

# THE THEME OF SURVIVAL IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES FROM MARGARET ATWOOD'S DANCING GIRLS AND OTHER STORIES

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**ABSTRACT:** Margaret Atwood is one of the most gifted, artistic, influential and intellectual female writers of modern fiction in the West today. She is a creative and eminent Canadian writer who is widely recognized as a social activist. Comparing to other contemporary writers, it is found that Margaret Atwood has achieved the attraction of readers and critics all around the world. A versatile genius, Margaret Atwood was differently handled the theme of survival in her novels as well as short stories. This essay dealt with the theme of survival, particularly between men and women. Also the survival was different for both men and women and it was clearly portrayed by the author in these short stories. The paper examines and narrates clearly how the protagonists of these short stories struggled to survive in this world. Through the short stories and short novels, the author shows her vision of survival to the readers.

**KEYWORDS:** Margaret Atwood, survival, intellectual, stories, protagonists

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most distinguished literary figures in Canada, Margaret Atwood has contributed her great part in the arena of world literature. She is internationally recognized poet, novelist, critic and social activist. Atwood's career in literature started with her first novel *The Edible Women* in 1969. It was followed by many novels and short stories and her most recent work *The Blind Assassin* (2000) has helped her to achieve her concrete place among the top women writers around the world. *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* is a collection of fourteen short stories originally published in 1977 by McClelland and Stewart, Toronto. This short story collection won the St. Lawrence Award for Fiction and the award of The Periodical Distributors of Canada for Short Fiction. The fourteen short stories are *The War in the Bathroom*, *The Man from Mars*, *Polarities*, *Under Glass*, *The Grave of the Famous Poet*, *Rape Fantasies*, *Hair Jewellery*, *When It Happens*, *A Travel Piece*, *The Resplendent Quetzal*, *Training*, *Lives of the Poets*, *Dancing Girls* and *Giving Birth*.

## II. INSTINCT OF SURVIVAL

In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the word instinct means, a natural tendency for people and animals behave in a particular way using the knowledge and abilities that they were born with rather than thought or training. The another meaning is a feeling that makes you to do something or believe that something is true, even though it is not based on facts or reason. The synonym for the word instinct is "intuition".

Instinct for survival means how the human beings have the inborn capacity to live even in a very difficult situation and what are the ways they used to come over the difficulties for their existence.

In *The Resplendent Quetzal*, the story started with Sarah who was sitting near the edge of the sacrificial well. Edward had passion for birds and kept a notebook with him since his age of nine and noted down Robin, Bluejay, and Kingfisher. Edward wanted Sarah to fallen the habit of birding because he wanted to get rid of her for some time. For escaping from her husband, Sarah pointed out an oriole coloured birds. Sarah thought to live without Edward and Edward thought to kill Sarah.

"She thought of herself as having more money if Edward were dead: she would have all of his salary instead of just part of it. She knew there wouldn't be any salary if he really were dead, but it spoiled the fantasy to remember this." (DG, 68) So the survival itself was questioned by the author. He had a question why she changed? And he thought, it would be the baby which died at the time of the birth. But the baby was a perfect one said by the doctor and after that Sarah did not go to university and did not get a job. She sat at home,

looking over his shoulder, towards the door, out the window and waiting for something. She did not have the instinct to survive and she lived for namesake. The tourist guide informed some things to them. Edward stood up from the place and started to walk back and suddenly he felt a flash of orange. "It was an oriole partly hidden behind the leaves; he could see the breast, bright orange, and the dark barred wing. He wanted it to be a Hooded Oriole, he had not yet seen one" (DG, 93). The Oriole made Edward to remember their happy life and started to believe Sarah and created an instinct to live with Sarah. According to *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, they called an unborn baby as "A jewel, a precious feather". The word Quetzal means feather. Edward said *The Resplendent Quetzal* and it was a green and red bird with blue tail. He explained to Sarah that Quetzal Bird meant "Feather Bird". When the baby died she blamed it on him and he said it was not his fault, not the doctor's fault, the cord was twisted and she never accused him. They only got married because Sarah was pregnant and their instinct for survival was around the baby. They married only for the child and the child was no more and why they continued in their relationship and Edward did not want to quit the relationship. She stole a plaster Christ Child in a crèche while Edward was paying the bill. She thought she was pregnant all the time and she followed all the medications prescribed by the doctor. When the child died Edward only cried but not Sarah. This showed his instinct for survival; though the child was dead he wanted to live with Sarah. The whole group of tourists was moved and she went to the edge of the sacrificial well and Edward came back and saw Sarah was at the edge of the well and she threw something into the well. She seemed to be crying and the old Sarah came back. "This isn't like you", Edward said, pleading, as if that was a final argument which would snap her out of it, bring back the old calm Sarah." (DG, 165). In *Lives of the Poets*, Julia lied in the bathroom and her feet were at the edge of the bathtub. She wanted an ice cube and she remembered the image of Coke and ice machine at the end of the hall, so, she moved towards it. A hotel guest opened the door and saw her and he thought it was an accident and closed his door. He did not want to help her. He wanted to survive but not about the survival of her. The machine was jammed and she went in front of the phone, tried to call long distance through the hotel operator, when she sneezed and the front page of the directory spattered with blood. She lost her another chance for her survival. In two hours, she had to give reading of the poem. She did not want to call Bernie because he will call the doctor and thought it wasn't serious. For every reading, it was happened and it was not that much serious for a doctor. She always had a thought in her mind, during the introductions, she faint and taken to the hospital by the ambulance and woke up, safe and cured, with Bernie sitting near her and he smiled at her. They were living together for four years and they had a problem, they needed money. Bernie was on grant through painting and she had a part time job, cataloging in a library. Bernie ran out of money and had trouble in selling paintings. He said to her that he and other two painters planned to start a gallery named *Notes from Underground*. Julia published a book and had money and she lent him part of her grant money to start the gallery. Through his gallery Bernie did not make money and she believed it because she had also in the same situation. Her name was Marika and Julia met her at the gallery. Marika was friendly to Julia and said she has read her book and it was quite good. "I don't find time to read books, but I got yours out of the library because of Bernie. I didn't think I was going to like it, but actually it's quite good. .... It was the way Marika offered her compliment: like a biscuit to a dog, part reward, part bribe, and part condescending." (DG, 243). Though they were friendly, they were like two mothers at a birthday party. After sometimes, they talked and showed their difference each other. The last time Marika came to the house and Julia did not wake up and she wanted a black notebook with phone numbers. Julia got irritated and she found the notebook under the bed and asked her "Would you like some coffee?" Marika said, "Bernie says we have nothing in common, but I think we get on real well." Julia wanted to stop Maria to coming home without hurting her. Bernie and Julia recently argued about the food bills because Bernie was eating twice as much as her. At first, they decided to share everything but now it changed. When she asked about that he said, "Don't worry, you'll get paid off" and it was about the gallery loan. The blood slowed down and dialed 0 and got the operator to place a call for her. She listened the noises from outer space and felt Bernie's tongue was already in her mouth. There was no more blood so she could do reading and felt hungry in the dinnertime. "Blood, the elemental fluid, the juice of life, by product of birth, prelude to death." (DG, 348). In half an hour they will come to pick her up and thought of her poem reading. She phoned him and it was Marika who spoke in the phone and said Bernie went away for a couple of days and he would call tonight so, I informed him and said Julia to water the plants. Julia thought if she was his secretary, leaving her with messages for the idiot wife. Julia did not ask her where he had gone and when she put down the phone, she thought she heard something, it maybe a voice or a laugh. They will arrive, two young men to pick her up for poem reading. She watched the snow and she was led by the young men into the auditorium, where a gathering was waiting to hear her words. She will step across the stage, words coiled and she will open her mouth and the rooms will explode in blood. Bernie only wanted Julia's money but not about her. He did not care about her and did not want to know about her survival. Julia wanted to survive but the circumstances around her made to lose her hope to survive. In *Giving Birth*, the author narrated a story with the help of a toy. In the beginning of the story the author questioned about the birth and delivery. The narrator had a girl child and they had greeted each other with hugs and smiles, played with hot water bottle and the alarm clock. The baby placed her fingers in her mother's mouth for learning the secret of making words but she did

not. The narrator was waiting for her first word. The narrator discovered a alarming thing in the playpen and it was a small naked woman, made of soft plastic. It was given by the narrator's friend and the baby loved the toy and she made a tear in the body with her new teeth. The narrator put the woman in the cardboard box which was used for toy storage. She was back in the playpen and found the woman's feet were gone and found in the baby's diaper. The narrator wrote this story while the baby was in nap. She named the woman as Jeannie and the narrator showed the difference between her and Jeannie. Jeannie was not real but the narrator was real and the narrator's hair was not light brown but Jeannie's was. She was going to hospital for giving birth and she was sitting in the car. There were two other people in the car with Jeannie, one was a man, the narrator called him as A, was driving. The man accompanied her for doing breathing exercises; he will present at the time of delivery and went together to the hospital maternity ward. The other one was a woman, sitting in the front seat; she too was pregnant and went to the hospital, wearing brown and maroon checked coat and tied her hair with kerchief and not going to the hospital to give birth. "The word in English for unwanted intercourse is rape, but there is no word in the language for what is about to happen to this woman."(DG, 355). In the hospital, Jeannie attended the prenatal classes and knew about the things after delivery. When they reached the hospital, the woman was not there and the man helped her to get out from the car. She was sent to Prep school, what she thought. She was purblind when she leaving her glasses and contact lenses. An old woman examined and told her that the labor would be last longing for another eight to nine hours. She wanted to hold something else during the difficult part of labor which was given by a talisman. This showed that she wanted to live the life after the delivery. When the doctor said it was just about four centimeters, Jeannie felt cheated. A nurse came with a needle and Jeannie said that she did not want that. She asked whether it hurt the baby and she answered her that it was mild analgesic. She felt the head and asked A to ring the bell. He pressed the button and a nurse came and took to the room. The nurse asked her not to push and breathe through mouth until her own doctor came. "Why should she wait, why should the baby wait for them because they're late?" She pushed only after the doctor ordered to push. She saw the baby and advised not to get up the next morning without the help of a nurse. Jeannie heard the footsteps and it was the woman who came with her in the car, carried her paper bag, leaving the hospital with her job done. That was she killed the child and after the baby was carried in to Jeannie, she examined her and she was replaced by someone else.

### III. CONCLUSION

In *The Resplendent Quetzal*, Sarah and Edward's married life was started only after knowing that Sarah was pregnant. Their survival was bounded on their unborn child. Only because of the child their survival was fixed. Though they wanted to kill one another without any intention, the survival was questioned by the author. The love they had at the beginning of their life was demised; their child dead while it was born made their survival a difficult one. Sarah's depression and her mystic behaviour confused Edward. This showed that the depression and death is a part and parcel of human beings' survival. At the same time, one's survival maybe ended by their loved ones and vice versa. A bird changed Sarah and Edward's life to love each other and started a new life. In *Lives of the Poets*, Julia's survival depended on her love with Bernie. Her survival bounded with Bernie's survival. She handled all the difficult situations in her life as well as Bernie, particularly economical crisis. Julia believed Bernie in all the ways. Bernie's survival depended only for Julia's money not for her love anymore. Sometimes one's survival based on others for their money or else other needs. Her love on Bernie made her to lose hope on her life. Though the diminished health made her weak, the unfaithful love made her to lose hope. In *Giving Birth*, the author questioned about the word delivery. The story narrated a woman's survival based only on giving birth. Only by giving birth, the woman was capable for speaking and smiling with others. Though she did not want to give birth, she was insisted to give birth. The survival of a woman was questioned during the child birth. At the same time, the author questioned the readers about the woman who got raped and misconceived. A nurse in the hospital asked Jeannie to slow down the delivery. Is the baby wait till the doctors arrive? The survival was questioned by the author everywhere in these stories. In all the three stories, the survival of human beings was differently shown by the author to the readers. The survival of human beings is end up at anytime and anywhere. Some of the struggles related to the survival are same beyond country, religion, language, colour and gender. The author made the readers to consider themselves as protagonist to feel the difficulties narrated. The article deals with the survival of human beings and the struggles and difficulties faced by them.

### IV. REFERENCES

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