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A Feminist Reading of the poem 'This is a Photograph of Me' by Margaret Atwood

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Abstract:

'This is a Photograph of Me' is one of the best poems of Margaret Atwood. The poem is divided into two parts that present through the use of symbols and imagery the dark side of the modern world. The paper will be analysed through a feminist perspective to show how the male-dominated society marginalises and subjugates women. Although the poem does not suggest the gender of the victim, the use of the imagery does make it clear that the poem is about a woman who is dead. The paper will also show how the writer by giving the voice to the dead symbolises a patriarchal society that has always marginalised women. The paper will also show the two aspects of society that are presented in two parts of the poem. One aspect presents an ideal image of a happy home which is just a mask beneath which lies the real picture of a world which is dark, aggressive and male-dominated.

Keywords: Marginalise, Identity, Voice, Discrimination

Introduction:

Margaret Atwood, in full Margaret Eleanor Atwood, (born November 18, 1939, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada), is a Canadian writer best known for her prose fiction and her feminist perspective. In her early poetry collections, *Double Persephone* (1961), *The Circle Game* (1964, revised in 1966), and *The Animals in That Country* (1968), Atwood ponders human behaviour, celebrates the natural world, and condemns materialism. Role reversal and new beginnings are recurrent themes in her novels, all of them centred on women seeking their relationship to the world and the individuals around them. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985; film 1990; opera 2000) is constructed around the written record of a woman living in sexual slavery in a repressive Christian theocracy of the future that has seized power in the wake of an ecological upheaval; a TV series based on the novel premiered in 2017 and was cowritten by Atwood. The Booker Prize-winning *The Blind Assassin* (2000) is an intricately constructed narrative centring on the memoir of an elderly Canadian woman ostensibly writing to dispel confusion about both her sister's suicide and her role in the posthumous publication of a novel supposedly written by her sister. Atwood also wrote short stories, collected in such volumes as *Dancing Girls* (1977), *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), *Wilderness Tips* (1991), *Moral Disorder* (2006), and *Stone Mattress* (2014). Her nonfiction includes *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), which grew out of a series of lectures she gave at the University of Cambridge; *Payback* (2008; film 2012), an impassioned essay that treats debt—both personal and governmental—as a cultural issue rather than as a political or economic one; and *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011), in which she illuminated her relationship to science fiction. In addition to writing, Atwood taught English literature at several Canadian and American universities. She won the PEN Pinter Prize in 2016 for the spirit of political activism threading her life and works.

Discussion:

This is a Photograph of Me is the opening poem of Margaret Atwood's highly acclaimed anthology, *The Circle Game*, published in 1964 which marked the beginning of a great career of Atwood as she won the



Governor General's Award in 1966. This collection of poetry has a great appeal as it talks about the concerns of the modern era like the contrast between appearance and reality, discrimination of women, condemnation of materialism, natural world and quest for identity. 'This is a Photograph of Me' encapsulates most of the above themes.

The poem comprises seven stanzas of uneven length and is divided into two parts with the second part in parentheses. The two parts present two different perspectives. The first part is quite ideal with positive and happy images. There is a mention of a tree, a small frame house, a lake and low hills. All these images make readers assume that the poem is about a place that is ideal to live in.

As the poem moves to the second part, things begin to change dramatically. With the start of the parentheses, the imagery turns dark and the tone becomes serious. The voice within the poem makes readers focus on a single point in the photograph. The voice as can be inferred from the images is of a woman who is dead. This woman attracts the attention of the readers as her voice is silenced amid the image of a happy home that is presented in the first part.

Apparently, the poem is about a photograph that is blurred but the voice that cries within the photograph is so deafening that it catches the readers attention.

The feminist reading of the poem will compare the symbols and images in the poem to the situation of a woman in a male-dominated society. The use of the phrase 'blurred lines and grey flecks' can be compared to the situation of the women whose plight in a patriarchal society is kept blurred and hidden. They are discriminated against in the name of being submissive and soft.

The use of the words tree, a gentle slope, a frame house and a lake all suggest the happy life which is merely a show-off. The writer tries to suggest that the situation of a women doesn't merely change because she is kept in an ideal place. Unless and until the identity and the opinion of women are not respected she will continue to live a miserable life. The same thing happens in the poem where this woman was kept in an ideal place but was always silenced. She was silenced to an extent that it's her dead body that speaks. She was not heard while she lived.

The use of the word 'distortion' suggests how truth is always distorted for the selfish desires of men. It is this distortion that silences a woman to such an extreme that she becomes helpless. The narrator within the poem becomes a symbolic figure and represents the whole class of women whose identity is always compromised be it in the form of a daughter, a wife or a mother.

The second part of the poem becomes a passionate plea of a woman to recognise her identity, her existence as an equal human being.

Conclusion:

The poem although ideal at the beginning becomes shocking in the second part by the revelation that the



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speaker is dead. This death symbolises the condition of a woman in a patriarchal setup where she is always silenced. The photograph becomes a story of a woman who struggles to enforce her identity at every step of her life thereby becoming a soft victim in a male-dominated world.

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