

**Maddalena Lorubbio**

**The Creative Word in Atwood's *The Robber Bride*: Towards New Female Identities**

**Abstract I:** Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* is a very complex novel, questioning the stereotypes concerning female identity and the patriarchal definition of the feminine Self. Through the diverse acts of re-naming themselves, the three female characters of the novel challenge the 'scientific terms', as Panikkar puts it, of the male worldview. The stable categories of the patriarchal language are not adequate to represent the multiplicity of the identity and spiritual world of women. Atwood's creative word is able to open the intimate world of these women in order to envisage fluid boundaries between the genders and delineate new possibilities for male/female relationships for future generations.

**Abstract II:** *The Robber Bride* di Margaret Atwood è un'accurata analisi delle frammentarie identità delle tre protagoniste femminili e del loro profondo desiderio di libertà e completezza. Il romanzo mette in discussione i comuni stereotipi maschilisti e la definizione patriarcale dell'identità femminile. L'esigenza delle protagoniste di trovare nuovi nomi per se stesse, nei quali identificare una parte del loro io, fa emergere con chiarezza la molteplicità della natura femminile e l'esigenza di distruggere l'inflessibile categorizzazione patriarcale del mondo, fondata, come sostiene Raimon Panikkar, sul termine scienziato. La parola creatrice di Margaret Atwood delinea confini più fluidi tra i generi e nuove possibilità per le generazioni future.

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In the 1993 novel *The Robber Bride*, Margaret Atwood shows how powerfully the creative word can challenge the stable categories of the male worldview and shape new female identities. The multiplicity of the feminine self, as opposed to its patriarchal definition, is represented by the numerous names every character has. By challenging the univocal scientific terms of the male language, Atwood's creative word claims a more complete social and personal identity for women and shows the female need to create an enlivening dialogue with the inner part of their being and to acknowledge their split souls.

*The Robber Bride* is the story of three middle-aged women, Tony, Charis and Roz, who have very little in common, but share some negative experiences with Zenia, a mysterious woman whom each of them met at different stages of her life and in a different decade. By telling each of them different stories of her life and by destabilizing the three women's love relationships, Zenia is able to open their intimate world and to make them face their split subjectivities. In this article, I will show how, through the diverse acts of naming and re-naming themselves and through the meeting of the dark double Zenia, the three female characters begin an enriching conversation with their inner microcosm and question the male definition of the female identity in the everyday life. As Atwood suggests, the stable female identity that the patriarchal terms have shaped over the time is completely inadequate to represent the multiplicity of the spiritual world of women and their hybrid nature. By opposing sexual clichés and restrictive gender roles, the novel also envisages fluid boundaries between the genders and foresees new possibilities for male/female relationships for future generations.

Tony, Charis and Roz meet once a month for a gossipy lunch in a stylish restaurant, the Toxique. During one of their monthly luncheons, the three friends re-encounter Zenia, whom they believed had died five years before. The present story is interrupted by a series of flashbacks about the three women's past and their relationships with Zenia. The novel ends with Zenia's death,

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probably a suicide, following her encounter with the three women: everything is mysterious, Zenia's stories in particular. As a matter of fact, Zenia's origins and stories are not clear at all, as she had told a different version of her childhood and life experiences to each of the characters. Even after her death, no one is able to discover her surname and her place of birth, neither the police nor Roz's private detective.

The third-person narration consists of seven chapters, which present a palindromic structure: the first one ("Onset") and the last one ("Outcome") are guided by Tony's voice, the second and the sixth have the same title ("The Toxique") and present the point of view of all the three, each of the central ones ("Black Enamel", "Weasel Nights" and "The Robber Bride") is dedicated to one of the three protagonists, respectively Tony, Charis and Roz. The novel has a schematic structure, moving from the protagonists' crisis after Zenia's reappearance from the dead at the Toxique, through the narration of the lives of the three, to the final crisis, a week later, after having encountered their enemy, in the same place as the beginning. The last pages are dedicated to the memorial service for Zenia, during which the three throw her ashes into Lake Ontario and continue narrating the woman's stories.

Tony, Charis and Roz all show a fragmented subjectivity and a lack of something inside them. Many of their psychological difficulties, even as middle-aged women, depend on their experiences as children. All their families were characterized by disintegration or discord between the two parents (Charis did not even know her father) and by one of them coping with solitude and full parental responsibility. Their mothers, in particular, are responsible for their lack of confidence and their sense of frustration, especially in their relationships with men. Their split subjectivity is signaled by the double or triple identity they built for themselves when they were young.

Tony Fremont is a university professor of history whose point of view is fundamental in the novel, as her guiding voice opens and ends the whole story:

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she represents the power of history to explain the past and the present, the need to create a narrative in order to understand the world around us and the importance of being able to change perspective to reach a full comprehension, which can never be definitive, of life. Her double/triple identity is signaled by her names: Antonia Fremont (the one given her by her parents when she was born), Tony (as she has chosen to be called in real life) and Tnomerf Ynot (her name spelled backwards).

Since her childhood, Tony was able to spell and write backwards, as a way to separate herself from reality. Though she wrote her real name with her right hand, her left-handed writing and her attempts at writing words backwards show a gap between her inner world and her family and social life and represents the distance between what she has to say and what she really feels. Ynot is a twin sister for Tony, but "taller, stronger, more daring" (Atwood 2009: 162). The double identity she created as Tnomerf Ynot, dominated by images of violence and war, represents the power that Tony lacks for Ynot is a sort of female barbarian warrior and rebel, cruel and uncivilized, the opposite of the docile and calm girl Tony was, always respectful of the rules and of her mother's feelings.

Charis is a New-Age follower and Yoga teacher when she met Zenia in the 70s. Her mother, Gloria, was single when she gave birth to her and so Charis did not even know who her father was. Gloria suffered from hysteria and was unable to be a figure of reference for the young Karen, Charis's first name. She used to beat her daughter and transferred her own feelings of self-hatred and helplessness onto Karen, who, being a very sensitive child, suffered in silence and learned to ignore her physical sensations and needs.

After Gloria's death, two of Charis's relatives, Aunt Vi and Uncle Vern, adopted her but soon after her arrival in the new house, Uncle Vern began to abuse his young niece. As when she was younger, Karen ignored her physical sensations and converted her body into a spirit, called Charis. As an adult, she

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completely eliminated the figure of Karen, as the sexually abused child, by sinking a bag, representing her old identity, in Lake Ontario and adopting the name Charis in her everyday life. By doing so, as Jean Wyatt points out, "Charis grows up without the qualities connected to her previous experiences, such as sexuality, the body, rage" (Wyatt 1998: 47). This is the reason why she is completely unable to have a satisfactory sexual life and she is often tormented by nightmares and hallucinations. When Charis met Zenia, she was living with an American draft-dodger, Billy, who stayed in her home without giving her any gratitude or help. When Zenia stole Billy, Charis was pregnant and soon after she gave birth to a baby girl, August.

Roz, on the other hand, is a rich and married businesswoman with three children, Larry and two twins, Paula and Erin. Roz, too, has a triple identity, shown by her three names: Roz Grunwald, Rosalind Greenwood and Roz Andrews. The first name change aimed at hiding her Jewish origins, the second one was the acquisition of her husband's surname. Roz's life was split in two when her Jewish father came back home after many years of absence. Until that moment, Roz lived with her Catholic mother, who was very severe with her, making her feel unappreciated.

Roz liked her father's freedom and disrespectfulness, but she felt guilty as regards her mother's strict morality. The more she loved her father, the more she felt to be a rebel towards her mother, whose recognition was necessary for her. Yet her father's bad reputation and his strange friends made Roz have some doubts about her father's rich income, which may have come from his illegal activities in Europe during the war. Therefore, she felt positioned between two opposite and irreconcilable poles, as she had to choose between them. In addition, as the daughter of a very oppressive mother, Roz always seeks acceptance from the others and can't be autonomous from the others' judgments. With her husband Mitch, Roz has the same attitude as with her mother: his acceptance corresponds to that of the whole world, without

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understanding that he is profoundly immature and insecure. In fact, he needs to prove his self-worth and independence by betraying Roz with other women: she accepts his unfaithfulness, until she discovers that his lover is Zenia.

Since their very young age, the three protagonists' split subjectivities make them easy victims for Zenia, through whom they acquire a fuller understanding of their moral and psychological selves and of their past. In the novel, Atwood presents three women unable to cope with their femaleness and wholeness, who try to define themselves from the male perspective, in particular that of their lovers. Atwood also demonstrates that any attempt to attribute a unified or coherent self to women is completely inappropriate as everyone's self, women's selves in particular, are fragmented and split. Women's subjectivities are not only double or triple, but multiple.

One of the causes of the three women's fragmentation depends on the split between what they naturally are and what they are expected to be by the society where they live: because of their historical subordination to men, women have become unable to see and self-define themselves, as they tend to adopt the male point of view. Since the time they were young girls, they learnt and respected strict rules of education and behavior in order to be accepted and recognized by their mothers and, as a consequence, by the whole society. This aspect represents a huge limit, as women cannot fully express themselves and be completely free from social restrictions.

The traditional dichotomization between what women are and what they should be is a product of our Western philosophical tradition, which can accept only divisions between two elements and privileges unity and coherence. Atwood seems to tell the readers that everyone of us should recognize his/her own hybrid nature. In addition, as Luce Irigaray points out, it is our patriarchal society which attributes to women's multiplicity the quality of being fragmented and defective, while it should be considered simply as such, without any negative evaluation (Irigaray 1985: 30).

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The creation of new names and identities allows the three women to break the silence of their soul and to externalize a part of the self in order to face their own subjectivities, as opposed to the objectivity of the male world, and build a more complete self-narrative. Labels, relegated to the world of science, are unable to show the complexity of reality and human life and need to be overcome by recognizing the multiplicity of the self and its inner contradictions (Panikkar 2007: 106).

Zenia encounters Tony, Charis and Roz at crucial moments of their lives, making them change and discover themselves, through the recovery of their past and the recognition of their multiplicity. Each of the three, though criticizing and despising her, in some ways identifies with Zenia and hopes to become just like her. She recalls all the double identities the three forged when they were young, so allowing them to regain all the past experiences and all those qualities they have chosen to repress in growing up. At a superficial level, Zenia is very different from Tony, Charis and Roz and still she is part of them, a sort of dark side, which is not something negative, but everything the three have put in the shade, being embarrassed by having some feelings and qualities the society around them considers unacceptable for a woman. She is the 'Other' compared to what the three are in their everyday life and to the mask they have chosen to wear.

It is difficult to attribute to Zenia labels coming from traditional literary genres, but, for sure, she embodies the figure of the female adventurer. Zenia has all the characteristics of a female adventurer: her eccentricity, her jobs, her sexual behavior, her solitary life, her wildness, being in opposition to culture as fixed rules regulating people's lives. Not by chance, she is often represented as a wild animal or gothic figure, like a serpent, a wolf, or a vampire. Being associated to animal aggressiveness and wildness and to fearful images, it is clear that she is not only a figure from reality, but, above all, a product of the three women's imagination. As a man-eater and a thief of her friends' lovers,

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Zenia's powers are those of sexuality and total freedom, so that she is boundless as regards her desires and aims.

Another confirmation of the incarnation of the three women's fears in Zenia, is the title: it recalls the fairy tale *The Robber Bridegroom* by the Grimm brothers, which is the story of a group of men who dismember and eat the bodies of their wives, exactly like Bluebeard: both the tales are about women's fears of the male predator (Pinkola Estés 1995). If the robber bridegroom is a woman, as evidenced in Atwood's novel, she obviously embodies female inner instincts of survival in a society which still oppresses them.

As every double, at the end, has to die, so does Zenia, after each of the protagonists has recognized a personal identification with her. The fascination Zenia provokes in her friends is so powerful that it exceeds the love for their men: once having understood that she represents the wholeness they are looking for, men are of secondary importance, or, better, they have a less important function in their lives, as the priority is given to the construction of their own identity. The powerfulness they all admire in Zenia depends on her total freedom to live according to her desires and feelings, without being stopped by the society where she lives. This is what each one of them needs to recover in order to develop her own individuation process. In fact, Zenia dies only when all three have included the 'Other' within the 'Self'.

Zenia wholly embodies the double Tony has built for herself, Tnomerf Ynot, the adult outsider woman. At the beginning, she was afraid of sex, but, through her friendship with Zenia and after her betrayal, she is more confident and sensual towards West, until she becomes his girlfriend and then his wife. For Tony, Zenia represents a sort of initiation to real relationships and to sex. The fact that Tony acknowledges her double self and does not castrate it, as Charis and Roz do, is probably the reason why she is the only one who is able to maintain a lasting relationship with her husband.

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Charis, too, meets Zenia when she is at a stalemated point of her relationship with the draft-dodger Billy. Charis cares for Zenia as if she were her daughter and in so doing she discovers her power to mother. In this way she starts feeling her own bodily presence, beginning her path towards wholeness. After Zenia brutally tells her that she had been the target of Billy's sexual advances, Charis makes love with him, and, by identifying with Zenia, for the first time she experiences an orgasm. Then, after Zenia and Billy's betrayal, Charis is pregnant: her capacity to give birth to another life means she has reached the wholeness she needed and has put all the pieces together. For both Tony and Charis, Zenia represents the achievement of self-assertiveness, self-knowledge and female sexuality.

In a similar manner, through Zenia, Roz has the opportunity to feel legitimated for having her father in high esteem. Thanks to Zenia's story of having been rescued, when she was a young Jewish child, and taken to Canada by Roz's father, she can see him as a hero and she can integrate her split self. Through her, Roz also understands how immature her husband is and how much she deserves more than him. Her desire to be Zenia is linked to her unacceptability of the social clichés about women, their need to be always nice and controlled: what her enemy really represents for her is the power of an unlimited pleasure, disrespectful of any moral or social law. It is a sort of rebellion against the strict education she received from her mother and against stereotyped assumptions.

The society where Tony, Charis and Roz live, as they demonstrate, is still used to judging them according to traditional clichés and those qualities a woman must have in order to show her femininity. The rules of social behavior their mothers taught them are still available. Over time, women have become complicit of this kind of stereotypes as they accept to build their social image on them. Zenia, on the contrary, does not conform to these schemes but is the opposite of what a woman is expected to be: a man-eater, aggressive, solitary,

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uncontrolled. The necessity to recognize new female roles in the current society does not mean that women have to abandon their spirit of care and nurturing. On the contrary, Atwood shows three friends who offer motherly care for each other. What the author wants women to do is to recognize their multiple identity, which challenges the fixed one attributed to them by a patriarchal definition.

The reference to the Grimm brothers' tale *The Robber Bridegroom* is motivated by Atwood's desire to demonstrate that women can play all the roles, both the traditional ones and those which have been only male prerogatives, such as the adventurer, the torturer, the murderer. Like Roz's twin daughters, who "opt for women, in every single role" (Atwood 2009: 352) and want to have their favorite tales re-read with all female characters, Atwood as well chooses an all-female story. The adaptation of the old tale challenges restrictive gender roles and creates a world where the boundaries between men and women, self and other are shifting and unclear. In the original tale, the figure of the Wise Woman is very interesting: in Atwood's re-adaptation, she can be personified by Zenia. In fact, she is the person who guides the three friends, even if in a very cruel way, to the discovery of the self and of their multiplicity, until the moment when, her mission accomplished, she dies. Exemplary is the fact that Roz's magazine review, of which Zenia becomes the director, is entitled "Wise Woman World", until she changes it into "Woman Today": as the wise woman of the story, Zenia knows that women need to recognize the dark aspects of their soul. This recognition is a wise and sincere act of self-assertiveness, since the old female wisdom, created by men, can no longer be available in a modern society, where women, even for the positions they hold today, have the possibility to affirm their needs and desires.

The recovery of the female psychological world which challenges the depersonalization of the patriarchal horizon and the creation of new female identities, as opposed to the traditional ones, gives rise to different gender relations. The protagonists' next generation show to be made by good heirs of

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the evolution in progress: apart from Roz's twins, who want women in all the roles, Augusta and Larry, too, are quite emblematic. Augusta is a very strong woman, who, since she was young changed her name August into a more resounding one, which seems to affirm a powerful personality in society, a soul who can leave a mark in the world. Larry is gay, that is, he does not belong to any of the fixed categories of men and women: Roz is unable to understand his homosexuality because she has not learned yet that the boundaries between the genders are not so stable and that this sharp division is too restrictive and does not correspond to the fluidity of reality.

Through these characters, Atwood shows that if women reinforce their strength and personality, they will grow up a better equipped generation. She also states that the stable categories built by the scientific terms are not adequate to represent the complexity of reality and human beings. The depersonalization provoked by the objective categorization cannot but kill the world of spirituality and, therefore, the 'I'. Through the act of renaming themselves, Atwood's characters become able to recover the 'Self' in its totality and to reach a new female identity and a better space in the world.

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