

## Theme of Sneakiness in Atwood's The Blind Assassin

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**Abstract:** *The aim of the present research is to find out the theme of sneakiness in the novel The Blind Assassin by Atwood. The study investigates that the characters in the novel are intentionally or unintentionally the victim of deception shown by Iris. This sneakiness is the bi-product of postmodern hyper-reality and the late capitalism as proposed by Boudrillard and Jameson respectively. Almost every character in Blind assassin is the direct or indirect victim of the postmodernity experienced by the Canadian society and the same portrayed by Atwood in the novel. This study is conducted through the analysis of the major characters and their roles they play in the action of the novel. This role seems to be reflective of their inner psyches. Sneakiness being a part of postmodernism has a constant slippage to the postmodernity of Canada. Atwood's novel seems best example of this. The research attempts to explore the answer to the question whether it is true that Iris plays a major role in developing theme of sneakiness in The Blind Assassin and attempt also to seek the justification for the same behavior exhibited by leading characters question.*

### Introduction

Postmodern trends in literature start after 1960 which is in fact a reaction against modernism. Modernism and modern trends are related to the stages of social developments which are based upon industrialization. Modernity is a diverse unity of socio-economic changes generated by scientific and technological discoveries and innovations. The modern age in literature started from the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century and it follows the Victorian age. This age is characterized by progress, prosperity, industrial revolution and uncertainty that entail fundamental changes in every field (Kierkegaard 59- 60). On the very inception of modernism everything regarding literary representations as well as socio-economic realities is questioned. Standard of artistic workmanship and of aesthetic appreciations has also undergone radical changes. The modern man is portrayed as revolutionary as he challenges the old values and traditions developing a materialistic attitude towards life and relations. Kierkegaard describes modern society as a network of relations in which individuals are leveled into an abstract

phantom known as “the public”. The modern public, in contrast to ancient and medieval communities, is a creation of the press, which is the only instrument capable of holding together the mass of unreal individuals “who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organization”

The term ‘Postmodernism, entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979 with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* by Lyotard. On Lyotard's account, the computer age has transformed knowledge into information and has generated materialistic relation resulting into developing crooked ways for gaining control over the capital. Postmodern man in quest of new values and tradition keeps the history at the margins and, in consequence, loses his identity in the hyper-real world of media and advertisement. Modern man shattered old realities and postmodern man has constructed new realities of his own by disregarding the older ones creating a social and moral mess. According to Baudrillard, we must now come to terms with the second revolution, “that of the Twentieth Century, of post modernity, which is the immense process of the destruction of meaning equal to the earlier destruction of appearances. Whoever lives by meaning dies by meaning" (38-39)

Literature of the time could not remain immune to the capitalistic thinking. Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* is one of the postmodern novels with dominant theme of sneakiness. Merriam – Webster dictionary defines sneakiness ‘marked by stealth, furtiveness or shiftiness’. Cambridge dictionary online defines sneakiness as ‘doing things in a secret and unfair way. All the characters in the novel act secretly to deceive the other characters in the novel through their deceptive expression and actions. They are trying to deceive the other characters by their hypocrisy or a tricky action as Iris, a big cheat, cheats Laura by having love affair with Alex Thomas intentionally. She is an incarnation of Machiavellian philosophy of eat, drink, and be marry. The character of Iris is the center of attention for the researcher since the novel appeared the literary scene. There are justifications about the attitude of Iris. Kerksens (2007) has discussed the Labyrinth of deception from postcolonial perspective in Atwood's novels. The research work by Kerksens dealt with the elements of deception in ten of novels of Attwood including *The Blind Assassin* which is also brought under the lens of deception. The researcher has found three –tiered deception in the novel. First Iris and to lesser extent Laura apply deception strategies. Secondly, in Iris' novel both protagonists use treachery. Thirdly, within the novel, deception appears as a quality rather than a flaw. Then there is discussion of Iris's disruption of reality in the novel. There are conscious efforts on her part to deceive Laura by having extramarital affair with Alex and in a way that's deceiving her husband, Richard, also.

Innala (2007) has researched the character of Iris in the light of theories of morality and evils in her research project *Iris as an Evil Narcissist: moral dimension surrounding the construction of truth in Attwood's The Blind Assassin*. In her research work, Innala (2007) comments that Iris's perception of truth raises moral questions. Her subjectivist sort of truth in

fact has 'no moral judgement'. Kant's morality theory and Hume's idea of morality is used to study the concept of morality. In the novel iris becomes evil and does evil to those who are close to her.

## 2. Theme of sneakiness in *The Blind Assassin*

Attwood's novels are to be studied from postcolonial and feministic perspective. But there is another perspective that is the deceptive qualities in the heroines of Attwood. Moreover, concerning Atwood's heroines in her early novels, Davey writes: "They tell lies in their professional work, they lie and fantasize as narrators of the novels, they fictionalize (...) their own lives to themselves" (Davey 65-66).

The novel *The Blind Assassin* is a multi-layered narrative. Remove a layer and you will find another layer with a different theme like that of sibling love, of unfulfilled love, of conversion of criminal deception and of death and destruction. But theme of sneakiness encompasses all the themes. Characters and the situations in the novel support Iris to be sneakiest of all the characters in the novel. Sneakiness is analyzed from social, psychological and ethical point of view. Iris is the victim of psychological and social sneakiness.

Iris is the main character in the novel whose acts, statements and silence affect the life of almost all the characters in the novel and whose life suffers because of the events and acts of other characters in the novel and she also is the one who is unable to get sympathies of the characters as well as the readers throughout the novel except in the end where she gets sympathies due to her old age. Her hypocrisy is prevalent on the very first page when on hearing about the suicide of Laura she keeps her nerves and satisfies the media by saying that her death is just an accident.

At the point of time when she is aware that she has lost her only sister and the only blood relation in the world; her comment startle the reader and the very negative image of her starts building up in the mind of the reader when she says: "I must be in shock, I decided"(Attwood 4). Attwood presents deceptive female characters in her novels but they use deception for their survival.

Her hypocrisy is evident when she writes a book *The Blind Assassin* and Laura is supposed to be the author. The facts in the novel written by her brought death to Richard. She herself admits it when she says: "I look back over what I have written and I know it's wrong but not because of what I have set down, but because of what I have omitted. What is there has a presence like the absence of light" (Attwood 484). She herself was with Reenie thinking about controlling Laura from getting close to Alex. She is the ally of Laura in hiding Alex in the pantry. She is with her in taking care of the food and all that he needed. Alex never needed a name for Laura. She used to call Alex he, him or his.

The affair of Iris with Alex is not based on love. Her only motive is to defeat Richard, Laura and her unbridled passions. Her affair with Alex is not pure. As she asks Alex that do you have a liking for her and Alex replies that he had no time to think about liking or disliking her. Alex is the only person who makes critical and true comments about her nature. On an occasion, he comments that: “make hay while sunshine, it’s your motto” (Attwood 12). On an occasion she uses the word ‘sneakiness’ for Laura and herself. As she says: “Laura and I sneaking into the pantry” (Atwood 99).

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Her cold and careful attitude to Laura is shocking for the readers as she pays no attention to what is happening to her. She is aware of the corrupt character of Richard as she mentions in the novel that for Griffin all the tactics of the girls are to Richard as nets and webs. She herself comments that Richard might have relations with number of girls but she is the one who bothers least. She is aware that Laura got a crush on Alex. In fact, Alex is the only urge for Laura to survive this cruel world. On picnic she has seen the relationship Laura develops for Alex and how touchy she is that she has invited him to his home for dinner instead of Reenie’s opposition. She herself was with Reenie thinking about controlling Laura from getting close to Alex. She is the ally of Laura in hiding Alex in the pantry. She is with her in taking care of the food and all that he needed. Alex never needed a name for Laura. She used to call Alex he, him or his.

Her reference to hating her name is symbolic. As she comments on an occasion that: “L is for loves and L is for lily so pure white it opens at day it and it closes at night” (Attwood92). Laura loves her name and she was in fact love and lily. She blossoms when it is all day and as night arrives she closes. “I had never a favorite letter that began my name-I is for iris- because I was everybody’s letter.” (Attwood 92)

She is a commodity to be used by everyone. Her father handed her over to Richard to save his business deal. So she considers herself to be a package handed over to Richard. Richard considers her only a thing to be used and be kept in the showcase. As she says that her task is to smile and attend parties with Richard and Winifred. “I did not talk much. I smiled and agreed and did not listen.”(Attwood 247)

These lines show that what a big cheat she is. It’s true that her marriage with Richard is a deal but she should have tried to have good relation with Richard. She might have taken interest in

him or at least have love for him. But she has no feelings for Richard. She neither dislikes nor likes him. In fact she never thinks of him. Joan Foster, *Lady Oracle's* protagonist, is Atwood's first fully conscious liar. She develops a double personality because of her parents' cold attitude. Iris too faces same sort of cold attitude from her father who sacrifices her on the altar of his business. Joan's multiple identities and her deceptive lies are like Iris who also has developed multiple identities and keeps on lying and deceiving throughout the novel. Rorty remarks that 'corruption can be expressed in nuance of speech and gesture and in habitual pattern of behavior, which occur without a second thought 'she nods and smiles but in reality not listening to what Richard says is also deception.

Iris is afraid of losing the status she has being Richard's wife. She willingly lost her sister but not the money. Her only motive is to get money and status and for that she is ready to cross all the limits. She calls Laura crosser of boundaries but she herself is the crosser of boundaries of morality. Her comment makes it clear that she is ready to eat her own heart (her only sister) for the money and the status provided by Richard. "If you get hungry enough, they say, you start eating your own heart" (Atwood 339). That's what she did to Laura and Richard. Alex is true when he calls her wolf. He comments that: "I have a wolf side to me." (Atwood: 356) She objects to Alex's calling her wolf but later in life she accepts that she has eaten up her only sister and her husband like a wolf.

Events and the situations in the surroundings made her sneaky. There was no way left for her just to be hypocrite and deceive other people for her survival. She deceives her teachers just to save herself from punishment.

As she realizes that Richard has cheated her she changes her stance and tries to be what she is not. She is aware that she cannot live a happy life so she decides to enjoy the protocol and status she gets being a member of Griffin family and transformed herself to a society wife. Richard wants her to be an obedient wife so does all the men in the life of Joan. In her relationships with those three male characters, Joan is forced to develop highly efficient mimicry strategies based on deception in order to satisfy their patriarchal demands. Iris also develops same sort of attitude for Richard. She is being dictated by Richard and Winifred at her house. No one cares about her feelings so she turns to Alex just to have a listener. It is sneakiness at psychological level. The women cannot carry the burden of diverse social constrains so they develop crooked ways for their survival as Iris and Joan develop sneakiness under the pressure of patriarchy. Iris is the elder sister so she has to follow all the norms and moral standard that resulted in double personality. She is in fact oppressed under the burden of moral and social constrains. After the death of her father, she considers Laura her responsibility but proves herself incapable of fulfilling it .while describing theories of evil, Kant argues: 'self-deception explains how we can take ourselves to be acting from duty alone. When in fact, we require some extra-moral incentive in order to do what duty dictates' (96)

It is her zest for lust and money that make her play trick on people. What she cares, only money and a status in society and for that status she is ready to tolerate any thing. It was actually a war for being. A battle for existence that made her do so. As she is aware that she can be “replaced”. So she needs to be as: “...revealing or as concealing as you might wish...” (Atwood 343)

She wants to have a life of mouse rather than of tiger as she lacks confidence. This lack of confidence makes her act secretly through the back door to achieve her aim. She wants to live like a mouse in the castle of tigers, by creeping around out of sight inside the walls away from the gaze of Richard, Winifred and the problems of the world.

Without money she considers that there be darkness and emptiness. She compares herself to be a letter which is deposited here and collected there but it is addressed to no one or she is sand on which everyone has a right to write and remove without her permission. The above comment shows what she thinks of herself but nothing can justify her last meeting with Laura when she tells her about extramarital affair and death of Alex Thomas. She might have kept quiet which she realized later in life that she might have held her tongue but now to no avail. Even she is aware of Richard attitude towards Laura but she is so busy in ruining the lover of her sister out of jealousy that she ignores it. Later in her old age she realizes her blindness to the events and the situations. Everything is before her eyes but she closes her eyes deliberately of the events. Winifred and Richard tell her fake story of Laura’s madness and she believes without confirming it. But realization is useless and he cannot prove herself innocent as Kading says ‘I cannot know is an excellent excuse’ (339)

But now she has proved herself to be the sneakiest of all characters even if it’s the situations and the events that make so but responsibility lies on her shoulders also. She herself is aware of her hypocrisy and stealth sort of acts. Her words echo the truth of the situation when she utters self-analyzing words about her nature as she is unable to recognize her image in the mirror. She considers herself to be outcome of the girl in the picture. It’s just guilty conscience that is teasing her. “sometimes I’m my own worst enemy.” (Atwood 125) She compares herself to the broken ice that will melt away in the cruel world. Even Alex is unable to hold her. She is the victim of the events, a typical postmodern person. She considers herself to be the victim of injustice and cruelties of the society so she shows negative sneakiness in the novel as her deceptive acts and attitude harm Laura, Richard, and even her daughter Amie suffers because of the imbalanced life she spends as a member of a broken family.

Laura is also sneaky in her actions but her acts are hidden under the cover of innocence. She is with Iris to sneak to the pantry to give food and accessories to Alex. In fact, it's her who hides Alex and Iris later becomes the ally. She also sneaks through school and wandered the markets and the streets. Even in a vision she wanders the streets stealthy. She also leaves her house and works at a cafe after the death of her father. She senses the wickedness of Richard and Winifred so instead of going to their house she starts working in a café to avoid them. Her deceptive acts are just to save herself and her house but she is unsuccessful because of Iris's non cooperative and selfish acts. Laura truly is a 'relief', 'lily', 'love' and she hates to pretend. She never liked to be a tree or butterfly or breeze as her teacher wants her to be. She wants to be "invisible" by wearing hats (Atwood 187).

She is aware of the hypocrisy of Iris but she still loved her. On occasions, she tries to make her aware of her ignorance. As she colors the pictures and Iris is colored blue. Iris asks about coloring her blue. She replies: "because you are asleep." (Atwood 197) Though she seems to be innocent but Iris' comment reveals the deceptiveness of Laura. She says: "I came to think that Laura was making fool of me...I didn't think she was lying as such, but neither was she telling the entire truth". (Atwood 244)

This prejudiced comment of Iris confirms her sneakiness as she is aware that her non-cooperative attitude is that of an innocent girl who has lost her parents and her house and even her beloved sister. Her sneakiness is positive as it harms no one. Iris's husband, Richard, also strikes the reader as a potential trickster. Description of Richard, on their wedding photograph, reveals his deceptiveness: "He look substantial, but at the same time quizzical: one eyebrow cocked, lower lip thrust a little out with on the verge of a smile, as if at some secret, dubious joke" (Atwood 292). Richard is the big cheat. He is the one who cheats Mr. Chase and destroys their whole business and brings death and destruction to the family. On their return from honey moon, Iris realizes that Richard has cheated them. "I have married for nothing", (Atwood 323) says Iris.

Richard is a big cheat but a little less than Iris as he controls the life of Iris as well as Laura and also the business and the property. He even does not inform Iris of her father's death. Iris is aware of the fact that Richard is not showing her mail from her house but she remains silent proving herself to be bigger cheat than him. She must have asked Richard about contacting her family. Even when Richard forces Laura to shift to leave her house she remains unconcerned and unmoved. She even does not question Richard on keeping her uninformed about the death of her father. Laura recognizes the evil nature of him and calls him: "a lying treacherous slave trader, and a degenerate mammon worshipping monster" (Atwood 524). Her ethical deceptiveness brings about the tragic end to Chase family.

Alex Thomas is another character in the novel whose identity remains hidden. He is along with Richard showing sneakiness at ethical level. He is the one who has affair with both the sister. He is not sincere to both the sister. His relation to Laura is of a parasite that sucks blood out of her without benefiting her. Iris gets a bit of solace from him by having sexual satisfaction. Alex Thomas tricks Iris in making her believe that he constitutes a real escape for her. She needs a listener and Alex proves to be a good listener. To some extent he is also responsible for the death of Laura. He is aware that Iris needs a listener so he gets benefit from Iris as in the story of man and woman, the woman tells: "I brought you apples" (Atwood 352). He makes Iris realize that it is he who is keeping her alive. His use of word 'wolf' for Iris is also true to him. : "stories true to life means there have to be wolves in them" (Atwood 424).

Later the use of words hyena and jackal reveals his trickster nature. Alex too contributes to the theme of sneakiness in the novel. Her acts of deception too are negative as he is the ally of Iris in bringing death to Laura. Her ignorance also is in a way responsible for dejection of Laura when she meets accident. Mr. Chase also shows ethical sneakiness. He is the one who brought this mismatch for Iris and in the end he dies without telling the cause and readers are kept unaware of his death. But there are hints of cause of his death. It is Richard who is responsible for his death. After his death, Iris remembers the words of her mother saying: "underneath it all, your father loves you" (Atwood: 105) What is underneath, she realizes later in life as her father forced her to a mismatch to save his business but the decision proves a disaster for the whole family.

Linda Hutcheon gave the concept of dedox. In her view, postmodern culture is evil because we have dedoxed. We lost contact with all the old docs and are now in search of new docs finding nothing in return. In the novel theme of sneakiness co-relate to dedoxing. As we analyze that all the characters question the presence of God. As Iris comments about her father that:

"All the talk of God and civilization make him vomit" (Atwood 96) And there is another comment about god : "all the Gods are carnivores"(Atwood 87)

Laura's questioning God in school and later Iris realizes that she has restored faith in god and Iris loses her faith like her father as she is her father's daughter and Laura is her mother's. Alex is also doubtful about the presence of god and Richard has only one God that's money. This loss of morality, contact with religion, god and any sacred documents make all the characters sneaky. Old dictums of 'take care of your siblings', 'speak the truth, never lie', and 'never cheat' are replaced by nothing but hypocrisy and corruption that leads to confusion and chaos and that's sneakiness. Iris doesn't have any morality or modal to follow so she is justified in her sneaky acts in the absence of any documents to follow. Iris has not lost contact with history as she idealizes Grandmother Adela but her idealization is just to follow her life style not morality. She is a snob as she tells the other woman in the party about her relation to Grandmother Adela to impress the woman and to degrade Winniferd. Winiferd is being called as new money and

vulgar. All the acts of Iris are just to impress other people and to raise her status. She calls her a sister keeper though she proved herself a failure. She failed to fulfill her promise of protecting her sister in her jealousy and sneakiness. It was Laura who sacrificed for it to save her house. She bore pains and miseries without harming her

## Conclusion

To conclude, all the characters show sneakiness in one form or other. Richard is an evil one who abuses Laura and harasses his wife physically as well as psychologically. He is an incarnation of late capitalism who wants to control lives of the people along with capital. He cheats Mr. Chase and brings him death by controlling his business. Alex on the other hand is a kind of hypocrite who has affair with both the sisters and he enjoys cheating both at a time and even getting material benefit from Iris. Laura is also a trickster sort of character but her tricks never harmed anyone. Iris is the sneakiest of all as she has no personality of her own so she develops a personality according to the instructions of Richard and Winifred. Her analytical comment about Richard, Winifred, Laura and her own self concludes the article. She says: "I didn't see the danger. I didn't even see they were tigers. Worse, I didn't know I might become a tiger myself. I didn't know Laura might become one, given, the proper circumstances. Anyone might, for that matter" (Atwood 403).

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