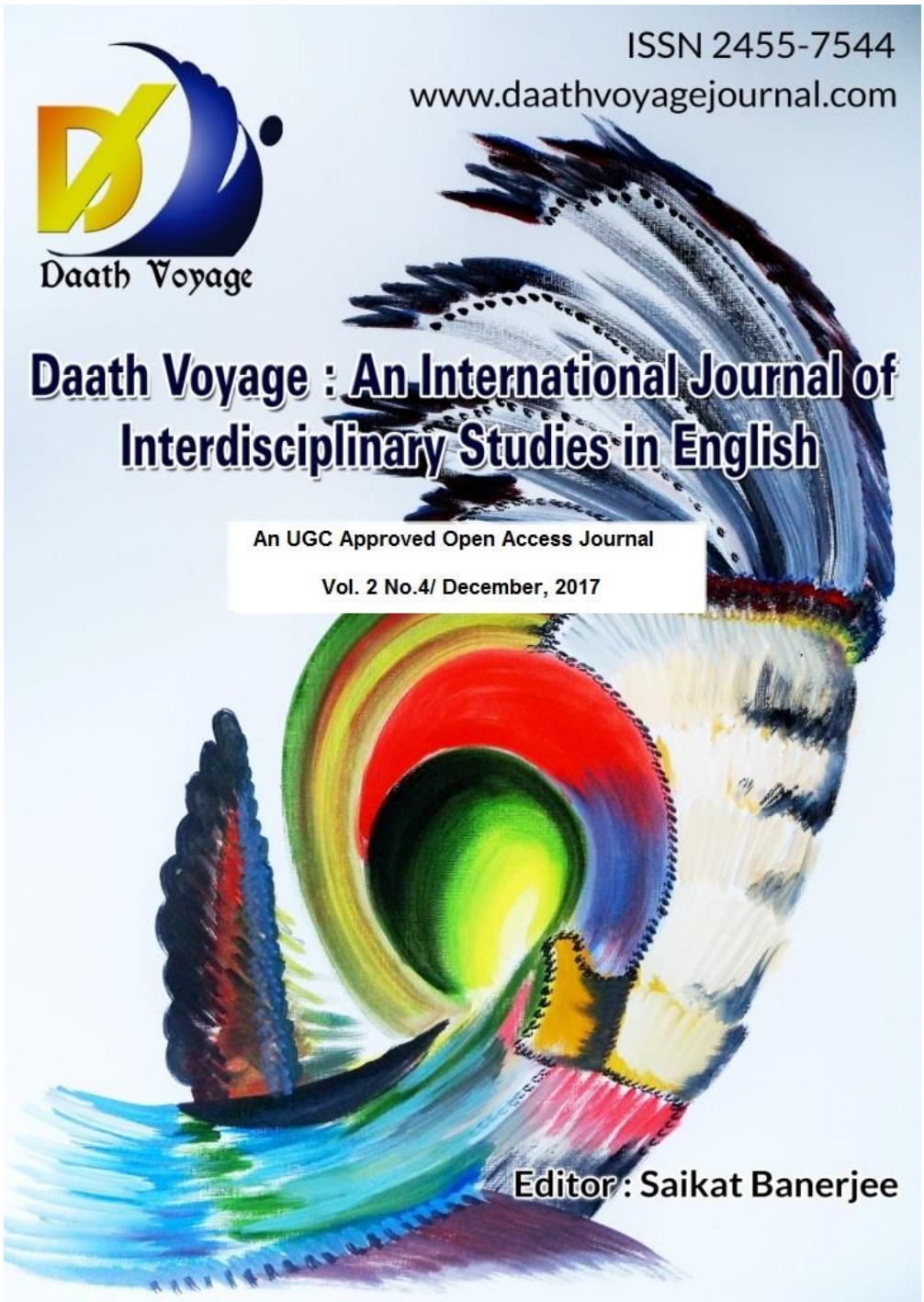

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Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

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Dr. K.N. Modi University, Newai, Rajasthan, India.

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com *Vol.2, No.4, December, 2017*

The Sinner or The Saint: *Stone Mattress Nine Wicked Tales* by Margaret Atwood

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Abstract: Atwood is a versatile writer whose major themes revolve round woman's issues. Her attempts in almost all the major genres of literature allows her to present women in all shades of life; sufferers, fighters, servants and what not? Besides, her novels and poetry, her short stories (rather tales) are the representations of a true female struggle. Her recent short story collection *Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales* present women in altogether different shades at a different point of their lives. These women being old should have been satisfied at this stage of their lives but they continuously struggle to find solace with themselves and with their past and finally emerge victorious in establishing a satisfied (desirable) lives. In their respective struggles, these women find themselves often clogged and cloistered by the social, political and cultural patterns of their societies and in order to achieve a position of their own, they often clash with the already existing paradigms.

Key Words: Margaret Atwood, Woman, Female, Social, Political, Male, Society, Feminist, Gender, Short Story, Constance, Verna, Age, Old age, Rape, Bob, Struggle , Victim.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood (b.1939), an eminent novelist, poet, short story writer and a critic is a pioneer in feminist polemics. She attempts to focus on the new-woman as self-aware, independent, seeking to evolve an identity of her own. Her writings systematically thematize the personal quest for fulfillment as inextricably involved in a communal quest for cultural identity. Atwood developed as a writer during the same time when a growing cultural nationalism developed in Canada and the woman's moment expanded in North America. She has often told the story of how her nationalist and feminist consciousness was raised while attending graduate school in the United States in the early 1960's. Thus, years after such accumulation of experience she emerged as

a fully packaged writer who could equally represent Canada's as well as (Canadian) female's experiences in her writings and these works of her in turn represent the overall Canadian nationalist fervor and Canadian women's dilemma who are doubly colonized. She was well aware of the struggle to become a writer and the struggle that was similar to many of her contemporaries. With the changing scenario and paradigm, she recalls the advances made at the time when she began her literary career as:

> Looking back on … the early and mid-seventies I remember a grand fermentation of ideas, an exuberance in writing, a joy in uncovering taboos and in breaking them, a willingness to explore new channels of thought and feeling. Doon were being opened. Language was being changed. Territory was being claimed. The unsaid was being said. (If You Can't Say Something Nice. 20)

She goes on to remind us that the effect of change was not completely positive, for, even though it was alright to express negative feelings about women, except for mothers, "it was okay to trash your mother", she remembers sardonically (21). In reality she questions recent restrictions put on women writers by present day feminist: "Are we being told yet once again that there are certain 'right' ways of being a woman writer, and that all the other ways are wrong?"(24) For Atwood such a new restraint is as damaging to women writers as the cultural taboos that had already been dealt with:

> Women of my generation were told not to fly or win, only to hobble, with our high heels and put our panty girdles on. We were told endlessly: thou should not. We don't need to hear it again, and especially not from women. (24)

Such sharpness of tone does not mean that in 1990's Atwood dismisses feminism as a derailed movement, rather, she points out the original and the most important track for women writers as, "the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the lights"(24).

Margaret Atwood in her fiction has pointed out certain shared themes of powerlessness, victimization and alienation as well as certain ambivalences and ambiguities. For her language is largely a referential way for providing verisimilitude that is a staple of realist fiction and that

authenticates the world and the world's relationship to it. She uses and abuses the convention of both language and narrative in her fiction in an attempt to make us question any naïve critical notion we might have about modernist formalism and about realist transparency. Her fiction subjects both language and its various discourses to 'psychoanalysis', in order to reveal the structures, which shape it, and to show the ways it can be used to victimize not only women but at times men also. Yet, throughout her exploration of language and discourse, she suggests that language is available either to entrap us or to liberate us, irrespective of the sex. She has rejected the univocal statement or any concept of meaning or truth as single and determinate. She has explained that one must learn to appreciate the unsaid, which is more important. She furthers the literary convention of language as surfaces and depths, as a palimpsest, which hides what it means and thus she toyed with the deceptive devices of rhetoric and figures of speech, metaphors as essential to language. She insists that language is available for us in so many layers; either as a release or as a transformative power or as a trap and/or as a force of subjugation. Her fiction expresses these issues with powerful images and symbols. She has also used journey metaphors, both as a quest for identity and for unknown territories. By exploring various modes of gaining control over lives, she attempts to present that past needs to be regained. She dismisses the sexiest assumptions hidden in language which prevent women from taking hold of words and from writing themselves into new, powerful identities. Her works show the historical and cultural nature of 'natural' phenomena and subject them to control by analyzing their hidden assumptions.

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than thirty books of fiction, poetry and critical essays. In addition to her famous critical works like *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) and *Second Words* (1982), she has written innumerable short stories which are edited in various collections. Her short story collection *Dancing Girls* (1997), attracted more positive response, winning The City of Toronto Book Award, The Canadian Booksellers Association Award and The Periodical Distributors of Canada Short Fiction Award. Her collection *Bluebeard's Egg* (1993) explores the question of women's marginal position within hegemonic discourse. *Wilderness Tips* (1991) is the collection of the stories with gothic overtones about women facing middle age mixed with narratives about confrontations with wilderness; followed by

Good Bones (1992) which is about female body parts and social constraints written with devastating wit. *Moral Disorder* (2006) presents interlinked stories so acutely observed, with sharp wit and confusing personal arena of respective lives. *Stone Mattress* (2014) are dark and witty tales with characters close to death or dead already or unwittingly doomed.

Atwood's new and recent short story collection, ***Stone Mattress*** *Nine Wicked Tales* (2015), is a return to the short story form since 2006. Though the author does not entirely eschew genre elements in her new book, the settings and characters are much more immediately recognizable — the insatiable Corpse Company have been overpowered, and there's not a rakunk or pigoon in sight. This is yet another collection of nine tales which provides the basis for launching her powerful critique of the prevalence of gender in our society. Focusing on the different ways in which women and men approach gendered mentality and its approach to aging, Atwood reveals how age and gender determine where a person exists within a given social structure and the quality of that existence. Thus, presents her respective characters as the sinners and the saints at the same time. Through the narration of several different elderly women characters, she invites her readers to consider how the norms of our society fail to address the difficult and inevitable process of growing up an independent woman with a worldview of her own. In keeping with the speculative mode of fiction she is known for, Atwood paints a disturbing picture of worlds in which people (particularly women) have no idea how to grow old (at times 'celebrated' in case of Constance) without feeling alienated and oppressed. Thus, these tales in *The Stone Mattress* reveal how the intersecting discourses of gender and aging shape the lives of the elderly women in contemporary Western society.

As a result, these stories draw attention to the woman's relationship to the power structures that prevent them from recognizing themselves as being oppressed. As noted by one of her critics,

> Atwood explores in her {fiction} the ways in which individuals become implicated in power relationships that often manifest themselves in forms of domination and victimization. However, at the same time, Atwood's writing displays a profound awareness that involvement in a power structure often entails some degree of internalization of the ideology

> that supports that structure, and that individuals are collaborators in the perpetuation of the assumptions that define their society. (Özdemir 58)

Thus, Atwood exposes interpretation of aging and the problems faced by the elderly women. As she examines the intersection of these discourses, she also speculates as to how future societies could be. By scrutinizing these problems and describing how they mirror current social practices, Atwood uses her works to portray the problem of aging and speculate what will result from the failure to address this issue. She also argues that the recognition of the problem will enable us to avoid it and embrace the identity of the elderly person, thus altering the way we perceive aging.

As Atwood hypothesizes ageism in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, "The second-wave feminist movement was accused of ageism and ignoring the older woman; however, feminist writing about aging and gender has more recently begun to proliferate into a substantial critical literature" (Watkins 223). Through her works, Atwood provides this missing link in literature and presents that old age has only recently come into the conversation of gender in literature that does not mean it is a topic that is one to be omitted from feminist studies. As feminists have begun to tackle the crisis of ageism, they have discovered that the discourses on age and gender are intimately tied together in such a way that creates a social hierarchy that is discriminatory towards elderly women. Atwood's fiction is strongly grounded in the feminist studies of this intersectionality between gender and aging. Such intersectional perspective may be described as "an analytical strategy that facilitates understanding the experience of marginalized people enmeshed in constant identity struggles," and is able to "denote the plurality of identity grounds and the array of frames organizing social life" (Quoted in Wilińska 883). This intersectional perspective is crucial to examining *Stone Mattress* because one cannot discuss either theme of gender and aging without relating it to the other. This meeting point between age and gender is prominently displayed in the study of sociologist Monika Wilińska. In her study, Wilińska discovered that, while men are able to age and take on the role of a retiree, elderly women are confined to their roles as women and must continue serving society in this motherly role (Wilińska 890).Wilińska's study is echoed in Tobias's claims that "women never know when it's game over" (*Stone Mattress*). While Tobias does argue that aging is more difficult for men, he also claims that men are able to accept death more easily.

Like Wilińska, he notes that women are held to standards that encourage them to resist death and strive to maintain the roles associated with women such as mothers and caretakers. Men are acceptable to wither away, but women are continually expected to fulfill the same roles they perform in their youths. Outraged at this idea, gerontologist Nancy Hooyman argued that this common social perspective has "denied women's centrality in the aging experience" and that "such an individualistic approach overlooks how existing structural arrangements of work and care giving create women's dependency and low economic status in old age" (Hooyman 115). Therefore, social expectations of aging women contribute to and form the basis of the struggles they face as they age.

Such perspectives binds stories of *Stone Mattress* and reveals why Atwood's female characters, none of which fill the chrononormative roles for women of their age, are unable to fit in with their societies. The opening story (or more accurately tale) features a character named Constance Starr who, under the pen name C.W. Starr, writes a series of commercial fantasy novels called *Alphinland*, and another piece centers on a writer whose first novel has become an "Instant Horror Classic". However, the male characters in these stories have been pushed into the background. Indeed, one of the entries in *Stone Mattress*, "Lusus Naturae," is about a young woman suffering from a bizarre genetic disorder mistaken for vampirism by the superstitious townsfolk (the girl's family go so far as to fake her death in order to preserve her from a dire fate at the hands of her neighbors). "Stone Mattress" and "The Freeze-Dried Groom" closely resemble noir tales, their female characters taking on the mien of femme fatales, albeit given an explicitly feminist spin.

The narrative momentum in these stories is also welcome due to their major themes. The nine pieces in *Stone Mattress* are unified by a focus on the subjects of aging and mortality, females struggling to achieve a position of their own; making a place in the other otherwise male dominated space and many others. On looking back at past accomplishments and traumas, and at present-day taking stock of things, these females are not satisfied with their achievement but they believe in carrying on with their struggles. For example, in the first tale of the collection, "Alphinland," we meet the character Constance, an elderly woman who goes to drastic means to preserve her younger self. Constance is a recently widowed world renowned author. Although her works are critiqued as being trashy(in her youth, by her then lover), they are incredibly popular, and it is in her world of

Alphinland, the setting of the books she writes, that Constance is able to run away from her sad and lonely life. In her work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir points out that women living in this state of aging resist the distinction between the real and the imaginary, and that "one of the most salient characteristics in the aging woman is the feeling of depersonalization that makes her lose all objective landmarks" (623). Through her depersonalization, Constance creates a sort of double identity, one in which she balances among her obedience to her late husband Ewan and her independent power in Alphinland. Because Constance refuses to accept her husband's death, she escapes from that certainty by continuing to interact with him as though he were still with her. In this story, Constance faces a snowstorm and throughout the blizzard she relies on her husband Ewan's "voice" to guide her, how to survive? In her anxiety to ignore the reality of her old age and widowed status, she escapes by recreating Ewan in her imagination and interacting with him as if he were real. However, instead of freeing her, her desperation to escape actually hinders her rational state as she goes about her every day activities. By reverting to her past obedient self, she allows Ewan to become so engrained in her system that she fails to recognize that she is capable of taking care of herself. For example, when she prepares to go out into the storm, she attributes her careful planning to his guidance:

> When she's at the front door with the wheeled shopping bag, Ewan says to her, "Take the flashlight," so she trudges upstairs to the bedroom in her boots. The flashlights is on the nightstand on his side of the bed: she adds it to her purse. Ewan is so good at planning ahead. She herself never would have thought of a flashlight. (*Stone Mattress*:8-9)

She recognizes that he is not physically there with her, yet at the same time she convinces herself that he is present and is still advising her on how to take care of herself. The fascinating aspect of this relationship is that, throughout her whole life, Constance has never actually needed someone to take care of her. In fact, it is quite the opposite. When she was younger, Constance first began writing her acclaimed book series in order to support her boyfriend Gavin who was struggling to make ends meet. Even though he humiliated and degraded her, she remained faithful to him and supported him under the belief that she needed him, when in actuality; it was he who needed her. Constance accepted the male dominated hierarchy that enclosed her, and as she ripened and

outlived the men who once dishonored her, instead of accepting a fresh and independent self, she instead runaway to her youthful way of thinking in which she was trapped by a patriarchal hierarchy. As Constance fanatically reflects about Ewan and her youth, one cannot help but perceive that she is doing so to fortify her awareness of her role in society. Because Constance has always believed that she needed a man, she reinforces the supremacy of Ewan's voice in order to continue her arrangement in the subservient woman's role she has always known. Constance, who won't even light a fire because it symbolizes renewal, is so obsessed with maintaining her past that she is keen to encourage the voices in her head so that she may prolong performances of a subservient partner, the role she has acknowledged for most of her life. By attempting to break away from her past, Constance sets herself up to endure in her present and thus provide into a social hierarchy that constantly oppresses her. Thus, she chooses a different present for herself.

When we switch from "Alphinland" to "Revenant," the second tale in the collection, we meet Gavin, Constance's ex-lover. Like Constance, Gavin also struggles to combats the strength that his youth has over him. However, while Constance escapes to her youthful mindset and decisively ensnares herself in it, Gavin is worried by the repercussions of his endeavor to escape. Gavin, who was known as being a womanizer in his youth, tried to preserve this icon by marrying a woman who was decades younger than him. At first, this youthful woman represented the perfect means of shunning the stereotypes of old age; because she was young, he would supposedly be able to maintain his image as a youthful womanizer. However, exactly the opposite occurs. Instead of escaping old age and his sins that he did with so many females, Gavin is only increasingly reminded of them, and he learns that trying to escape actually ensnares him more. Because it is impossible to escape from the things that one did, Gavin's wife uses this to her advantage and constantly reminds him of it, thus encouraging him to remain in a unending spiral of powerlessness. Gavin cannot escape his physical limitations and is thus tormented by his youthful ideals that, in their focus on overpowering women, are inherently designed to ridicule the aged man who is no longer able to have sex. In the book *Gender and Aging*, Susan Krauss Whit borne points out that,

> Given that the human sexual response is highly sensitive to emotional and other psychological processes, one does not have to stretch one's speculative energies very far to

> predict that the sexual behavior of aging men is likely to suffer almost as much from exposure to prevailing social attitudes as from any physiological changes (49).

Gavin, who used to be known as a womanizer, cannot bring himself to have sex anymore and is troubled for the sake of his youthful self. Unlike other men of his age, he does not have the excuse of blaming his wife for his impotence; because she is still young, he has no chance to craft excuses as a means of escaping the reality. Just as Gavin disgraced Constance when they were both young, Gavin's wife is able to do the same to him because she has her youth on her side. She is capable enough to retain this power because she is decades younger than Gavin, which means that she is not facing the similar problems related to aging as he is.

Since Gavin lacks the sexual prowess he had in his youth, he therefore has lost his powers as a man, which means that his wife, Reynolds, is able to overcome patriarchal power with her power of young age. Since he cannot bring himself to have sex with her, or with any woman for that matter, he foregoes any status he has as a male. Patriarchal standards can be as harmful to men as they are to women when men are unable to perform up to par. While De Beauvoir offers examples of how aging can be easier on men in her book *The Coming of Age*, she points out several cases where aging is just as horrifying for men as well. When talking about Yeats, De Beauvoir writes,

> What infuriated him was the accidental, casual aspect of this inescapable old age; he too tripped over the odious stumbling-block of this unrealizable reality – he was the same person, but he was being forced to suffer revolting usage (297).

In other words, he was attempting to escape his old age by focusing on his youthful, mirrored image of himself, but was then aghast to discover that his attempts to run away only hindered him further. De Beauvoir's case is easily relevant to Gavin's because, like Yeats, Gavin was angered at how he could not escape his age and how he was unable to behave as he once did. He still feels the same way about women that he did when he was in his 20's, but now he is unable to satisfy his masculine identity by acting upon these feelings. Even worse, he is forced daily to face a woman decades younger than him, one that he cannot control because he cannot have sex with. Because he is not able to exert power over her, it is he who is week, and it is in this powerless state that he recognizes that she is only paying attention in being with him so that she can inherit his wealth. It is this part of Gavin's story that makes us feel the most sorry for him. Because Gavin lives in such a way that he

is severed from his youth, we can see that the lack of love in his life further contributes to his spiraling loss of a sense of identity. This tale therefore emphasizes the importance of how feelings of genuine love contribute to the aging society's identity and how it is the relationships we form that help us rationalize our existence. Instead of encouraging the elderly patriarch to try to escape to their youthful pasts, we must instead encourage them to embrace themselves in their current state of being. On sexuality in the aging male, Whit borne states,

> In expressing these feelings, the knowledge that one can love and is loved can provide a unique source of strength and inspiration to the identity of the aging person—male or female. (51)

Thus, without real relationships to ground us and prevent us from "escaping" reality, we lose a sense of whether or not our existence is meaningful in the social hierarchy in which we are rooted.

Of all the tales in this collection, the titular tale "The Stone Mattress" is the story which offers the maximum and most dramatic sense of reconciliation with and freedom from one's past. The tale after which the collection is named is a story of a young but old woman named Verna who is obsessed with killing men. As a self-created widow, her yearning to overpower men led her to flirt with, marry, and eventually kill three of her suitors. This story attempts to trace her thought process as she contemplates what it really means to her to commend these murders. In this tale, Verna introduces herself to her targets during a simple yet provoking definition of her name:

> "Verna," he says. "That's a lovely name."
>
> "Old-fashioned," she says. "From the Latin word for 'spring.' When everything springs to life again." That line, so filled with promises of phallic renewal, had been effective in helping to secure her second husband (*Stone Mattress:*236).

This passage not only reveals her thought process, but also her meticulous understanding of men and of the process of aging as well. Just as she knows that women such as her own self struggle to protect their beauty as a means of preserving their youth, she also realizes that older men are worried to maintain their sexual strength, which is why she plays with that desire when she flirts with them. In this story, Verna embarks on a journey meant to serve people of her age, and even though she vowed to give up killing, she can't defy the thought of being active so as to prove to

herself that she can still do it. While she scans the throng of men, she observes that she is looking for ones who value the conviction that there are still some moments of life to be lived and that they are not too old to cherish it. Although this reveals further that she hates men, we do not perceive her reason until Bob comes onto the scene.

When she first sees him, Verna does not believe that this man has returned into her life. While he doesn't identify her, she knows him the moment she encounters him. It is this man who stimulated her abhorrence for men, which began back in high school. On the eve of her first prom, Bob asked her for a date, only to then molest her at the end of the night and leave her on the side of the road. Because of the socially constructed assumptions of human nature, it was Verna who was blamed for the whole ordeal. To make matters more difficult for her, when she found out she was pregnant, she was sent to a convent to wait out the pregnancy and then give up the baby for adoption when it was finally born. Verna's hatred is legitimized because Bob's actions ruined her childhood. Children, no matter their gender, are "autonomous individuals with a free future opening before them" (De Beauvoir 671). However, when female children are forced into adulthood, they become "servants or objects, imprisoned in the present… they are separated from the universe, doomed to immanence and repetition. They feel dispossessed" (De Beauvoir 671). After Verna was violated, this was exactly what happened to her. She lost control of her body when Bob took it from her, and from there her body was subject to her mother's control and humiliation as well as the nuns' domineering power. Because of this loss of power, her body becomes a means of labor and reproduction, and she did not recover control until she took it from the first man that tried to claim it. While Verna reflects on her life story, she also remarks that the word "rape" would have never been used to illustrate this event. Her account reflects the saga of the ages. De Beauvoir's claim that "Woman's powerlessness brought about her ruin because man apprehended her through a project of enrichment and expansion" (66) ornaments true to this story. While Bob may not have been looking to impregnate her, he did accomplish elevation by having sex with her and gossiping all over the town. As Verna is pleased that young women have additional rights now, she is correctly bitter that she was never able to gain conclusion. Consequently, as soon as she decides that she must kill him, she takes the Achilles' heel of her youth and gender and transforms it into power gained from her age and

experience:

> Why should she be the only one to have suffered for that night? She'd been stupid, granted, but Bob had been vicious. And he'd gone scot-free, without consequences or remorse, whereas her entire life had been distorted. The Verna of the day before had died, and a different Verna had solidified in her place: stunted, twisted, mangled. It was Bob who'd taught her that only the strong can win, that weakness should be mercilessly exploited. It was Bob who'd turned her into – why not say the word? – a murderer (*Stone Mattress*:246).

Verna's reminiscences of that night reveal how she became the murderess she is today. Her mania with her ruined younger self established her narcissistic personality that empowered her to restructure her identity and fashion a new role for herself in the social order. As noted by Simone de Beauvoir,

> If she [a woman] can put herself forward in her own desires, it is because since childhood she has seen herself as an object. Her education has encouraged her to alienate herself wholly in her body, puberty having revealed this body as passive and desirable" (668).

In spite of Verna's mother's wishes, Verna's education, i.e. her rape and the following torment of being locked up in a convent, only added customary recognition that she is an object of desire. As she learned this, she had two paths to choose between: One would be to conform to the society that tortured her or look for a husband who would take her for who she was. This is what her mother, and all of society, wanted for her. The other alternative, her selection, would be to embrace herself in an entirely diverse sense and propose up her attractiveness to the *Other* that could only be satisfied through her recovery of her body. In order to regain it, she had to first give it up to those who exploited her. Throughout the years, Verna has put aside the pressures of her ego and has striven for the desires of the *Other*, a higher form of herself that emerged from her sufferings. Because Verna was clever to create this new self, she was able to displace her situation in society. She thrived as a widow and suffused in new life, as pointed out by De Beauvoir, "Every woman drowned in her reflection reigns over space and time, alone, sovereign; she has total rights over men, fortune, glory, and sensual pleasure" (669). Instead of wallowing in her past, Verna used it to authorize herself and fashion a fresh identity that enabled her to relocate herself on the social

hierarchy and thus regain her body for herself. A remarkable aspect of Verna's scheme of rewarding her *Other* is how sensitive it is. The information that her rapist's name is "Bob" generates an image of a common man. As a result, as we reflect on the simplification of his name, one perceives that, when Verna kills him, she not only kills her rapist, but also symbolically kills all of the "average Bobs" out in the world who molests naive immature girls like her and got away with it. Just as he lured her away from the dance so he could rape and then discard her, so did she lure him away from the cruise into a cave – a symbolic image(of avenging her violation) of the female anatomy – where she could destroy him.

The split second before Verna kills him, she reminds him of who she is. At this disclosure, Bob smirks: "Bob capering triumphantly in the snow, sniggering like a ten-year-old. Herself wrecked and crumpled" (*Stone Mattress*: 254). She has a vivid picture of this smirk that provides her final justification for murdering him. Remaining true to his character, Bob shows no remorse. Because they aren't surrounded by others, he has no motivation to behave as he wouldn't – namely as someone who regrets his past actions – so he doesn't. One has no idea what would have happened had he regretted. Just as Verna's image was destroyed when he raped her and ruined her reputation, his face was physically destroyed when she slammed the stone up into his lower jaw and then repeatedly dropped it onto his face. The youthful Verna died when he raped her, that is why he also died before he could age any longer.

This story provides optimism for the future, not because Verna killed her rapist, but because she was able to "kill" the image of herself that had been constructed by society. Verna butchered her previous husbands as she was unable to bear what Bob did to her. Bob stood for the society that marginalized and tormented her, and because she did not realize this until she saw him again, she remained a slave to societal expectations even when she killed her other two husbands. By murdering the epithet of societal oppression, Verna rejected societal norms and created a new, true image of herself. Thus, emancipating herself from societal expectations.

Thus, these stories present the war within every female as these women struggle with the 'other' that consistently disturb and distracts them from within. These women are the sinners as well as saints as they dwindle between the two extreme edges of life, responsibility towards others and care

for their own selves. They try to emerge victorious in these wars that they face with themselves and at the end are able to resolve these tensions and achieve a semblance to lead a harmonious life ahead.

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