



Abjected Women and Feminine Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

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ABSTRACT

*This study illuminates the lives of the abjected women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, as they undergo a liminal process and how they are able to get feminine subjectivity in the course of their lives. This study also sheds light on how women are being stereotyped, treated, in the patriarchal society. While focusing on *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, this study further addresses the different ways women are able to acquire subjectivity for themselves and by doing so are able to create a new identity for themselves that does not align with the stereotypes and norms created by society that favours men as compared to women.*

KEYWORDS: *Abjected women, Subjectivity, Liminality, Identity.*

INTRODUCTION

The image of both man and woman (human beings) is pathological. This is based on the notion held for centuries and decades that men are all powerful and domineering, while women are regarded and misrepresented as inferior, subordinate and weak, (Purdy, 2001, p. 34). Claire Johnston, one of the first feminist critics to offer a sustained critique of stereotypes held against women notes that, the feminine gender can be analysed as a structure, a code or convention. It represents the ideological meaning that 'woman' has for men. In relation to herself, she means no-thing: women are negatively represented as 'not-man'.

According to Agba (2012), pathological ideologies held in the past have changed. The thinking today is that gender barriers should be lowered. Gamble (2004, p. 28) asserts that a new nous of consciousness has begun where women are finding an innovative way to create an identity for themselves, a new sense of self-gratification, that liberates them from the set norms and gender roles imposed on them by society. She explains that a new epoch rose up in the late 18th and 19th century America, where the society as well as individuals, most especially women, turned against the patriarchal structures that limit them. This new form of awareness is greatly influenced by the second-wave feminist movement, where women's consciousness has been awakened in a patriarchal world. Sarah Gamble discussed in her book *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post feminism* explained how women have created a world of change on

how they view the world around them by creating a new identity for themselves.

In the discourse of feminine subjectivity, the female subject tries to portray not the generalized perspective on how the female gender should be portrayed but rather, an individual female consciousness, where the woman is free to create a personalized identity, unrestricted by gender roles to personal freedom and her own defined role in the society. Through gender liminality and feminine subjectivity, women are able to create a new identity, as they transgress from symbolic into the semiotic. The force of separation or gap between the self and the other is what the abjection and the liminal process are about. Feminist critiques hold that the change process of breaking gender barrier is developed in several stage. First the subject has to illuminate the processes of self-construction and personal liberation from the patriarchal and authoritative society. This has to be done in a way that presents women as not only being bounded by gender roles, but also that they are free to take charge of their lives in the society they found themselves.

Notably, several factors can speed up the change process of a subject. Van Gennep argues that a change in place and setting can influence the change in identity. Other factors such as wanting equal rights, needing to be treated better in a patriarchal society that glorifies men over women and the subject's experience can birth the ability to break free from the structure that binds her. It is based on these assertions that this study seeks to evaluate the politics of abjection,



gender liminality and subjectivity, that encompasses the issue of injustice, oppression, gender roles and inequality against women in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Kate Chopin and *The Awakening* by Margaret Atwood's as a study.

METHODOLOGY

The research being studied will make use of a qualitative research approach. Julia Kristeva's Abjection and feminine subjectivity theory will be used. Arnold Van Gennep's Liminality theory will also be used in evaluating the character in the novels. Through the use of the psychoanalytic feminist theoretical idea by Sigmund Freud, the study would associate how possible it is for the female gender to undergo the liminal process, that counter psychoanalytical feminist ideas. The study will assess how gender liminality affects feminine subjectivity, how women are able to emancipate themselves from the repressive patriarchal society, and the factors that affect and limit feminine subjectivity. The study will also discuss how psychoanalytical feminist ideas limits the process of feminine subjectivity, making the research descriptive in nature. An ethnographic research style would also be used as the purpose is to reveal how the environmental or cultural situation surrounding the characters in the novels being used affects the topic of concentration, in other for me to be able to obtain a well-grounded understanding from the point of the characters involved. This thesis aimed at using an explanatory research design, book reviewing as well as articles and journals, to collect data and back up my discussion.

ABJECTION

The theory of Abjection as related to gender equality cannot be over emphasized, as it reflects as one of the key factors that bring about the behaviour that drives women to want to be equal to men. Wanting equal rights and needing to be treated better in a patriarchal society that glorifies men over women. Abjection in its knowledge is a drive, not a subject nor an object. It gets its full meaning or takes shape when encountered by a subject, in other words it is the subject that gives meaning to abjection. Abjection exists in a space of its own, like a void waiting to be filled. Julia Kristeva in her book *Power of horrors* explained that "The object is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine" (Kristeva J. *Power of Horror*, 1982, p. 1) The subject occupies the void, as the abjection waits for the signifier to give it meaning, this makes Abjection quite complicated to understand, as we use the signifier or the subject to understand and give full meaning to it. For abjection, meaning is derived from the subject that comes in contact with it. As human behaviour differs, so does abjection give different impact from one person to another.

As related to feminism, abjection is a force that the female gender often inclines to. Women in the society are seen as rebellious, evil and unworthy. Most especially, when they don't follow the rules of society, they are tagged unruly and also seen as the second or inferior gender. Barbara Creed

in her book *The Monstrous Feminine* explained why the female gender is categorized as rebellious and evil, most especially when they are in a patriarchal based society. She explained Sigmund Freud's thoughts about men fear for women, being linked to the women being castrated and the absence of genitals "probably no male human is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital" (Sigmund, 1928, p. 154) the male will always be threatened by the female gender due to its versatility of having both male and female qualities. The female gender creates its own rules and language, shifting from semiotic structure to symbolic language structure. For this reason, the male symbolic structure will always want to over emphasis its superiority, the female would always oppose to, and hence abjection will always identify to the female gender.

LIMINALITY THEORY

Liminality is a theory coined by Arnold Van Gennep in his book *Right of Passage* in 1902, where he explained that liminality is a process that brings about a transition from one boundary to another, the effects caused by abjection creates a space, a transition from self to other. "From a Latin word *limen*, "threshold", the experience of liminality is one that characterizes a period of transition, accompanied by confusion and disorientation, from one state of being to another" (Downey & Ian, 2016, p. 139)

In his book, *Rite of passage*, Van Gennep tried to examine the interrelatedness between the liminal process and the effect drawn from the process. From Gennep's point of view, liminality does not deal with the aftermath of an action, but rather on future predictions where there are multiple outcomes. He holds that liminality seeks to identify the significance between existing ideologies and agents in the society. Van Gennep explains that the ideology surrounding 'liminality', involves a process of social change. They note that what is now considered as liminality embraces a wide range of explanations and conceptualization that surpasses previous ethological discourse on traditional ceremonies, initiation rites, religious events, and social changes, otherwise known as rites of passage. *Rite of passage* serves as a medium through which we become knowledgeable about the initiations and ceremonial activities carried out in the society. Hence, liminality serves as a benchmark for the various changes that occur in the lives of members of the society, (Andrew & Robert, 2015, p.5)

FEMININE SUBJECTIVITY

In contextual application, feminine subjectivity examines how the woman otherwise known as the 'subject' sees herself and carries out her roles as a female. The concept focuses on how women see their experience as a contributory factor to their identity and status. Hence, feminine subjectivity seeks to explain the experience of women from the eyes and views of women, most especially for those that do not belong to the elite group. In feminine subjectivity, analysts do not seek to

find out how the woman's sexual role, treatment or activity defines her but rather how they perceive themselves to be in areas such as politics, personal relationship and dealings with others, (Lewis, 2019, p.1).

Beauvoir (1988, p.16) notes that feminine subjectivity as a concept addresses the rationale for presenting women as inferiors and weaker versions of the male. That is, the male figure is presented as absolute, dominating and wielding all economic, social and political power. While the women are seen as vulnerable and weak. Even when a woman is the head of an organization, her subordinates who are men tend to see her from the angle of a woman. Her words are discounted and her thoughts are devalued. Hence, Beauvoir argues that when handling issues relating to the society, the consciousness of women should be taken more seriously from a human angle, rather than from a male perspective

THE AWAKENING AND ABJECTION

The narrative in the Awakening tackles issues of abjection. It advocates the issues that cause change in behaviour and drives women to want to be equal to men. It depicts the rationale women have to break free from gender stereotype, while demanding for equal rights in a society that oppresses the female gender and gives prominence to men than women. It portrays how the subject goes against all rules and collapses all forms of meaning.

In the Awakening, Edna gets married to Leonce Pontellier at a young age because of his overwhelming show of care and affection. This affection is however considered to be a mirage as she is unhappy in the marriage and considers her union a grave mistake. Prior to her marriage and her stay in the Grand Isle, Edna was less expressive. She was trained with an iron fist by her sister and father, who gave her little or no room to share her thoughts. However, upon her awakening she realizes that she had been oppressed for too long. She also realized that she had no affection for her husband and wanted to have nothing to do with him and the children. "Edna would never sacrifice herself for the children or for anyone else. She could offer her life and all her riches for the children, but she can never offer herself up", (Chopin, 121 & 122).

Unlike the patriarchal stereotype held in the society that it is the duty of the man to take the primary role, Edna changes the narrative by taking the lead. She showed that she possesses both the male and female ability. When Robert finally returns to the New Orleans, she kisses and confesses her feelings to him. Chopin was able to establish in the play that Edna's abjection is born out of confinement to rules and regulations, as well as boundaries which made it impossible for her to express herself. It was due to these restrictions that she began to deconstruct herself from societal norms to give herself a new meaning and identity.

LIMINALITY IN THE AWAKENING

Undoubtedly, the aftermath of abjection creates a space, a

transition from one's reflective consciousness to another known as Liminality. Hence, in the Awakening, Chopin was able to reveal the various stages of Liminality undergone by the main Character, Edna. Here, the author was able to establish the relationship between the liminal process and the effect drawn from the process by the protagonist in the play. The life of the protagonist is characterized by confusion, delusion, repulsion, disorientation and change in identity from one state of being to another.

The liminal process in the awakening is dissected into three different phases: the Pre liminal, Liminal and Post Liminal phase. The process begins when Mrs. Pontellier transits with her family from her home in the New Orleans to the Grand Isle on vacation. During her stay at the Isle, she got infatuated and eventually falls in love with Robert LeBron. It was during this new founded intimacy at the Grand Isle that her forced awakening occurs. Apparently, Edna began to loosen up from the less expressive woman she used to be to an outspoken person. She sudden realizes that she has rights and then begins to reject the already existing symbolic system in the society. In the Liminal phase, Edna was able to relegate herself from the larger society. It was in this stage that she moved out of her husband's house when he travelled to New York City, while her kids were away stay with their Grand Mother. This new founded peace drawn from her family absence gave Mrs. Pontellier enough time to reminisce on her awakening. Apparently, the Liminal phase became a foundation for a novel ideology to be created in the life of Edna.

Furthermore, in the third phase captured as the post liminal stage, Edna meets with Robert after he returned from Mexico. She could feel her emotions erupting for her beloved once more after they kissed intimately in her abode. Unfortunately, her hopes of being together with Robert was crushed once again when he left with a goodbye note. The death of Madame Ratignolle during childbirth further spurs her thoughts of reintegrating with the society as a renewed individual having overcome the stereotype, less expressiveness and emotional upheavals in the pre liminal and liminal stages. Her death is seen as an escape route from the harsh realities of life melted on her. She finally transits from one state of being to another as the ocean subdues in death. The ocean in this case serves as a liminal object of transition.

FEMININE SUBJECTIVITY IN THE AWAKENING

Feminine subjectivity focuses on how the events happening in a woman's life, shapes her condition and identity. Therefore, feminine subjectivity in the Awakening is viewed from the perspective of Edna and how she perceives the series of events happening that moulds her life as a woman, mother and wife in the classical society of New Orleans.

Prior to her awakening, Edna embraced the ideologies of the patriarchal system. She never questioned her traditional role of being a mother and wife because she was trained by

her father to believe that women are subjected to follow the dictates of men, while letting go of their own innate desire. Her marriage with Mr. Leonce, grooming her two kids and yielding to live according to the structured pattern of the Orleans society shows that she accepted the pre-existing rules of the classic society she lived in with her husband. Apparently, Edna's less expressiveness on issues that interest her like her paintings and recognizing her rights as a woman was as a result of her previous acceptance of the system. Her stay and continuous interaction with other characters at the Grand Isle was the booster needed to bring her out of her shells and the belief system she was familiar with.

ABJECTION AND THE HANDSMAID TALE

When a subject goes through abjection, he or she refuses to embrace pre-existing ideologies and ends up accepting all that is not. And although the body and the subconsciousness of the subject finds it difficult to accept these changes, it is however always at conflict with itself; only through this way is the subject able to create new identity for itself. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are treated as goblets. Those in authority determines what they do, more specifically, they decide how their body is used. "We are containers. It is only the inside of our bodies that are important (Atwood, p.84). When Offred and other handmaids were taken to the Rachel and Leah centre for indoctrination, they had a hard time adapting to the new standards set by the Eyes. They were always at conflict with themselves because the previous government, though imperfect, allowed women to live freely, socialize, and have rights.

As Offred learns to live by what is projected by the republic of Gilead, she revolts against the existing rules, mostly after becoming aware that the will of her friend, Moira had been bent. Moira was indoctrinated at the club after she was caught during her escape by agents of the eye. Initially, Moira was a source of courage and inspiration to Offred. But her recapture caused her to be influenced and brainwashed to accept the codes of the theological system. Seeing her friend in this state was an uneasy and repelling period for Offred. It made her to disengage from all form of sanity. The courage she once lacked was beginning to surface, making her carefree. Initially, Offred made fun of Moira over her feminist approach, however, she began to see reasons to revolt. In other words, Moira and her mother were sources of rebellion that inspired Offred.

LIMINALITY IN THE HANDSMAID TALE

The Handmaid's Tale is engrossed with different liminal moments picturing where participants emerge with new statuses; are detached from old rules, norms and values before they are reintegrated to join other members of the society. It also shows how a change in environment can adversely cause a change in identity. *The Handmaid's Tale* presents liminal spaces of how women's orientation was changed as a result of ideological changes in the environment.

Before the handmaids are reintegrated into the society as renewed persons, they are tasked to go through a liminal process where they let go of their previous knowledge, to embrace a new one that is well accepted and recognized by the system of Gilead. The liminal process is very important to the existence of the Christian society of Gilead. During this change process, they ensure that none of the values held by the present generation is transmitted to the next. You are the transition generation, said aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. She did not say: Because they will have no memories, of any other way. (127).

THE HANDMAID'S TALE AND FEMININE SUBJECTIVITY

Unarguably, women have always been relegated and treated as objects. Their accounts have gone untold severally. Hence, as a group that is excluded in matters of important, women are more interested in stories that concern them because, most times, they are not allowed to take prominent societal position (Madsen, 2000). Thus, Feminine subjectivity in *The Handmaid's Tale* examines how the subject otherwise known as 'Offred' sees herself, carries out her roles as a female in Gilead and sees her experience as a contributory factor to her identity and status. Irrespective of Offred's stance in the novel as the main character, she does not have the will to oppose the theological society of Gilead. Notably, she is weak and tends to give in easily to the demands of others.

During the era where women were allowed to have rights, Offred mother often queried her passivity and juvenile approach towards issues relating to women's right. While her mother was a part of various movement that supported women's culture, Offred was never involved. By the time she realizes the truth and need for a female's culture, Gilead had been established. And since she has never been active in projecting the privileges and rights of women, she is unable to revolt against the tyranny of the male dominated system because of her perceived vulnerability and weakness. The society of Gilead is dominated by men and the manner through which Offred gives account of happenings in her immediate environment further buttresses her subjectivity. Her speech, means of communication and narration is based on what has been approved by the authorities of Gilead.

CONCLUSION

So far, we have seen how stereotyping of the female gender results to an affirmative call to change and theorization of separateness in sexual existence. In Margaret Atwood's book *The Handmaid's Tale* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, we have been to reveal how both authors were able to present the processes of identity change and liberation from the patriarchal system using Edna, Offred and other female characters. Undoubtedly, this study has extensively explained the issues of gender roles, injustice, human objectification,

sexual objectification, and oppression against women, and how they experience the transitional process to obtain a new identity.

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Citation: Imasuen Osasumwen Sofia, "Abjected Women and Feminine Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's Handmaid's Tale and Kate Chopin's the Awakening", *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, Vol 8, no. 1, 2022, pp. 47-51.

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