

**AESTHETICS OF NATURE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S**  
***THE BLIND ASSASSIN***

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**Abstract:**

*Nature has the power to teach, elevate, sooth and console. It offers rich experiences of joy and a sense of peace to all who seek its beauty and grace. It invokes an incomparable interest to women who seek its extraordinary beauty. It offers knowledge to the needy, lovely scenery to the lovers of Nature. The myriad forms and phenomena around us are nothing but the various manifestations of the nature. This paper explores how the characters experience nature in Margaret Atwood's novel The Blind Assassin.*

There is an indissoluble bond between nature and human beings. This realization would fill one with universal love and all the characters associated with nature. Here is no doubt that nature is the abode of God and all the beauty that nature unfolds is a mighty manifestation of God's wisdom and power.

Margaret Atwood, a Canadian is one of the most powerful, intelligent and talented writers in Canada. Atwood's literary career as a novelist begins with her maiden novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), followed by *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber's Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). *The Blind Assassin* has won the greatest of honours – the Booker Award. It is an extraordinarily accomplished novel, and is a work of superb artistry. It is a story of duplicities and betrayals in the glossy pretentious world of the fashionable and the ambitious.

*The Blind Assassin* is about two sisters, one of whom, Laura Chase dies in a car accident in 1945 under ambiguous circumstances. Iris Chase, wife of Richard Griffin, an industrialist lives alone in Port Ticonderoga during her old age. In her middle nineties, Iris's life oscillates between her uncertain present and the mysteries of her past. She recollects the past and the mysterious death of her sister Laura Chase in this novel.

As the novel opens, readers come to know about the death of Laura Chase in a car accident. The car fell into the ravine and it smashed “through the tree tops feathery in the new leaves and then rolled down” (p.3). Atwood reveals *nature and death* in the opening of the novel. Iris Chase, sister of Laura Chase is getting ready to identify her. Her mouth is numb and her face expresses extreme pain. She is furious with Laura and with the policeman for implying that she has done it. Iris says, “A hot wind was blowing around my head, the strands of my hair lifting and swirling in it, like ink spilled in water”(p.3). She describes death as hot wind. Here, nature pinpoints the guilty-conscious nature of Iris. She is afraid that the news of Laura’s suicide can spread like ink spilled in water.

Laura takes a photograph which has been clicked during button factory picnic. She establishes her relationship with Alex Thomas and they are sitting under an apple tree. She holds her hand over the picture and she feels the heat coming up from it. It is like the “heat from a sun warmed stone at midnight” (7). The Celtic meaning of the apple tree deals with love, truth, peace, beauty, honesty, romance, fertility and remembrance. It is a symbol of purity and motherhood. Laura is honest in her love and the meetings of lovers are fruitful. Near the apples, the coarse grass is seen in the foreground. The grass is yellow because the weather has been dry. The context can be interpreted as the dry weather implies lack of love and care in the family. After Liliana’s death, Laura has no one to take care of her. The external environment around Laura is dry and coarse. Even the place is filled with coarse grass. But apples are hanging there. Here the apples appear like the forbidden fruit. The love of Alex is expressed in terms of apples. The small green apples are watching her like eyes. Nature has been bestowed with human qualities.

The orange tulips are coming out in a crumpled and raggedy manner. They are compared to the stragglers from the returning army. Iris Chase used to poke around the “debris of the back garden, clearing away dry stalks and fallen leaves” (52). Debris of the back garden denotes loss of family fortune. It can also imply human relationship. Iris in her old days has become a dry stalk and a fallen leaf. The productivity of the plant is lost.

Laura has the habit of borrowing things from Iris without asking her. Iris always forgives her because she has no one except Laura. Iris says, “The two of us on our thorn-encircled island, waiting for rescue and on the mainland, everyone else” (53). To portray the isolation of Laura and Iris, Atwood penetrates into the imagery of an island. Many people are standing on the island. Relationship is described as a thorn-encircled island. Island symbolizes only isolation, bitterness and loneliness. Iris realizes her lack of self-identity and asserts that, “I am after all a local fixture, like a brick-strewn vacant lot where some important building used to stand” (54).

The summer heat has come in the town. It settles over the town like “cream soup” (p.60). Weather is described as malarial and cholera. The trees are like wilting umbrellas and they offer shade to Iris Chase. She walks through Erie street turns into Mill Street and runs along the Louveteau River. Port Ticonderoga has two rivers, the Jogues and the Louveteau. The Louveteau’s swift current is used for the electricity plants. The Jogues is deep and slow. Port Ticonderoga is the entire town rising out of the shallow prehistoric ocean, sprouting, like those brown, grainy films of flowers opening up that used to be shown in movie theatres. The town is compared to a flower with its mainland and rivers.

Because of natural surroundings, workers are able to work cheerfully. Nature reduces the working burden of men. The button factory of Chase appears like a fairy land. Nature and industry are inseparable. Even the grandfather, Benjamin Chase thinks that “flower beds are good for the workers’ morale – zinnias and snapdragons are his standbys as they are inexpensive and showy and lasted for a long time” (68). Nature lifts up the morale of people.

According to Reenie, Norval proposed to Liliana at a skating party. There is an “inlet - an old mill pond - upstream from the falls, where the water moves more slowly. When the winters are cold enough, a sheet of ice forms and there is thick enough to skate on” (83). Liliana is below Norval’s social level. They always act together like Ferdinand and Miranda in Shakespeare’s “The Tempest”. They are surrounded by the white icicles, everything white (86). There is ice under their feet which is white. By introducing ice to the background, one can predict the chillness and paleness in their relationship. Ice melts when it receives sunshine. It is not stable and physical love is portrayed through ice.

Liliana Chase undergoes an abortion when Laura is a very small child. She is not able to understand the pain of her mother. She burrows her head against her mother’s side. She experiences “a hot smell of rust, mixed with the sweetly acid scent of damp but smoldering leaves” (115). To mark the destruction of the fetus, Atwood uses the element of nature. “Leaf” refers to the unborn baby. The action “smoldering” refers to the external action kindled by some like Norval Chase. It consumes the life of Liliana.

After their mother’s funeral Iris is sent with Laura out into the garden. The fresh air does them good. The sunlight makes her squint. After the funeral Iris feels,

I resented the intense greenness of the leaves, the intense yellowness and redness of the flowers: their assurance, the flickering display they were making, as if they had the right. I thought of beheading them, of lying waste. I felt desolate and also grouchy and bloated (120).

In the presence of the moon the flower gardens are silvery grey, as if all the colours have been sucked out of them. The moon is reflected in her lily pond and she is dipping her toes into its cold night (169). When Laura disturbs Iris’s sleep, she enjoys nature during night. “It became autumn. Laura and I picked milkweed pods and opened them, to feel the scale-shaped seeds overlapping like the skin of dragon” (171). They pull the seeds and throw the pods into the river. They watch whether they capsize or get swept away. Pods refer to the life struggle of people. River water refers to the journey of life. These pods may sail or sink. Just like the pod, Laura also sinks in her life.

The days are darker after Iris’ marriage. Winter season is delayed. This delay is portrayed as “ominous” (365). When Iris visits Rome, she sees the Tiber, “flowing along, yellow as Jaundice” (372). Richard makes shovel handles, because Germans are short of wood. ‘There is a lot of digging to be done, and more projected and Richard cannot supply the shovel handles at a price that undercuts his competitor’ (372-373). Through this we may argue to make shovel handles he could have destroyed trees and taken all the necessary woods. Men in the novel are associated with ice and they lack appreciation of nature.

Iris says, “The heat was dizzying; where the sun hit the lawn it was a blinding green. The shadows under the trees were thick as tar” (377). The heat in the earthly atmosphere denotes the emotional barrier of Iris. “Blinding Green” refers to how Iris is bereft of the truth and she has blindly followed the words of Richard. Even the colour “green” highlights Richard’s opportunism as he is merely looking into the prosperous side of Iris Chase. Through nature, the diplomatic character of Richard is portrayed.

Iris Chase’s sister Laura has been seduced by Richard. Then Laura is forcibly admitted in the mental asylum called Bella Vista. Bella Vista means “beautiful view” (524). It is situated at the outskirts of the city. Richard wants to save his prestige. He also he wants to separate Iris and Laura. Hence he chooses a remote place.

Due to the decrease in the familial relationship, Iris wants to be occupied. Finally, she decides to engage herself in gardening. “I had taken up gardening in earnest no, I was getting some results. Not everything died. I had plans for a perennial shade garden” (585). When Iris feels that all human relationships have died out she comes to the conclusion ‘not everything died’. She wants to find solace and comfort under nature. She has planned a perennial shade garden. Here, Margaret Atwood has used two major gardens, perennial garden and rock garden. Rock garden has been established under her sister-in-law, Winifred’s pressure. Now, Iris finds out her own self-identity. She wants to liberate herself from the clutches of cruel people. She understands that man expresses artificiality. Nature is always truthful. It represents sincerity and faithfulness. As an act of return to nature, she starts taking care of the perennial garden. When human relationship fails to give her shade, she can take rest under the shade of nature.

“Port Ticonderoga, this middle sized town is situated at the junction of the Louveteau River and the Jogues River and is noted for stones and other things” (p.611). After Laura’s death, Iris gets the picture of Alex and Laura which has been taken during button factory picnic. Iris says, “Happiness is a garden walled with glass” (632).

Iris has got a different perception of nature. “The drops of rain will glitter on your face and clothes like sequins” (636). “A person like me inside it - an old woman, an older woman, living alone in a fossilized cottage, with hair like burning spider webs and a weedy garden full of God knows what”(636).

It may be pointed out that the influence of nature on human beings is critically reflected in the novel. Aesthetics of nature belongs to the order of values of which ecological value too forms a significant part. In this paper an attempt has been made to organize and understand the human and non-human interactions and interrelationships. Nature is the eternal repository of rapturous human emotions and any experience of nature is transcendental.

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