Changing the Pattern: Reclaiming History, Constructing Herstory in Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace

Ana Sentov, Faculty of Law and Business Studies, Novi Sad, Serbia, ana.sentov@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper will examine how Grace Marks, the female protagonist/narrator of Alias Grace (1996), reclaims her history, which is comprised of many different, often contradictory stories of her life and the crime for which she is imprisoned. These stories reflect the dominant discourse of a conservative male-dominated society, in which Grace is an outsider, due to her gender, class, age, and immigrant status. The law, the medical profession, the church, and the media all see Grace as a disruptive element: a woman who committed or assisted in a murder, a lunatic and/or a member of the working class who dared disturb the social order. Grace is revealed not as a passive victim, an object to be acted upon, but as an agent capable of reclaiming history and constructing herstory, challenging and defying the expectations of dominant social structures. The paper will show that Alias Grace, as a novel giving voice to the marginalized and the silenced, stands as a compelling work that examines and provides insights into the position of women and its changes over the course of history, provoking a discourse that remains relevant today.

Key words: Margaret Atwood, Alias Grace, history, herstory.

Introduction

The political and social shifts the world has experienced since 2016, the year of Brexit and Trump’s election to office, have produced an interesting side effect – they seemed to have sparked a renewed interest in Margaret Atwood’s unique blend of fictive memoir and social commentary. The critically acclaimed TV adaptation of The Handmaid’s Tale (1986) released in April 2017, which presents a dystopian view of a near-future American society as a totalitarian state in which a select group of straight white men hold all the power, women have been reduced to servants and stripped of their reproductive rights, and all other minority groups have been marginalized or downright exterminated, struck a chord with audiences that felt their rights were under threat from the new US administration. The second TV adaptation of an Atwood book, CBC’s Alias Grace,
released in September 2017\textsuperscript{23}, seemed to have eerily predicted the very type of situation that was unfolding just as it premiered (Gilbert 2017). Women in the film industry were speaking out about the systematic sexual harassment and abuse happening in this sector, which in turn encouraged women (and men) of all ages and walks of life to speak openly about similar experiences. Women’s rights movements were initiated or were reinvigorated, the most famous being #MeToo, which explicitly deals with helping survivors of sexual violence, and Time’s Up, which is focused on workplace equity and creating equal economic opportunities for women and people of color (Langone 2018). The goals of these two of the most prominent movements tell us a great deal about the place that women and minority groups still occupy, even in the developed world. All these voices express an enormous need amongst such victims to speak out and be heard, to break the silence and dissolve the pattern of victim-blaming, and thus to reclaim or construct their stories and their identities.

\textit{Alias Grace} – a Historical Novel?

\textit{Alias Grace} (1996), as a novel giving voice to the marginalized and the silenced, represents a particularly relevant exposition on the position of women, one that continues to stimulate discussion on how this situation has, and has not, changed. This paper will examine how Grace Marks, the female protagonist/narrator of \textit{Alias Grace}, reclaims her history, which is comprised of many different, often contradictory stories of her life and the crime for which she is imprisoned. However, the historical figure of Grace Marks never had the opportunity to give her own account of the crime. As Atwood said in her lecture “In Search of Alias Grace” (1998), what we know about Grace comes from a variety of sources, the most notable being \textit{Life in the Clearings}, a journal/travel book written by Susanna Moodie, an English emigrant to Canada in the 1830s. In writing a series of poems called \textit{The Journals of Susanna Moodie} (1970), Atwood explored Moodie’s writings and came across her version of the Grace Marks story. In 1851, Susanna Moodie went to see the “celebrated murderess” in the Kingston Penitentiary, where she was serving her life sentence. Together with a fellow servant, James McDermott, Grace Marks was accused of the murder of their employer, Thomas Kinnear, on his farm outside Toronto in July 1843. According to Moodie, it was Grace’s infatuation with her employer and her jealousy of Nancy Montgomery, Kinnear’s housekeeper and mistress, that drove her to seduce McDermott and manipulate him into murdering both Nancy and

\textsuperscript{23} Atwood previously wrote a screenplay for CBC in 1974, \textit{The Servant Girl}, about Grace Marks based on Susanna Moodie’s account of the crime from 1853. After realizing that Moodie’s account was prejudiced and mediated by sensationalized Victorian crime novels and journalism, Atwood abandoned this version. She was a Supervising Producer for the 2017 adaptation, written by a Canadian actress and director Sarah Polley.
Kinnear. The pair raided the house for valuables, went to Toronto, and made it across Lake Ontario and to the United States. However, the very next day they were arrested by the Canadian authorities and brought back to Toronto, where they were both tried. Initially, both Grace and McDermott were sentenced to death by hanging, but Grace’s sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, as a result of many petitions written by well-meaning citizens, as well as on account of her gender and young age (she was only sixteen at the time). In Moodie’s version, Grace Marks is presented as a cunning temptress, and McDermott as her pawn, driven by his lust for Grace and resentment against his superiors. Interestingly, Moodie later changed her opinion of Grace, having encountered her several years later as an inmate of the Toronto Lunatic Asylum. She concluded that, rather than deliberately wicked, Grace Marks must have been insane all along, which would explain her shocking behaviour.

As Atwood says, “[t]hat was the first version of the story I came across, and being young, and still believing that ‘non-fiction’ meant ‘true,’ I did not question it” (1513). Thirty years later, Atwood started her own investigation into the Kinnear-Montgomery murders, examining “records, documents, newspaper stories, eyewitness reports, gossip, and rumour and opinion” (1513). She discovered that there was a multitude of versions, many of them differing or downright contradictory. Not only were there several of Grace’s confessions, but these also contained contradictions. Additionally, there were McDermott’s versions of the story, differing eyewitness accounts, and a variety of newspaper stories whose reporting on the crime and the trial that followed was, more often than not, highly sensationalized, influenced by the papers’ own political agendas and nineteenth-century opinion about criminality, insanity, and the nature of women, especially their weakness and seductive qualities (1515). In the Author’s Afterword, at the end of Alias Grace, Atwood says, “[t]he combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes was most attractive to the journalists of the day” (463). In the multiple versions and in witness statements, Grace was alternatively presented as an unwitting accomplice to McDermott, a naive and dim-witted young girl who ran away with him out of fear for her own life, and a cunning female demon, who seduced both men and incited McDermott to commit murder. There was also a political angle to the story: five years previously, a rebellion against the ruling classes in western Canada had been crushed, and its leader, an Irish immigrant (like Grace herself) escaped to the United States. The newspapers which supported the upper classes called for a more severe punishment for Grace, while those who leaned towards more liberal and reformist views were in favour of showing mercy towards Grace, as a member of the oppressed class.

“I felt that, to be fair, I had to represent all points of view,” Atwood says in “In Search of Alias Grace” (1515), and so the first two chapters indeed repre-
sent many points of view – they open with a number of historical quotations: an excerpt from Moodie’s book, describing her first look at the “celebrated murderer,” contemporary newspaper reports detailing the trial and McDermott’s execution, an extract from the Kingston Penitentiary Punishment Book, and even a newspaper sketch of the accused. Each section of the novel begins with a juxtaposition of historical and fictional quotations, blurring the lines between the two and making the reader wonder if there really is any difference between the two. The first chapter gives us a glimpse into the mind of the protagonist/narrator herself, through a sequence of images of her life in prison and of Nancy on her knees, blood dripping into her eyes, that might belong equally to Grace’s memories – or nightmares. This seemingly authentic insight into Grace’s mind, however, is interrupted by her own statement: “This is what I told Dr. Jordan” (16) – not “This is what happened” or “This is what I remember,” again calling into question the reliability of her narrative. Thus, from the very opening of the novel, readers are left wondering about Grace’s motives, her ability and/or willingness to tell the truth, and her culpability.

These issues are reflected in numerous papers which have addressed Grace’s guilt or innocence, her unreliability as a narrator, and the genre of the novel. A number of scholars (Wilson 2000; Ingersoll 2001; Bruun 2012) have explored the complex interplay of historical and fictional epigraphs in the novel, and the way they self-consciously comment on and contrast with the author’s text, sometimes contradicting each other, as when Atwood uses excerpts from Grace’s and McDermott’s confessions to show how historical texts are, more often than not, different versions of the same event (cf. Wilson 226, Bruun 196).

Regardless of whether they see Alias Grace as a historical novel proper, or a parody of the genre, most scholars agree that “it offers a general questioning of the truthfulness of history” (Howells 150), leading its readers to conclude that history is as much a construction as fiction is (Rigney 160, Wilson 225), to forego the satisfaction of narrative closure, and to wonder about the authority of any official historical account (Vevaina 89). In this context, Grace’s role as an unreliable/duplicitous narrator is a recurring topic, with many scholars remarking on the sense of empowerment that Grace draws from storytelling, reclaiming the story of her life from all those who made different versions of it, in accordance with their own interests (Muller 2000; Howells 2000; Wilson 2000; Rigney 2000; Vevaina 2006; Bruun 2012). Atwood clearly stated that Grace is “a storyteller, with strong motives to narrate, but also strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a blend of these two motives” (1515).
“An Innocent Victim, or a Cunning Temptress?”: the Enigma of Grace

In this context, some critics have addressed the question of whether Grace is truly a murderess, an accomplice to the crime, or an innocent victim of circumstances beyond her control. In the end, the issue of Grace’s guilt or innocence is less important than the questions the novel poses about the relations between truth and fabrication, history and fiction, memory and forgetting, and criminality and mental illness. Mannon proposes that guilt and innocence represent another binary group that is called into question in the novel, and that leaving “the most tantalizing gap unfilled – the question of Grace’s guilt or innocence” is a purposeful decision of the author, meant to draw the readers’ attention to the more important issues of how Grace, and more broadly women from the working class, were treated by male authority figures and institutions; as Mannon notes, “female virtue was defined by the same men who would try to steal it,” and “being innocent did not necessarily mean you would be proven innocent in court” (560).

It cannot be denied that, whether guilty or not, Grace had lived through abuse and trauma, and her overwhelming need for re-establishing her sense of identity and claiming the right to tell her own story is evident. Different versions of her story reflect the dominant discourse of a conservative male-dominated society, in which Grace is an outsider, due to her gender, class, age and immigrant status. The law, the medical profession, the church, and the media all see Grace as a disruptive element: a woman who committed and/or aided in a murder, a lunatic and/or a member of the working class who dared disturb the social order. Grace is, by turns, “the celebrated murderess,” a mad woman, an innocent victim, a cunning temptress, or “a romantic figure” (AG, 23). Throughout the course of the novel, both Grace and the reader will question or reject these labels. Grace will be revealed not as a passive victim, an object to be acted upon, but as an agent capable of reclaiming history and constructing herstory, challenging and defying the expectations of dominant social structures.

Reading Alias Grace as a social commentary on the position of the marginalized social groups in the nineteenth century, and taking into account recent events, we can conclude that, almost 180 years later, things have not changed as much as we might like to imagine. The pattern of blaming victims (especially if they are women) still persists, and Alias Grace very clearly shows how discrimination and misconduct towards women and marginalized social groups is reinforced within society. Wilson (225-226) claims that all of Atwood’s narrators-protagonists are on a quest to free themselves from self-deception, or symbolic blindness; to regain some vision and move as far as possible from the

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objectifying, patriarchal gaze. Grace’s specific quest is to challenge the official versions of her story and claim the right to her own version by challenging the accepted binaries of guilt and innocence, truth and falsehood, and history and fiction. She becomes a “trickster creator,” who is able to manipulate the patriarchal gaze and subvert the social norms she had previously internalized.

Grace’s story reveals various forms of abuse women were and still are subjected to which are invisible or casually overlooked. At the very beginning of the novel, readers become aware that Grace has suffered abuse at the hands of prison guards, asylum staff, even doctors. Whether this abuse has taken the form of sexual assault is left ambiguous, but Grace’s hysterical reaction to the appearance of a doctor (AG 30) leaves no doubt that she was forced to suffer medical examinations without her consent, if not worse. An illustrative example of this is Grace’s account of clergymen’s’ visits to the women in the penitentiary and asylum. In her experience, even the ritual of confession, meant to provide relief, is sexualized and exploitative:

Oh come to my arms, poor wandering soul. [...] Shed tears of remorse. Confess, confess. Let me forgive and pity. Let me get up a Petition for you all. Tell me all.
And then what did he do? Oh shocking. And then what?
The left hand or the right?
How far up exactly?
Show me where. (AG, 35)

The readers are made aware how Grace, and women like her, have been betrayed by men in authority, the very men who were there to ensure their safe and just treatment: policemen, prison guards, judges, doctors, and clergymen (cf. AG 355). Grace is harassed and verbally abused on a daily basis by the prison guards who escort her to the governor’s house and back to prison (AG 70-71). Once Grace starts telling the story of her life to Dr. Jordan, we realize that the pattern of abuse reaches back to her early childhood.

Grace was a witness and a victim of domestic violence perpetrated by her father for as long as she could remember. Recounting her traumatic childhood with a drunken, abusive father and a mother exhausted by poverty and many pregnancies, Grace remembers that, as the eldest child, she was the minder of her siblings, and that she had sometimes thought of drowning one or two of her younger siblings so there would not be so many mouths to feed (AG 104). This morbid example can be read as an insight into the mind of a future murderer, but also as evidence that ethics and morals may hold little meaning for those who struggle to make ends meet.

After a disastrous passage over the North Atlantic during which her mother dies and is buried at sea, Grace’s troubles continue in Canada, as she is left to
fend for herself and the children, while her father continues to squander what little money they have. Soon she becomes the target of her father’s drunken raging and begins to fear that he may cause her a serious injury. She also fears that he may force her and the children to beg in the streets, or worse (CBC’s *Alias Grace* explicitly shows Grace being sexually assaulted by her drunken father). In order to appease him, and to remove herself from this toxic situation, Grace manages to find employment as a servant in a respectable family. There she makes the acquaintance of Mary Whitney, another young servant girl, and for the first time lives a relatively peaceful, well-ordered life. Mary becomes Grace's friend and mentor, and Grace admires her for her strong character, quick wit, and apparent indifference to social hierarchy. Mary is quick to understand Grace’s background and shelters her from her father’s demands for her wages. Mary also shares her “democratic ideas” with Grace, although Grace finds it hard to get used to them at first (*AG* 157): according to Mary, all people are created equal; being a servant is a job like any other; many girls in Canada work as servants to earn their dowry, and then when they get married, have servants of their own; the upper classes are idle and useless. Mary’s ideas of equality and class mobility were inspired by the uprising of the Canadian reformist William Lyon Mackenzie against the upper classes. Grace finds these views strange at first, but later seems to adopt them. Although Grace’s new life seems peaceful, Mary warns her of an ever-present danger for servant-girls: their employers’ sexual interest in them. She advises that “men were liars by nature, and would say anything to get what they wanted of you, and then they would think better of it and be off on the next boat,” that “the worst ones are the gentlemen, who think they are entitled to anything they want” (*AG* 165), and that a woman, especially if she is lower-class, is always the one to be blamed for the transgression.

However, Mary’s progressive views and her sharp wit prove inadequate against the very same situation she has warned Grace against; she falls prey to the advances of her employer’s son, and becomes pregnant. Even though he professed to love Mary and gave her an engagement ring, when he hears about the pregnancy he refuses to be trapped and advises her to drown herself. Mary’s painful death as a result of a botched abortion is a stark reminder for Grace that any position a woman may occupy in a world of male privilege is fragile and easily brought to ruin. Grace thus experiences another trauma, the death of a close friend and mother figure, and comes to realize how easily the same misfortune might befall her as well. Following Mary’s death, Grace leaves the Parkinson family, drifting from position to position, but the traumatic event is never far from her mind and she is very careful to reject any untoward advances.

Unfortunately, Grace eventually becomes trapped in another complex situation in the Kinnear household. Nancy Montgomery, Kinnear’s housekeep-
er who hired Grace and who reminds her of Mary Whitney, turns out to be Kinnear’s mistress as well. As Grace tells Dr. Jordan, she felt little solidarity towards Nancy; according to Grace, Nancy considered herself higher up on the social ladder and was jealous of Grace as a potential rival. Nancy is, like Mary, most likely another victim of male privilege; as she already had a child with another man, Kinnear was the only one who would hire her, and, as McDermott explains to Grace, Nancy had planned to seduce Kinnear and thus secure her place. Thus, the society puts working women in a position where they are preyed upon and exploited, and then shuts them out for breaking the rules of propriety.

Once Grace realizes that Nancy is Kinnear’s mistress and pregnant with his child, she loses any kind of respect she might have had for her, and the tension between the two results in frequent fights (AG 249). At the same time, Grace’s story implies that Kinnear had lost interest in Nancy, and taken a fancy to Grace. Her friend, Jeremiah the peddler, warns her that Kinnear is one of those gentlemen who have a hankering for servant-girls, comparing such men to dogs which have killed a sheep and developed a taste for its flesh, and then must kill another (AG 258). This comparison highlights the predatory nature of gender and class relationships, as well as the vulnerability of Grace’s position as a working woman. When interrogated by Dr. Jordan, however, Grace is reluctant to share any details about Kinnear’s behavior towards her: she claims that he took no more liberties than is usual with a servant (AG 297). Whether this reluctance is because of Grace’s firm belief in not speaking ill of the dead, or her wish to repress the memory of another instance of harassment, is left unclear.

As Grace goes on with her story, the pattern of abuse is revealed in all other interactions with men in her life: after the murders, Grace escapes with McDermott out of fear for her own life. At least, that is what she claims, although McDermott’s confession paints her as the instigator. In any case, even if Grace “had him on a string” (AG 384) to get her revenge on Nancy, it cannot be denied that she was in a vulnerable position afterwards: she was the only witness to the murders, and had to comply with McDermott’s wishes. “For if I was forced in some way to marry him, I would be dead and buried in one shake of a lamb’s tail; and if he was suspicious of me at present, he would be more so later” (AG 328). Grace’s victimization is aggravated once she is arrested and convicted. Reverend Verringer, a member of the committee petitioning for Grace’s release, tells Dr Jordan that Grace’s confession of having a hand in the murders was most likely the result of abuse. Verringer implies that Grace suffered a nervous breakdown because of the mistreatment, or that she might have faked it to escape abuse. The mistreatment, however, continues in the asylum to the point that Grace was suspected of being pregnant as a result of rape (AG 84-85).
“Changing the Pattern”: Constructing Herstory

A number of critics have read Grace’s fictive memoir as that of a trauma survivor, and regarded Grace’s relationship with Dr Jordan as that of a patient and a psychotherapist. It was certainly Atwood’s intention to emulate the patient – psychotherapist dynamics, with Jordan’s attempts to access Grace’s unconscious via association technique and dreams analysis, but in this case it is the patient who has the upper hand. At first it appears that Dr Jordan is the one with all the advantages – his gender, class, and education put him above Grace – but it soon turns out that Grace holds power over him, as a storyteller and as a woman. Jordan’s images of Grace stress his dominance and her vulnerability and passivity – he approaches her mind “as if it is a locked box,” he tries “to open her up like an oyster” (AG 133-134).

However, we soon come to realize that Grace’s passivity and compliance are a form of resistance. Grace is quick to understand that Jordan’s interest in her case is motivated by a desire to make a name for himself and boost his reputation as a doctor. When Jordan insists he wants to help her, Grace muses: “Help is what they offer but gratitude is what they want [...] He wishes to go home and say to himself, I stuck in my thumb and pulled out a plum, what a good boy am I. But I will not be anybody’s plum. I say nothing” (AG 49). Grace uses different strategies of resistance – silence and evasion, as well as confession, but she is the one to choose what to divulge and what to withhold. She thus cleverly keeps Jordan’s interest, and prolongs the time he spends with her, because she is aware that this is what he wants. She is the first to realize that Jordan’s interest in her has erotic overtones, and tries to manipulate it in her favour. Stanley (2003) argues that Grace’s class and status as a servant holds an erotic appeal to the male characters that employ or study her, yet also desire sexual mastery over her, whether it is by metaphorical or literal imprisonment, or through rescuing her. Her father, her employers, and other authority figures have tried to obtain mastery over Grace by keeping her in the subjugated position of a servant, a patient, or an object of sexual desire, while men like Dr Jordan, Reverend Verringer, the lawyer Mackenzie, and Jamie Walsh, the boy who testified against her at the trial and whom Grace eventually marries, have all harboured fantasies of rescuing her. Both of these narratives force her into the position of a victim, either of her own criminal urges that must be contained by male authority, or of unfortunate circumstances, her female passivity, and weakness, all of which require a man to come to her rescue.

Grace has also learnt to manipulate male desire to her advantage. “It is knowledge of me you crave, doctor,” Grace says in a voiceover in CBC’s Alias Grace. Jordan desires “knowledge” of Grace in the Biblical sense, but also, more

26 Darroch 2004; Wilson 2006; Bruun 2012; Mannon 2014
importantly, the knowledge of her secrets. However, Grace has seen what has happened to women who had allowed themselves to be “known:” Nancy and Mary “were impregnated by their employers, were ‘had,’ both sexually and by the skewed codes of an unequal social system” (Stanley 378). Grace resists being fully “had” and truly “known” by employing secrecy, her refusal to disclose, and her ability to construct multiple stories. This gives Grace a measure of power over figures of male authority, which is most evident in the case of Simon Jordan.

One of the multiple stories about the murders says that Grace perceived that she had excited Kinnear’s sexual interest, and encouraged McDermott to kill Nancy and rid herself of a rival. Grace herself tells Jordan of the episode in which Kinnear lustfully gazes at her as she is scrubbing the dirty kitchen floor. It is this incident that incites Nancy’s jealousy and anger, prompting her to dismiss both servants. As it turns out, Kinnear is not the only male character with “a hankering for servant girls” – in Jordan’s dreams, Grace becomes associated with young maids and female factory workers he fantasized about as a boy. Stanley points out that both of these men, representing the dominant class, desire Grace, a member of the working class, but are ultimately unable to dominate her (378-379). It is Grace who survives, while they are consumed: Kinnear is murdered, while Jordan, defeated as a professional and a man, goes back to the United States, and in a final ironic twist, loses his memory as a result of a head injury in the Civil War.

Grace survives because she has learned to manipulate the male gaze, and more broadly, public opinion, and to resist by alternatively retreating into silence and offering multiple versions of her story. Her amnesia, bouts of hysteria, and the insanity episode, may be read as her means of protest against various oppressive systems of control (Stanley 2003; Bruun 2012; Mannon 2014). Grace also firmly rejects to be pinned down and categorized: there are almost as many versions of her personality as there are characters in the novel. To the governor’s wife and her friends, she is an object of fear; to the governor’s young daughter, she is “a romantic figure;” to Revered Verringer and his circle, she is a victim of the corrupt system. Her employers preyed upon her, while Jordan saw her as a woman shrouded in mystery, needing to be rescued. Many times in the novel Grace is associated with figures representing the disruptive or monstrous feminine power: a witch, a sorceress, Circe, Siren (Wilson 2000). Her skill at needlework and quilting, as well as storytelling, is reminiscent of the Moirai (the Fates) who spin, direct, and sever the threads of life. Her mind is compared to Pandora’s Box, the source of evils that spread across the world; this is also the name of the chapter in which Grace is hypnotized and apparently speaks in the voice of Mary Whitney, who claims that she is the one who controlled Grace’s body at the time of the murders. This event, instead of resolving the mystery,
only provokes more questions both for Jordan and the reader: Is this a genuine case of possession? Is this a case of double personality, which developed as a result of trauma? Is Grace mentally ill and therefore cannot be held responsible for the crime? Or is it a sham? Is Grace an accomplished actress, as one of her doctors believed?

Whether Mary Whitney was a real person or Grace’s fantasy, she is finally vindicated when Grace is released from prison, having survived and successfully resisted all attempts at being categorized and known. Mary, together with other female characters – most notably, Grace’s mother and Nancy Montgomery – serves as a double or a mirror for Grace. Their unfortunate endings – marriage to an abusive drunkard, a botched abortion, violent death – could very well have been Grace’s own fate. Even minor characters, like Rachel Humphrey, Jordan’s landlady and Lydia, the Governor’s daughter, show how women are imprisoned by social rules, and how any transgression is promptly punished. Rachel Humphrey, trapped in a loveless marriage with a drunkard, carries on an affair with Jordan, hoping that he will marry her. After being abandoned by him, she becomes deranged, wandering “by the lakeshore in a black dress and cloak,” like a character in a Gothic romance. The vivacious Lydia becomes infatuated with Jordan and is disappointed at his abrupt departure. When she starts flirting with officers, her parents force her to marry Reverend Verringer, after which she becomes “a different person, very subdued and pale, with no high spirits any more” (AG 408). The destinies of all these women become interwoven with Grace’s own, in a complex web of female rivalry and solidarity. It is Grace who, directly or indirectly, becomes involved in each of the women’s lives, and it is Grace’s voice that reports what happened to them in the end. Grace tells their stories, as well as her own, and by the end of the novel her storytelling becomes the symbol of female solidarity and forgiveness: giving voice to those who are silenced.

After Grace hears news of her pardon and release, she feels adrift, not knowing where to go or what to do with her life. However, she finds out that everything has been arranged for her to go to the United States and marry her childhood admirer, Jamie Walsh. Jamie was a boy who sometimes helped at the Kinnear household, and who testified against Grace at the trial. Overcome with guilt, he sought Grace out to offer her a new life and a farm of her own. In the final chapter, Grace addresses Dr Jordan in a fictional letter, describing her life with Jamie. Mannon believes that by marrying Jamie Walsh, Grace gives up her agency, and becomes an object of rescue again: “[he is] besotted with her criminal past in a way that troubles her; Walsh likes to think he caused her suffering, that he was ‘the author of all’ (456).” It is true that Grace indulges him by retelling the details of her deprivations and abuse in prison and the asylum, and grants him her forgiveness. But it is ultimately Grace that is the author of
this narrative: “He insists on being forgiven, [...] and who am I to refuse him such a simple thing?” After all, Grace muses, “I suppose it isn’t the first lie I’ve told: [...] a little white lie such as the angels tell is a small price to pay for peace and quiet” (AG 438). Grace once again becomes Scheherazade, one of her many aliases, spinning her tales to amuse the sultan and ensure her survival.

I had a rage in my heart for many years, against Mary Whitney, and especially against Nancy Montgomery; against the two of them both, for letting themselves be done to death in the way that they did, and for leaving me behind with the full weight of it. For a long time I could not find it in me to pardon them. (AG 439)

In the final scene, Grace is seen making her own Tree of Paradise quilt, “changing the pattern a little to suit my own ideas” (AG 440). In accordance with her belief that “guilt comes to you not from the things you’ve done, but from the things that others have done to you” (AG 365), when Grace is finally pardoned, she is able to let go of her rage and extend the pardon to Mary and Nancy. She weaves a patch of Mary’s white petticoat, Nancy’s pink floral dress, and her own faded prison gown into her quilt, embroidering them with red stitching, “to blend them in as a part of the pattern” (AG 441). She thus symbolically accepts Mary, serving as her criminal alter ego, and Nancy, serving as her victim, as extensions of herself, and patches together different fragments of her life and of her identity into a unified pattern.

**Conclusion**

The theme of a multifaceted and fragmentary identity often appears in Atwood’s poetry and prose; as her protagonist Elaine Risley notes: “There is never only one, of anyone” (Cat’s Eye 1988: 13). According to Sherill Grace (191), Atwood’s novels such as The Handmaid’s Tale and Cat’s Eye belong to the genre of female autobiographical writing. As a large part of Alias Grace is made up of the protagonist’s first-person narration of her life, Sherill Grace’s theory can be applied to this novel as well. In the “male” autobiography, the subject (I) is individualistic, asserting its separateness from others, while “the female model of autobiography, like the female model of identity, stresses inter-dependence, community, multiplicity [...] The female autobiographical ‘I’ is more like a process than a product, and its discourse is more likely to be iterative, cyclical, incremental and unresolved, even a mystery.” Indeed, the enigma of Grace Marks’s guilt or innocence is never resolved, and the novel ends with another puzzle: Grace notices certain changes in her body, which may be the result of pregnancy or a fatal illness: “It is strange to know you carry within yourself ei-
ther a life or a death, but not to know which one” (AG 440). Grace’s narrative contains not only her own story, but also her family’s, Mary Whitney’s, Nancy Montgomery’s, and fragments of other characters’ histories. It also contains authentic insights into the life of poor Irish immigrants, into those of servants, into Canadian politics in the 1840s and 1850s, into class relations, gender roles, institutionalized violence in prisons and asylums, and finally into widely accepted attitudes towards women, the working class, the criminal, and the mentally ill. Thus, her narrative contains all the different aspects of her life that have shaped her identity.

Grace understands that one’s identity is also shaped by social values and expectations and in her own case by legal institutions and social censure. “You should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself” (AG 48), she tells Dr Jordan bitterly. Her story was taken away from her, so that she “might as well have been made of cloth, and stuffed, with a china head” (AG 295). Grace’s experiences with the legal system and the media reflect the attitudes towards women and the lower classes in the 19th century, when they were either represented as helpless victims or as heinous villains; in both cases they were silenced and their agency was taken from them. The symbolic image of a stuffed doll with a china head conveys Grace’s sense of helplessness and, more broadly, of feminine docility. However, Grace’s case continued to fascinate audiences precisely because this docility turned out to be an illusion. In the Author’s Afterword, Atwood comments:

Attitudes towards [Grace] reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women: was Grace a female fiend and temptress, the instigator of the crime and the real murderer of Nancy Montgomery, or was she an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent by McDermott’s threats and by fear of her own life? (AG 445)

As Darroch notes, Atwood has pointed out many times that our own age shares many of the ambiguous notions about women, sexuality, and criminality, and so Alias Grace contains a sophisticated critique of both the past and the present. Unhealthy fascination with crime, violence, and sexuality, fed by sensationalized reporting, is both a historical and contemporary feature. Grace has become a true celebrity because of her crime. On the surface, she has experienced social censure, but at the same time, her fame as a murderess is enthralling and sexually charged. Grace indicates that she is aware that the social censure only masks a true moral hypocrisy:
That is what really interests them – the gentlemen and the ladies both. They don’t care if I killed anyone, I could have cut dozens of throats, it’s only what they admire in a soldier, they’d scarcely blink. No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern, and they don’t even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes” (AG 27).

On the one hand, Grace is expected to tell the truth, but on the other hand, the dominant social structures have already decided what the truth is.

Using autobiographical speech, strategic silence, and evasion, and in maintaining the enigma of her personality, Grace Marks successfully (re)constructs and reclaims her story, accepting different aspects of her identity in the process. Whatever she may be guilty of, she ultimately positions herself as an agent rather than a victim or object of rescue. Grace’s comment that

\[\text{It is not the culprits who need to be forgiven; rather it is the victims, because they are the ones who cause all the trouble. If they were only less weak and careless, and more foresightful, and if they would keep from blundering into difficulties, think of all the sorrow in the world that would be spared (AG 439)}\]

should not be read as placing the blame on the victims, but rather as a breaking of this pattern. It is an invitation to women to become agents of change and speak out against harassment and injustice: not to be victims but to break the silence. Time’s article on the #MeToo movement, “The Silence Breakers,” says:

\[\text{This reckoning appears to have sprung up overnight. But it has actually been simmering for years, decades, centuries. Women have had it with bosses and co-workers who not only cross boundaries but don’t even seem to know that boundaries exist. They’ve had it with the fear of retaliation, of being blackballed, of being fired from a job they can’t afford to lose. They’ve had it with the code of going along to get along. They’ve had it with men who use their power to take what they want from women. These silence breakers have started a revolution of refusal.} \]

Recent events have shown how Alias Grace, as a novel giving voice to the marginalized and the silenced, continues to be relevant and modern, giving us an opportunity to reflect on the ways the position of women has (not) changed. The main protagonist, with her refusal to comply to social expectations, her passive stubborn strength, her powerful autobiographical voice, and her aura of a trickster-creator, remains one of the most authentic and fascinating female characters of Atwood’s opus.
Works Cited:


**ZVANIČNA ISTORIJA I ŽENSKA STORIJA U ROMANU *ALIJAS GREJS* MARGARET ATVUD**


**Ključne reči:** Margaret Atvud, *Alijas Grejs*, istorija, položaj žena, društveni poredak.