Creative Saplings, Vol. 05, No. 05, May. 2026, **ISSN-0974-536X,** https://creativesaplings.in/

The Tale of Creative Non-victims: A Study of Feminist Revisionist Mythology in Margaret Atwood's *Unpopular Gals*

Adrija Santra Junior Research Fellow, Department of English and Culture Studies, University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India, India.
Email: addrisantra@gmail.com
DOI:

Abstract

Myth is often considered as the soul of a particular culture, a perception that entails an unquestioning acceptance to all its discriminatory assumptions. One of the most prevailing features of mythology is its projection of a world predominated by patriarchal worldviews. Instances of misogyny, sexism, violence, commodification and dehumanization of women abound in the world of myths and fairy tales. Therefore, Contemporary feminist scholars feel compelled to re-evaluate the domains of myth, legend, folklore and fairy tale, seeking to expose the male hegemonic structures embedded beneath their apparently innocuous reading and to recover the female voices that have long been suppressed and marginalized. Margaret Atwood is one of the most prominent writers of the literary genre called "feminist revisionist mythology", which reinterprets the traditional narratives through a feminist lens. This paper offers a critical analysis to the short fiction "Unpopular Gals" from her 1992 collection Good Bones, focusing on Atwood's reconfiguration of female characters traditionally condemned as Cruel and villainous. It examines Atwood's characterization through the framework of the victimhood model proposed in Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature. The study further argues that Atwood delineates these women not as passive victims or silent sufferers, but as creative non-victims who put up a strong resistance against the male oriented socio-cultural system. The paper engages the reader into a critical rethinking of the traditional mythological narratives, foregrounding the agency of the women who challenge and subvert patriarchal constructions.

Keywords: *Feminism, Mythology, Fairy Tales, Victimhood, Margaret Atwood..*

Introduction: Myth and Patriarchy

> Myth is a constant by-product of living faith, which is in need of miracles; of sociological status, which demands precedent; of moral rule, which requires sanction.
>
> (Malinowski 122)

Mythology serves as a cultural tool through which societies explain their origins, values and social structures. Far from being mere tales of gods and heroes, it functions as an ideological framework that is used to shape and develop cultural consciousness and social orders. However, myths have never been neutral narratives. As an architect of social norms, myth constructs, reinforces and perpetuates prevailing social orders and hierarchies based on class, caste, race and gender; thus bolstering the idea of duality by favouring the dominant section and marginalizing the oppressed one. The institution of myth can be identified as a primary vehicle through which patriarchy has retained its tenacious hold upon all the social, cultural, economic and political spheres since the primitive ages. From the very outset of the civilization

Article History : Received: 31 March. 2026. Accepted: 18 May. 2026. Available online: 25 May. 2026. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) **Conflict of Interest:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

women have remained confined within myriad images, symbols and ideas propagated by myth, leading to the formations of sexism, gender roles and gender stereotypes. These stereotypes often results in the reduction of femininity into the ideas of fertility, fecundity, tenderness, beauty and chastity; while exalting masculinity with the attributes like strength, knowledge, courage and power. Thus, women are doomed to remain imprisoned within their bodies and biological functions; whereas men are granted the privilege of transcending bodily limitations. Kate Millet, in her book Sexual Politics, propounds a theory of sexual politics where she examines multiple arenas through which patriarchy channelizes its hegemonic approach to influence the heterosexual power relation. From the anthropological perspective, Millet observes that myth contrives "a felicitous advance in the level of propaganda, since it so often bases its arguments on ethics or theories of origin" (46). The tradition of male supremacy derives fortification through the world of myth, which is often regarded as pious, immaculate and unquestionable- an absolute authority.

The present article, while conducting an excavation into the performative role of myth in perpetuating phallocentrism, also claims a subversion. It draws attention to the revisionist efforts made by the feminist authors who have reimagined the traditional mythic narratives in order to challenge entrenched patriarchal ideologies. The paper focuses on Margaret Atwood, the eminent Canadian novelist and one of the pioneering literary figures who strategically deploy mythology as a weapon to redefine femininity by reconstructing the culturally inscribed notions. "Unpopular Gals," a short yet powerful story from Atwood's 1992 collection Good Bones, serves as a representative example of her revisionist technique by undertaking a quest to uncover the truths suppressed beneath the surface narratives of fairy tales. The article engages in a critical analysis of *Unpopular Gals* through the lenses of feminist revisionism. Atwood's model of victimhood is applied as the principal methodological framework in this regard. This article endeavours to identify the appropriate victim positions occupied by the anti-heroines drawn from the pages of fairy tales; and examines their psychological journey from victimhood to creative non-victimhood.

Feminist Revisionist Mythology: Objectives and Functions

Since phallic myths dominate the world of mythology, overshadowing women's voices, feminist scholars and writers find it imperative to delve into this realm in order to trace the socio-historical contexts of the sexist elements entwined within its plot trajectories and characterizations. Karen E. Rowe brings forth a new dimension for understanding fairy tales by positing the woman at the centre of the narrative. She contends that it is not the man but the woman who is actually the teller of fairy tales. Rowe's *To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale* draws upon figures such as Philomela, the mute yet revengeful

weaver from Greek mythology, and Scheherazade, an adept chronicler from The Arabian Nights, who beguiles death through her dexterity of storytelling. The presence of these proficient female narrators indicates that "the true art of the fairy tale… is… semiotically a female art" (71). Patriarchy usurps women's agency in order to make the future generation "forget the maternal lineage (68) of mythological narration. Nevertheless, the "double narration", shrewdly camouflaged beneath the apparent voice of a female raconteur, does not escape the scrutiny of Rowe. Although women are persuaded to tell the story, it is patriarchy that pulls the strings and determines the course of the narrative (61). In her essay "Feminism and Fairy Tales", Rowe further highlights the strategies employed by fairy tales to disseminate the latent phallocentric behavioural patterns. It makes women "internalize romantic patterns from ancient tales" in such a way that they "continue to tailor their aspirations and capabilities to conform to romantic paradigms" (222). Beauvoir also explains how a young girl is indoctrinated into imbibing the ideas she comes across in fairy stories, which endorse a woman's state of passivity and subordination as the fundamental conditions for winning love and validation from men: "the little girl learns that she will become all-powerful through deepest resignation: she takes delight in a masochism that promises supreme conquest" (306). Immersed in the world of fantasy, the girl ignorantly exposes herself to the masculinist expectations and the enduring power hierarchy.

The term "feminist revisionist mythology" was coined by Alicia Ostriker in her book Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America. She observes, "At first thought, mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer" (210). Regardless of country, community and culture, the world of myth primarily belongs to men. It introduces brave, tough, virile and conquering male heroes who are projected as superior to weak, helpless, or sexually transgressive women, whose roles are limited to serving as either angels or monsters. According to Ostriker, the purpose of feminist revisionist mythmaking, "lies in the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth, revisionism in its simplest form consists of hit-and-run attacks on the familiar images and the social and literary conventions supporting them" (216).

The process of this remythologizing method follows a number of steps: first, addressing the problems in myth by posing precise yet pertinent questions; second, recognizing the subdued feminine voices buried beneath the loud and indisputable androcentric rhetoric; third, foregrounding alternative perspectives ; and finally, offering them a verbal articulation, thereby attempting to restore the voices that are lost but not dead, to revive the characters who have been silenced yet remain ineluctably present in the plot.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their book The Madwoman in the Attic, bring novel insights into the traditional readings of select works by women writers such as Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, and Mary Shelley; probing into the fairy tale intertexts employed to articulate women's physical and psychological experiences. Cinderella, Snow White and other popular tales acquire multiple dimensions and postmodernist reinterpretations in the course of the critical re-evaluation of these classics. Cristina Bacchilega, in her book Postmodern Fairy Tale: Gender and Narrative Strategies problematizes the relationship between fairy tales and gender from a complex postmodern perspective. Conceptualizing "gender" as a performative construct fortified through constant reiteration, Bacchilega advocates a continuous process of constructing and deconstructing the "magic mirror", which produces "framed images out of a desire to multiply its refractions and to expose its artifices" (23).

In short, feminist revisionist mythology has been theorized by both critics and feminist writers not only as a means to revise, rethink and retell the existing myths, but also as a method of imparting fresh, unprejudiced and progressive perspectives through deconceptualization and denaturalization. Fairy tale poems from Anne Sexton's collection Transformations offer fresh and unconventional reading of familiar tales. Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* stands as an exemplary work of this genre, reimagining the traditional fairy stories through strong, subversive portrayals of the women characters. Suniti Namjoshi's Feminist Fables can be considered as a significant contribution to this genre, distinguished by its feminist understandings conveyed through the form of fables. Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wives* delineates the untold stories of the wives and female partners of the real and mythological male figures. Thus, through diverse reinterpretations, feminist revisionist mythmaking transforms mythology from a site of silencing to a medium for resurgence of female subjectivity.

Margaret Atwood and Revisionist Mythmaking

Margaret Atwood's idiosyncrasy as a feminist revisionist mythmaker lies in her employment of mythological intertexts that expound, emphasize and shape the meaning, motifs and implicit messages of the surface narrative. Atwood interweaves the primary storyline with mythical intertexts in such a way that they function either as complements to or as counterpoints to one another. Both strands coexist and develop in parallel throughout the entire story. The intertext works as a leitmotif within the surface narrative, and the latter progresses through continuous allusions to specific mythological characters or incidents.

Sharon Rose Wilson remarks in her study of Atwood's mythological revisions, "Atwood has used mythology in much the same way she has used other intertexts …Whether explicitly named or simply implied, Atwood's varied mythological intertexts are central to her images, characterization, and themes" (215). Shuli Barzlai observes, "Atwood frequently draws on these venerable genres (myths, folktales and fairy tales) and recasts familiar motifs and stories into contemporary forms" (127). Through her frequent use of mythical narratives, legends, folklore, fairy tales, allusions to rituals and customs from diverse religions and cultures, and references to multiple classical, mediaeval and modern texts, as well as to art and music, Atwood creates a bridge between past and present, offers a reappraisal of the traditional stories in a modern context, and simultaneously undertakes a critical assessment of myth within a feminist framework. Wilson, in her book Margaret *Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* identifies at least five general purposes served by the intertexts in Atwood's oeuvre. These include: first, to demonstrate the quality and nature of the cultural background of a particular character; second, to address the pre-existing patterns that entrap the character as well as the reader, thereby building the character's tropes and influencing the reader's discernment; third, to comment self-consciously on the patterns present in embedded fairy tales, and related popular traditional narratives often by deconstructing their plots with "transgressive" language and recovering the female voices by replacing the male narrator with a female one; fourth, to comment self-consciously on the frame story and other intertexts that are collaged together to shape the plot; and, finally, to offer the characters an imaginative or "magical" release from the patterns externally imposed on it, ensuring the possibility of transformation—not only for the novel's characters, but also for the nation they represent, and, most importantly, for the humanity as a whole. (34)

Carol Ann Howells, in the context of a critical study of Atwood's Penelopiad, characterizes her revisionist approach as a "postmodern domestification of myth" (65), a strategy adopted to comprehend the household politics in the palace of Ithaca. Howells discusses how Atwood turns away from the conventional masculinist narrative that places the entire spotlight on Odysseus and his adventures, thereby sidelining the story of Penelope. Instead, she attempts to delve into the unexplored side of the epic by focusing on the complex relationship dynamics, sexuality, socio-cultural expectations, and political intrigue perceived from Penelope's point of view.

Fiona Tolan views Atwood's revisions of classic texts as a mode of negotiating questions that retain their relevance from the past to the present (118), as well as an endeavour to revive the classic plots through reimagination and reinterpretation (122). Howells' essay "Margaret Atwood's Recent Dystopia" undertakes an extensive reading of Atwood's incorporation of mythological references within a dystopian and science fictional framework, particularly in

relation to the MaddAddam Trilogy. Charlotte Beyer explores Atwood's feminist revisionist mythology in her selected poems, engaging deeply with the question of female identity. Reingard M. Nischik highlights the key aspects of Atwood's revisionist approach to the popular cultural texts such as myth and fairy stories: "Atwood rewrites these stories, turning them inside out and upside down, placing them in new contexts, and undermining conventional thought patterns and textual norms, especially the gender portrayals perpetuated by such formative popular texts" (155). Atwood, as a creative artist, writes her journey by continuously breaking the old myths and replacing them with the new ones. Despite her avowed resistance to being labelled as a "feminist", she deliberately places women at the center of her works, and all her revisionist ventures are aimed to strip away the mask of patriarchal constructs and redefine womanhood through a complex, multidimensional and fundamentally feminist narrative style.

Fairy Tales' Treatments towards the Non-fairy Characters

Before embarking on a critical assessment of Atwood's short story, I would like to provide a brief overview of the cruel and prejudiced attitude of fairy tales towards the non-fairy characters. If we consider the word "fairy" in the context of fairy tales, we perceive that this notion of fairness is supposed to operate on two levels: physical and moral. When a female character fails to conform to the physical attributes deemed sexually appealing by the male gaze, she is pushed into the world of darkness and portrayed as a "wicked" woman whose physical "ugliness" permeates her entire being. Thus, fairy tales consistently espouse the normalized, idealized, conventional notions of "fairness". Women who are physically attractive and morally compliant, acquiescent and docile-- are celebrated as "good" and rewarded with the Prince Charming, that is, the male validation. Those who do not capitulate to the stereotypical gender roles ascribed to women fail to win the favour of the narrative. They are subjected to brutal, violent and inhumane punishment in the name of poetic justice. The Ugly Sister duo in "Cinderella," the Evil Queen in "Snow White," the Wicked Stepmother in "The Six Swans," and the villainous Stepmother in "The Juniper Tree" are fated to go through heinous physical torture followed by gruesome deaths. A recurring pattern in these narratives involves beguiling the culprit into choosing her own punishment. In "The Goose Girl" the false bride, who conspires to replace the real princess, is outwitted by the trickery of the king and ultimately ends up choosing an appalling death for herself. She is "stripped entirely naked, and put in a barrel which is studded inside with pointed nails" and two white horses harnessed to it, which dragged her "along through one street after another, till she is dead" (384). Now, a woman cunning enough to usurp the real princess, deceive the king to become his consort and even inveigle him into beheading the faithful horse Falada is quite unlikely to be too naive to decipher the old king's deception. Therefore, the intent of the

narrative becomes evident through such a contradictory representation. The tale aims to project her as a self-destructive woman who is deceitful and manipulative, but, at the same time, too imbecilic to anticipate her own death. To hold women accountable for their own downfall is the most abominable ploy exercised by patriarchy to evade all its responsibilities for the misfortunes of womankind. This is one of the most insidious mechanisms through which patriarchy legitimizes and perpetuates the suffering of women.

A Study of *Unpopular Gals* through Feminist Revisionist Lens

Unpopular Gals, with its dramatic monological narrative style, comprises three separate monologues delivered by the fairy tale women characters conventionally regarded as the villains. While articulating female characters, fairy tales always conform to the traditional and stereotypical notions of femininity. Women who adhere to such conventions are applauded as the "virtuous" ones, whereas those who do not are labeled as wicked, vile, sorceresses, witches or monstrous women. Interestingly, Atwood herself could not escape such scathing attacks. She recalls, “Over the years I’ve been on the receiving end of every sexist bias in the book”, as she has been marked as “witch, man-hater, man-freezing, Medusa, man-devouring monster. The Ice Goddess, the Snow Queen” (Atwood). Atwood’s inclination towards the execrated women over the popular and celebrated ones stems from her sense of affinity with them and her strong animosity towards the gender stereotypes. While reading the story, the reader is invited to envisage a trial scene in which the Ugly Sister, the Cannibal Witch, and the Wicked Stepmother— three antagonistic characters from the world of fairy tales – are presented before the judiciary. They hurl a series of compelling and logically structured arguments in their defence to nullify the charges brought against them. These anti-heroines, functioning as the ideological extensions of Atwood herself, attempt to seize the domain of myth and reshape it in their own terms. In Atwood’s version, the notorious women are expressive enough to enunciate their side of the story. Instead of acquiescing to the imposed allegations, they annihilate the cultural silence and venture into creating a strong resistance.

The opening section of *Unpopular Gals*, narrated by the jealous, evil, “ugly” stepsister, is an outburst of the stifled anguish of a woman who is subjected to deprivation, pity and abhorrence due to her physical appearance. The character of The Ugly Sister is one of the most commonplace stock characters illustrated in fairy tales. The Grimm Brothers’ collection offers numerous instances where the Ugly Stepsister, often in alliance with her equally “ugly” mother, serves as a primary antagonist. The stepsisters in “Cinderella,” “Mother Holle,” “Sweetheart Roland,” “One-eye, Two-eyes, and Three-eyes,” “The White Bride and the Black One” derive sadistic pleasure from tormenting the protagonist and weaving intrigue against

her. However, Atwood moves beyond such simplistic representations and seeks to investigate the problem inherent in the male-propagated conception of ideal feminine beauty. Since a woman is not permitted to transcend the limits of body, she is inevitably doomed to undergo an agonizing identity crisis when her own body appears to betray her. According to the logic of phallocentric body politics that allows a only a narrow range of features to pass the litmus test of beauty, a woman who does not meet the beauty standards set by a patriarchal, racist, white supremacist ideological system is reduced from a body to a "nobody": "I hardly know how to say I, or mine; I've been she, her, that one, for so long" (19). A striking contradiction emerges when comparing the projection of the Ugly Sisters between the Brothers Grimm' version of "Cinderella" with that in the Walt Disney Pictures' 1950 animated adaptation of the story. In the former, the sisters remain unnamed but are not explicitly mentioned as ugly; rather, they are depicted as "beautiful and fair of face, but vile and black of heart" (Grimm & Grimm 109). In contrast, the Disney princess version assigns them names, but renders them physically unattractive, with corporeal features deviating from the conventional beauty standard. Anastasia and Drizella, with their colored hair, darker complexion than Cinderella's, drooping and bulbous noses, and fleshy, rotund physiques, establish a clear demarcation between beauty and ugliness.

Atwood unfolds the intricate layers of the "ugly" woman's psyche, burdened with excruciating psychological turmoil and inconsolable pain. Her aversion is further exacerbated by the pity and the displays of spurious kindness from the people around her. The outburst of this suppressed resentment is manifested through her attempt to distort images of flawless beauty, symbolically represented by dolls. Dolls as instruments for inculcating and reinforcing the sexist beauty stereotypes are examined in some of Atwood's other works, including "The Female Body", where a little girl violently destroys her doll which gives "a false notion of beauty, not to mention anatomy" (36). A similar concern is reiterated in Atwood's Burning Questions (2021), where Atwood deals with the concept of beauty in the essay titled "On Beauty". She observes:

A high rate of Barbie Doll disfiguring has taken place over the years, and attic trunks conceal many a hairless Barbie, tattooed with purple Magic Markers and minus her arms. Could it be that their one-time owners suspected themselves of not being up to the Cinderella standard and, in a ritual act of reverse sympathetic magic, were taking it out on their dolls? (231)

The Ugly Sister is destined to endure an unrequited love despite her genuine passion and affection for the prince. She is ultimately castigated and is sentenced to death. She is also denied the possibility of reproduction. The androcentric biopolitical system prevents the proliferation of a woman who is apprehended as a potential threat to the male-appropriated

cultural discourses. Through the elimination of a rebellious woman, patriarchy inscribes its triumph.

The second part contains the testimony of the cannibal witch who is accused of "cooking and eating children" (21). A tactic of manipulating the credulous minds of children by frightening them is quite explicit here. Children are conditioned to develop a sense of repugnance not only towards a woman but also towards one who is aged and "can't see very well" (21). A multi-layered discriminatory attitude based on gender, age and disability is adroitly injected into their cognition. The motif of the cunning, scheming and unscrupulous older sibling in contrast to the innocent and virtuous younger one is another instance of ageism introduced by the fairy tales. The younger sibling, as a stock character, is often subjected to vicious conspiracies hatched by the elder. The story revolves around the younger sibling's journey of escaping the web of deceit and proclaiming his/her victory by marrying the king's daughter/son. Older people are widely speculated to be jealous and selfish, while a blind eye is turned to their sense of dispensability and alienation.

Brenda R. Weber problematizes ageism in relation to women through critical lens of the gaze theory. She contends that it is the politics of gaze that enables discrimination based on age and senility. She asserts, "Theories of the gaze overly consider young girls and youthful women as the objects of such objectification, thereby removing ageing and aged women from contemplation" (366). This omission is evidently a form of cultural punishment imposed upon women for no longer serving the visual pleasure demanded by the male gaze. However, in the case of fairy tales, one may observe a contradiction to Weber's supposition that the "grey-haired grannies are not even worth thinking about as subjects of harm" (367). The frail, decrepit, poor-sighted woman is, in fact, conceived as a potential threat to patriarchy. Her testimony in *Unpopular Gals* sheds light on her forthrightness, ethical transparency and her capacity to evaluate her feminine identity in her own terms. She deftly rejects the allegations by exposing the absurdities of the masculinist narrative: "…even if I did eat just a few, whose fault was it? Those children were left in the forest by their parents, who fully intended them to die" (21). In the original story of Hansel and Gretel, it is the evil stepmother who orchestrates the abandonment of the children, while their biological father merely acquiesces to his wife's decision. Men have always been absolved, with all of their liabilities conveniently disregarded. However, the Witch in Atwood's story pinpoints the subsided truth and holds both parents accountable for the children's misfortune.

The Witch is a true rebel who scornfully shakes off the ignominious identity ascribed to her by defying the archetypal notions associated with her. Instead, she internalizes an alternative identity and announces herself a goddess of harvest and fertility. In mythological traditions, it is predominantly the female deities who epitomize both agricultural productivity and childbirth. The Witch proudly claims that, like a goddess, she holds the power to manifest herself as both creator and destroyer. She can shower her blessings as a provider of crops, germinate seeds and sustain life. Pregnant women worship her to receive the boon of fecundity. At the same time, endowed with an ambivalent power, she can transform herself into a cannibal. She gives birth, yet simultaneously, can end lives with her own hands. She delivers the child, and at the same time, assimilates it into her body. This paradoxical treatment towards creation associates her with the Hindu goddess Kali, who extends her grace as a creator, a protector and also a destroyer.

Unfortunately, the paternalistic ideological system consciously refrains from acknowledging her power with absolute surrender and veneration. The male supremacist world is afraid of admitting the indispensability of women and to recognize their power; therefore, it desperately veils the glory of the Goddess under the vanity and grandeur of “fusty draperies” (22). These repellent coverings function as a means for willfully concealing both her womanhood and her motherhood. She is reduced to a numb, inanimate, petrified sculpture—decorated, yet contemptuously abandoned in the attic of a derelict temple. It is their sheer reluctance to offer devotion that leaves the forlorn, ostracized woman with no choice but to snatch away everything she perceives to be rightfully hers.

The final section is narrated by the Wicked Stepmother who is charged with the offence of abusing and exploiting her stepdaughter. She diverges from the banal presuppositions that define the concept of motherhood. The character is saddled with the perpetual dialectic between motherhood and womanhood. Beneath the façade of a cunning, abominable and relentless villain, Atwood reveals a woman suffering from the pangs of identity crisis. She begins her self-vindication by exposing patriarchy for absolving the "Lily -livered widowers" who connive in the mistreatment of their daughters by maintaining complicit silence. Her testimony also reflects her revolt against the customary ideals of femininity. She feels no compassion for the obedient, passive, “sniveling” daughter who would eventually end up being a dutiful wife. Rather, she boasts of her effort to transform those passive, numb, obtuse girls into active and industrious women. It is her attempt to rejuvenate their inert and withering spirits. The wicked stepmother claims that she deserves commendation rather than blame, because it is her ill treatment that propels the heroine toward marriage with the king’s son and her attainment of a life in the palace. In her view, she does not bring misery, but fortune. Therefore, the cultural assessment of her character is unjust, partial and completely

unreasonable. She overturns the entire motives conventionally attributed to her and evokes a revisionist criticism of her character.

Atwood's Victimhood Model: A Journey towards Creative Non-victimhood

Atwood's revisionist narrative engages the critical reader in problematizing victimhood and pondering over the victim position of her characters in the light of the model of "Basic Victim Positions" propounded by Atwood in her 1972 critical handbook to Canadian literature named Survival: A thematic Guide to Canadian Literature. Atwood's speculative model comprises four distinctive positions that can be attributed to a victim. First, the position of denying one's own state of victimhood; second, the position of acknowledging victimhood but rationalizing it as controlled by something supreme, omnipotent or overwhelmingly powerful, thus subscribing to it submissively; third, the position of recognizing victimhood but refusing to accept the victim role as an inevitable or unconquerable one; fourth, to transcend all the previous stages, enabling the individual to emerge as a creative non-victim (32-39).

Atwood further specifies the different "games" played by a victim within each position. In the first position, the game consists of a refusal to perceive oneself as a victim, often accompanied by denial, evasion and self-deception. In the second, it is the game of Victor/ Victim dynamics, where the victim fails to acknowledge the real source of oppression and the anger, scorn or frustration is directed against the fellow victims and oneself. Position three involves the game of renouncing the victim role, though not the victimhood itself. Finally when a person ascends to position four, the victor/victim game becomes irrelevant as the individual has moved beyond it. (Atwood 32-39).

> The attempt to place the "unpopular" fairy tale women within these victim positions gives rise to three fundamental questions.
>
> Are these women aware of their victimhood?
>
> If yes, do they make an attempt to emancipate themselves?
>
> Is it feasible to consider them as "creators"?

The fact that none of the three women, in their individual narratives, directly utter the word "victim" invites some confusion while searching for the answer to the first question. Their awareness of victimhood is, however, explicitly manifested in their mighty confrontation with the masculinist narrative tradition. The ways in which they question and satirize beauty standards, expose the social ingratitude, and critique the silence of fairy tales regarding male irresponsibility clearly suggest that they are able to recognize patriarchy as their oppressor.

Another indication of their self-awareness is their fearless and unapologetic confession of their "limitations," that entailed their misfortunes. The Ugly Sister is conscious not only of her bodily limitations but also of the injustice and deprivation she has to endure because of her "unattractive" physical features. The Cannibal Witch likewise identifies herself as a victim of social segregation due to her senility and poor eyesight. The Evil Stepmother feels no regret for not becoming a perfect mother as per the phallocentric assumptions. Rather, she incisively criticizes the institution of myth where God requires a Devil to fabricate the entire plot of the Fall, thereby aligning the anecdote with her own condition as a scapegoat used to safeguard her male counterpart.

As we have received a satisfactory answer to the first question and developed a clear perception of the self-consciousness of the Atwoodian heroines, we can eliminate the first position of self-denial from our consideration. The *Unpopular Gals* are aware of their victimhood. They do not remain content with their lot by normalizing the discriminations. Thus, the lowest position they can occupy is the second, where the journey of acceptance and knowledge formation begins.

Throughout this journey the victims acquire knowledge, gather strength and harness her inner power to cope with her realization. This process entails a series of inward actions rooted in the victim's unwavering willpower and determination, alongside a multitude of outward responses to the oppressive structures that govern her existence. At this point, the second question arises spontaneously: does she attempt to emancipate herself?

The moment a victim realizes that she is being exploited, marks the birth of an ineffaceable psychological turmoil. At this juncture, one oscillates between concession and resistance, between submission and defiance. Such tension is prominent in the testimony of the Ugly Sister. Her narrative is laden with profound emotional turbulence. The other two are portrayed as comparatively stable, assertive and self-assured. The Cannibal Witch's reminiscence of the old days conveys a nostalgic tone rather than a remorseful one. Although she laments for the loss of her former status of a goddess, she hardly appears as a vulnerable or debilitated woman crestfallen by people's betrayal or her subsequent destitution. The Evil Queen unequivocally asserts her indignation toward the weak and fragile stepdaughter. The rebellious, uncompromising mettle that these women continually kindle within them catalyzes their journey towards conquering victimhood. They leave the androcentric world utterly discomfited by their indefeasible logic and impenitent attitude. Their negotiation with victimhood is marked by transparency, courage and intelligence. They neither deny their victimhood nor fail to identify their oppressor; instead, they adopt a mode of resistance through self-justification. Even the staunchest moralist reader will fail to provide a

satisfactory answer to the question--"Life isn't fair. Why should I be?"(20), which implies that the narrative itself needs to be impartial at the very first place in order to pass judgment on the moral fairness of a character.

As we ascend to the third question, we encounter the difficulty of assigning a fixed victim position to Atwood's anti-heroines. Are they eligible for the appellation of a "creative non-victim"? The determination becomes problematic as Atwood herself, in her theorization, emphasizes the fluid nature of the model, where no position is permanent. A close reading of the text reveals that the three women of *Unpopular Gals* are also shifting their positions consistently. This fluctuation becomes evident as we analyze the "games" played by them. Both the Ugly Sister and the Evil Queen confess to engaging in the victor/victim game which is the "displacement of the cause or…passing... victimization along to others" (35). The Ugly Sister does not direct her anger towards the prince, who, as an embodiment of patriarchy, rejects her on the basis of her looks. Instead, she hurls all her burden of bitterness towards a vulnerable target like a lifeless doll or her timid, subservient stepsister. The Evil Queen also fails to reprimand her husband for thrusting the responsibility of his daughter upon her against her will; instead she constructs the little girl as her rival and subjects her to relentless torment. The Cannibal Witch, meanwhile, repudiates her victim role to the extent of contemplating herself as a goddess, which involves the game played by a victim in the third position.

But do they ultimately succeed in attaining the position of a "creative non-victim"? I would argue that they do. While analyzing this fourth position, Atwood mentions of a crucial condition: "In an oppressed society, of course, you can't become an ex-victim – insofar as you are connected with your society – until the entire society's position has been changed" (35). A characters confined within the world of myth, can never easily escape its enduring norms and conventions, since myth and social conventions are mutually reinforcing. How, then, can these women achieve a non-victim status?

The answer lies in their exclusion. These characters have been disavowed not only by society but also by myth itself. Myth's eternal predilection for the damsels in distress results in the systematic marginalization of the antagonistic women. Having been "killed" by the narrative—both physically and symbolically—and condemned by society, they paradoxically obtain a form of liberation from the very structures that oppress them. The exclusion paves the way for their renunciation of the existing system and their elevation to the position of non-victim. From this vantage point, they break the cultural silence and release all their grievances with a demand for redress. The marginalized women come to realize that they are not redundant but essential. When the Evil Queen, as the representative of the entire

Unpopular Gals community, declares, "I am the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it" (24), she assumes the role of the creator. Despite being marginalized by the narrative, they recognize themselves as the central authoritative figures who actively determine the course of the story. At this stage, all Victor/Victim dynamics become obsolete, as their sense of self-worth emancipates them from the yearning for validation, and, thereby, the victim role no longer holds any temptation for them.

Conclusion

Atwood's postulation on myth shares a close affinity with Jung's theorization as she observes most people possessing "unconscious mythologies" (Kaminski 32). She asserts her intention to bring them into a state of consciousness by turning them inside out. Atwood does not endorse the idea of eradication of mythology; rather, she believes "in a way, everybody needs one" (32). The release of the unconscious into the domain of consciousness can either affect one adversely or unlock the door to creativity and new possibilities. Atwood consistently advocates for the latter: "It's just a question of getting one that is livable and not destructive to you" (32). Therefore, Atwood's revisionist mythmaking involves an act of demarcation between the good and the evil, a categorization between the innocuous and the detrimental, and a continuous process of selection between the progressive and the regressive mythological discourses. The recent wave of neopatriarchy, which seeks to hinder the burgeoning development of gender equality by reviving the regressive patriarchal ideas in a modernized form, craftily harnesses this "unconscious mythology" as a weapon to reinvigorate misogynist stereotypes and traditional gender roles. In the throes of this crisis, Atwood's revisionist approach to myth can serve as a beacon of light to resist the insidious encroachment of patriarchy. A critical and logistical engagement with myth can destabilize the ideological construct of eternal femininity by reclaiming women's authority to reorganize all the symbolic structures that have historically defined them.

Works cited:

Atwood, Margaret. *Burning Questions:Essays and Occasional Pieces 2004-21*. Chatto & Windus, 2021.

---. *Good Bones.* Virago, 2010.

---. "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything At All." *Meanjin,* Winter 1995.

http://meanjin.com.au/essays/if-you-cant-say-somethinh-nice-dont-say-anything-at-all/

---. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. House of Anansi Press, 2012.

Bacchilega, Cristina. *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

Barzilai, Shuli. "Unfabulating a Fable, or Two Readings of "Thylacine Ragout". " *Once upon a Time: Myth, Fairy Tales and Legends in Margaret Atwood's Writings,* edited by Sarah E. Appleton, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 127-50.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated and edited by H.M. Parshley, Everyman's Library, 1993.

Beyer, Charlotte. "Feminist Revisionist Mythology and Female Identity in Margaret Atwood's Recent Poetry." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2000, pp. 276-98. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23925612. Accessed on 21 Mar. 2026.

Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber*. Penguin Books, 1979.

Duffy, Carol Ann. *The World's Wife*. Picador Classics, 1999.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.* Yale University Press, 1979.

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Fingerprint Classics, 2021.

Howells, Carol Ann. ""We can't Help but Be Modern": The Penelopiad." *Once upon a Time: Myth, Fairy Tales and Legends in Margaret Atwood's Writings,* edited by Sarah E Appleton, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp.57-72.

Kaminski, Margaret. "Preserving Mythologies." *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, edited by Earl G. Ingersoll, Virago, 1992.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. "Myth in Primitive Psychology." *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays,* The Free Press: Glencoe, Illinois, 1948, pp. 122.

Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Doaba Publications, 2021.

Namjoshi, Suniti. *Feminist Fables.* Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1981.

Nischik, Reingard M. "Margaret Atwood's Short Stories and Shorter Fictions." *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, edited by Carol Ann Howells, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 145-60.

Ostriker, Alicia. "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets sand Revisionist Mythmaking." *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America,* Beacon Press, 1986.

Rowe, Karen E. "Feminism and Fairy Tales." *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, edited by Jack Zipes, Routledge, 1987, pp. 209-26.

---. "To Spin the Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale." *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion and Paradigm,* edited by Ruth B. Bottigheimer, University of Pennsylvania Press,1986, pp. 53-74.

Sexton, Anne. *Transformations*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971.

Tolan, Fiona. "Margaret Atwood's Revision of Classic Texts." *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, edited by Carol Ann Howells, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 109-23.

Weber, Brenda R. "The Incredible Invisible Woman: Age, Beauty, and the spectre of Identity." *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics*, edited by Maxine Leeds Craig, Routledge, 2021.

Wilson, Sharon Rose. *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics.* University Press of Mississippi, 1993.

---. "Mythological Intertexts in Margaret Atwood's Works." *Margaret Atwood: Works and Impact,* edited by Reingard Nishcik, Camden House, 2000, pp. 215-28.