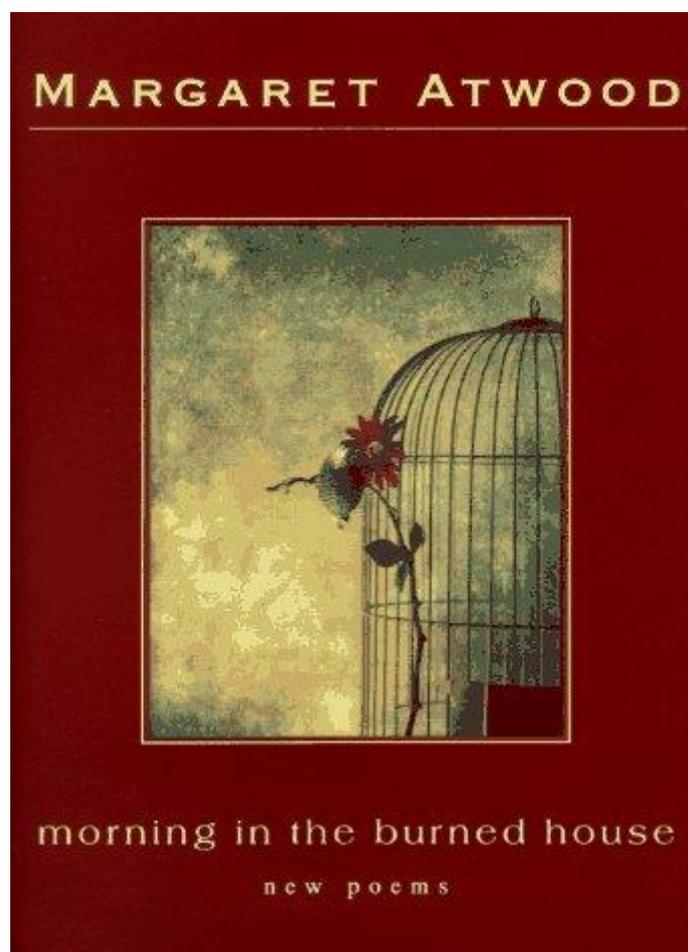


**Blurring Identities in a Changing World:  
A Perspective on Margaret Atwood's Select Poems**

**Dr. Olive Thambi**

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**Abstract**

Margaret Atwood explores different facets of human personality in her short stories, poems and novels. Most of her characters are seen grappling with formidable issues. Her characters do things for self-gratification and for a general recognition of themselves as someone of importance in society. The concept of identity is explored at different levels by the author. Atwood is of the opinion that language alone cannot suffice for the expression of

one's feelings. Unspoken words count as much as spoken words. There are certain things which are left unsaid and which people may never get to find out -- certain feelings which words can never adequately express. This paper attempts to discuss the underlying question of identity that seems to hurt and harass the young and the old in this ever-changing loveless world.

**Keywords:** Human personality, Formidable issues, Unspoken words, Question of identity

### **Diversity in Canada**

Canadian culture is shaped by a range of languages in vogue and by wide variations in demographics, First Nations' cultures, immigration patterns and proximity to Europe, Asia, and the USA. Consequently, the "Canadian voice" is not consistent throughout. Despite all differences, Canadian writers do bring many shared thoughts to their representations of nature, culture, and human interaction, whether at home or abroad. Some critical approaches to Canadian literature have tried to identify national or regional characteristics in literature. Canadian literature is, in fact, heterogeneous in nature as it is a conglomeration of the writings of people of many nations put together. Therefore, Canadian literature does not restrict itself to a particular set of topics, terms, or even Canadian settings, nor does any set of topics and terms constitute an essential ingredient in a Canadian book.

### **Concept of Identity**

Margaret Atwood explores different facets of human personality in her short stories, poems and novels. Most of her characters are seen grappling with formidable issues. Her characters do things for self-gratification and for a general recognition of themselves as someone of importance in society. The concept of identity is explored at different levels by the author. Atwood is of the opinion that language alone cannot suffice for the expression of one's feelings. The unspoken words count as much as the spoken words. There are certain things which are left unsaid and which people may never get to find out -- certain feelings which words can never adequately express.

### **A Misnomer**

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Blurring Identities in a Changing World: A Perspective on Margaret Atwood's Select Poems

The concept of identity is a misnomer today. From a child to an adult, everyone craves attention and recognition. The desire to be loved and adored is inherent in most people. The ever changing world with its different trends and changing lifestyles has had a huge impact on minds, both young and old. Margaret Atwood captures it all in her heart-rending poems which speak volumes about the human psyche.

### **Focus of This Article**

The paper deals with two profound poems “A Sad Child” and “This is a Photograph of Me”. The poem entitled “A Sad Child” is about a child who yearns for love and attention from her parents. The opening lines of the poem which are presumably, a retort from a parent to a sad child, go like this:”You're sad because you're sad. It's psychic. It's the age. It's chemical”. (4) Obviously, there is a lack of warmth and understanding on the part of the parent, unable to perceive an underlying problem which could be resolved amicably through a lot of love and care.

### ***A Sad Child* – An Autographical Strain**

The child is sad because she is not given enough love and attention. Instead of reassuring the child of their care, the parents coax and cajole the child into buying a pet or a coat. They even suggest she take up dancing to forget her gloom. As the poem progresses, the reader learns the child has come to realize that she is not the favourite child. The poet describes a touching scene where the child rushes back from a lawn party, all decked up in a new dress with a new ribbon, with an ice cream smear on the face and her mouth full of sugar, regretting rather remorsefully that she is not the favourite child of her parents after all. Critics discern an autobiographical strain in this poem and also suggest the failure of most parents to help children in their formative years. There is a definite lack of emotional connection, or intelligence on the part of the parents.

### **Emotional Intelligence**

Daniel Goleman has dealt with the aspect of emotional intelligence in his book

*Emotional Intelligence*, published in the year 1995. He says in his book, *Emotional Intelligence* that “our deepest feelings, our passions and longings, are essential guides, and that our species owes much of its existence to their power in human affairs. That power is extraordinary”. (3) In the poem, the parents are described to be people lacking in emotional intelligence because of which, they fail to respond to their child’s needs appropriately. It is clear that the child’s strange behaviour indicates the presence of a problem, which has to be sorted out in a suitable platform. When the child feels slighted and neglected by her loved ones, she feels lost and forlorn. There is nobody to give her an identity. Her identity seems to be in a state of flux all the time.

### **Growth of Our Identity**

Man gets his first identity at home, when he is given a name. As he grows up, he gets different labels. Julia. T. Wood, in her book, *Communication in our Lives*, says, “in the earliest years of our lives, our parents tell us who we are. You are so smart. You are so strong. You are such a funny one”. (14) People see themselves through the eyes of others. When this image is denied to them, they find themselves at a loss. They are perplexed and confused, because they really do not know who they are and whether they would ever gain acceptance in society.

### **Importance of Nonverbal Cues**

Allan Pease says in his book, *Body Language*, that non-verbal cues also play a crucial role in shaping children’s personalities. Children observe the adults around them and attach meanings to their actions. Psychologists in general believe that children imitate the actions they observe in their growing years and reinvent themselves. Here in the poem, “A Sad Child”, the child makes her own assumptions more from the actions of her parents than their words.

### **Longing for Love**

Actions speak louder than mere words. Just a few words from her parents urging her to do something different like buying a coat or a pet does not reassure her of the love she so

longs for. Perhaps just a hug or some other physical display of affection would have worked wonders. The child is so insecure towards the end, that she takes cover in a wash room and just speaks to herself regretting she was not the favourite child after all. Don Colbert says in his book, *Deadly Emotions*, “people who have stuffed emotions very often have grown up ..... in which they have felt unloved or rejected as children. In some way, they have not experienced the security and bonding of a normal parent-child relationship”. (54)

### **Identity Crisis**

The identity crisis can happen even in adulthood amidst an ever changing scenario. “This is a Photograph of me” is yet another poignant poem of Atwood, which captures the thought in all its profundity. The photograph, which was presumably taken years ago, has the narrator in a reminiscent mood. The opening lines of the poem go like this:

It was taken some time ago  
At first it seems to be  
a smeared  
print: blurred lines and grey flecks  
blended with the paper; (1-5)

### **Blurred Lines and Grey Flecks**

The photograph of the narrator is not clear at first glance. A cursory glance can only reveal “blurred lines and grey flecks” merging with the paper. Then a closer look may reveal a house, some hills and a lake. In the words of the narrator,

(The photograph was taken  
the day after I drowned.)  
I am in the lake, in the center  
of the picture, just under the surface. (15-18)

### **Stripped of Individuality**

Then the narrator goes on to say that it is difficult to discern her exact image from the photograph. This is because she is submerged under the water and the effect of the light gives a false image of her. As can be seen, the real image of the narrator is different from the one seen in the photograph. According to the poet, a woman is stripped of her individuality in a patriarchal society. She has no identity of her own. She is just exploited in different ways to such an extent that her real self gets blended with the environment she lives in. She is more of a commodity than a human being.

### **The Drowning**

John Wilson Foster in his article, 'Poetry of Margaret Atwood' says that the concept of drowning in the poem could refer to a loss of identity. People's real selves can get eclipsed by domineering people. A woman is usually overshadowed by the people around her in different ways. Expectations are very high and the woman succumbs to the wishes of her loved ones. She surfaces later and slowly emerges from the waters that had submerged her. But this time she is quite unrecognizable. She has no identity of her own. She has to just point out a few characteristic features in the photograph which give a remote resemblance of her.

### **Identities Get Blurred**

Identities do get blurred in a social milieu where altruistic love is missing. The world today is devoid of love, compassion and empathy. Anything done in a spirit of love can mean a world of difference to people. Margaret Atwood aptly encapsulates the loss of identity and the sense of helplessness right from infancy to adulthood. The problem is in fact universal and not just confined to Canada. The world needs to be really friendly, more understanding and sincerely compassionate. It all begins with the heart -- the heart that is willing to love.

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A selection of Atwood's poems was released as *Eating Fire: Selected Poems 1965-1995* in 1998. Showing the arc of Atwood's poetics, the volume was praised by *Scotland on Sunday* for its "clean, symbolic, thoroughly Atwoodesque prose honed into elegant columns." Atwood's 2007 collection, *The Door*, was her first new volume of poems in a decade. "There is a pleasing consistency in these poems," he wrote "which are always written in a fluent free verse, in robust, clear language. Atwood's wit and humour are pervasive, and few of the poems end without an ironic twang." Atwood's next few books deal less with speculative worlds and more with history, literary convention, and narrative hijinx.