

“You Are Free To Reinvent Yourself”: Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* As A Feminist Historiographic Metafiction

「隨心所欲、重建自我」：瑪格麗特·愛特伍德之女性歷史後設小說《盲眼刺客》

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(Excerpt)

Chapter One--Writing as Self-Assertion and Resistance to Official Discourse

With industrialization since the late eighteenth century, women encounter several kinds of discriminations when they go out to work; for instance, wage discrimination, job segregation, discrimination against married and pregnant women and, specifically during wartimes, an invitation of women to join the work force only to expel them after men come back home¹. Though there are increasing working opportunities open for women from World War I onwards, the patriarchal conventions still constrain women from working outside the domestic area: "For all women, there was the tension between the ideal of the woman at home and the reality of women's work" (Prentice, Alison, et al. 113). Marian, the protagonist in Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, is an example of women struggling between home and work in the 1950's, a continuity with slight changes of post war reality². An example of such changes in *The Edible Women* is that, a middle class woman, Marian not only graduates from college but gets a job in a market research company, a more professional work than those labor-intensive ones women took before. Yet, Peter, Marian fiance, can't give up fixing Marian at home by marriage. The urge to confine women is even stronger when it is about the career of upper-class women. Ruling out reasons like financial needs to work outside, upper-class women have no 'excuses' to work outside home, not to mention exposing themselves in public like other women do from lower social class.

Industrialization does not exercise its power in North America until the nineteenth century. Set in the time period from the late nineteenth century to the end of twentieth century, *The Blind Assassin* can be deemed as The Chase Saga in which Iris historicizes the past of the Chase family, from the rise of the button factory to its replacement by Griffen-Chase Royal Consolidated. Corresponding to the development of industrialization, the button business faces the ups and downs in the historical contexts of wars, recession, etc. This historical setting of capitalism³, and the two World Wars, moreover, is intertwined with the narrative focus of the maternal lineage – Adelia, Liliana, Iris, Aimee, and then Sabrina – in the Chase family. Though not in the center of their family business, the first few generations of the female

characters have their lives, and especially their marriage, closely connected to it, serving either as objects of exchange or as the sole manager to salvage the family business or maintain its financial balance. Iris's grandmother, Adelia Montfort, is a daughter of a once prosperous family that had earned their fortunes in the railroad industry. Because of the downgrading of her family, Adelia is married to Benjamin, whose button factory is at the peak of its luck. Marriage is an act of trade also for Iris, who is married to Richard for the same reason as her grandmother: money, only that by then, in 1930s, it is the button factory that faces the crisis of closing and Iris's marriage is how her father saves their family factory. Iris's mother, though not a valuable object as Adelia and Iris serve in their marriage, does function to maintain the operation and order of the button factory during the First World War. Thereby, woman is an object of exchange for the continuity of accumulating money.

Other than marriages, many aspects of woman's living condition are detailed in Iris's memoir. Iris records a past as though she is a historian documenting events. Yet, how is her writing different from official history? Why does she write? How does she relate official documents to a personal family history? This chapter aims to examine Iris's writings to show how she achieves self-assertion by recollecting and reconstructing her past life. Iris's writings, including both the novel *The Blind Assassin* and the namesake novel within the novel, delineate Iris's life in three stages. The first stage includes the early periods of her life until her marrying Richard. At this stage, we can see the education the young Iris receives from several mother figures — Adelia, Iris's grandmother; Liliana, Iris's mother; Winifred, Iris's sister in law— and how that results in her self-denial, which is characteristic of her until her having an affair with Alex. Seen from the perspective of the young Iris in her teens and early twenties – which is later recollected and described by the old Iris, the lives of upper class women from late nineteenth century to early twentieth century appear to be restrained, dignified but dull: staying at home most of the time to manage their households with just some slight changes of holding parties as the only extension of their social lives. At the same time, through Iris's pen, we get to understand their subdued pains of childbirth, their implicit desires and struggles for having their own spaces.

If Iris herself is one of those apparently self-denying women, in the second part of her life, when she has an affair with Alex, she uses the affair, story-telling in their meetings as well as writing down their stories as means of self escape and fulfillment of her desires. Iris's rebellion continues in the next stage, when she moves away from Richard to live alone, publishes the novel under Laura's name, and fights against

Winifred for the custody of Aimee, until at the end she writes down the whole story with broader historical knowledge in her memoir. At this moment, she is able to be detached from the past selves and examine what she has been doing with distinctive perspectives; moreover, as a story-teller and narrator, she actively speaks to the other female characters, such as Myra , Sabrina, and "you" as readers, in an attempt to build a female community.

While creating female bonding between herself and the other women in the circle of women, Iris's personal account of Chase women's histories, I will argue at the end, serves also as an antithesis to official discourse. *The Blind Assassin* as a "her-story" presents different media of recording personal stories and public history: on the one hand, Iris, apart from verbal language, uses photos and buildings to record the Chase women's lives; on the other hand, she juxtaposes them with the newspaper reports, photos and statues, which are factual and concrete records without emotional depth or even historical authenticity. As a whole, therefore, I argue in this chapter that by writing, Iris has her self asserted while at the same time resists the official discourse which seems to give a twisted version of history of both Iris and the Chase family.

Writing as a Way to Understand Feminine Self denial

"What fabrications they are, mothers. Scarecrows, wax dolls for us to stick pins into, crude diagrams" (94.)

With all the differences in their generations, family backgrounds and personalities, Adelia, Liliana, Winifred, and the young Iris have one similarity: they are all housekeepers in a family and helpers for their "men" (husbands, fathers or brothers). Adelia runs the household for Benjamin, Liliana for Norval Chase, Winifred for Richard, and, as I pointed out earlier, both Adelia's and Iris's marriages use women in exchange for better business or to salvage a bad one. Busying themselves in developing the family business outside, the men are free of chores because they are the responsibility of women. This division of home and work may be a matter of necessity in the early period of industrial capitalism, when home has to be a haven from the harsh environment and competitiveness at work. The question, however, is how women are put in an inferior position willingly or even unconsciously subordinating themselves to men. No matter how Adelia conducts a well-organized management of Avilion, she is willing to succumb to the power of Benjamin. Liliana follows the same patterns in sticking to her role as a helper to the Chase family. Winifred, in a family of the newly rich, is proud not of setting a business herself or having her own life, but of her abilities in handling, arranging to the degree of

monopolizing everything concerning Richard. "It was she who arranges things for Richard, she told me – social events, cocktail parties and dinners and so forth" (232). The ability of running the chores for men becomes even a showoff of power for Winifred. With their belief in their own inferiority and subordination to their men, Adelia, Liliana and Winifred thus serve as role models for the young Iris to learn from, until she, like Laura, later modifies this beaten track in different ways.

In her memoir, Iris shows how women figures play a crucial role in forming the subjectivity of the young Iris. As a daughter in a once prosperous button factory family, Iris has several females from the upper class— Adelia, Liliana, Winifred— as her mother figures who contribute to her idea of self. Though Adelia, Iris's grandmother, dies before she was born, Iris claims that "Laura and I were brought up by her. We grew up inside her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself." (62) In other words, living in a house constructed and decorated under the supervision of Adelia, Iris and Laura are to a certain degree influenced by Adelia. In Adelia's design, the sculptures of stone sphinxes, literary sources in the name of Avilion, European norms of culture are all incorporated in the house to form its and its residents' identities. Showing her taste and capability of arranging the household in a perfect condition, Adelia often invites notable guests during holidays like Christmas. The design of her Christmas card reinforces her taste and the image of a capable hostess. Nevertheless, the power of Adelia is after all confined to the area of household, under the roof of Avilion. At the end of the nineteenth century, the button factory of Benjamin, Iris's grandfather, began to earn its fortune. It would be easy if Adelia wants to travel anywhere. Yet, Adelia refuses to go abroad without the company of Benjamin and restrains her longing to visit the old world, Europe, which she thinks is the synonym to culture. Such sacrifices of spatial freedom are common among women, especially among those in the upper-class, since it is deemed dangerous to expose themselves too often in public territory.

This model influences Iris a lot both in her childhood and in her married life. Iris as a child is ideologically and physically confined to the family estate Avilion. There are two angel statues in the Chase graveyard, which symbolically construct the identity of Laura and Iris, the two daughters of the Chase family—like two angels 'protected' within the house. Their nanny, Reenie, is like their guardian, who is responsible for their safety. Places outside the house are insecure for them. Most of the time, they stayed in Avilion, separated from the town people, except for the time when they escape intentionally from Reenie's eyes.

Whenever we could, we would steal away from Avilion and roam the town, despite Reenie's belief that the world was full of criminals and anarchists and sinister Orientals with opium pipes, then moustaches like twisted rope and long pointed fingernails, and dope fiends and white slavers, waiting to snatch us away and hold us to ransom for Father's money. (152)

Despite their efforts to sneak out of Avilion, Iris is especially limited in her mobility. When Iris and Laura are older, Iris is forced to play the role of a guardian to protect Laura against danger and impropriety. That is, Iris has to make sure that Laura does not move across the household and behavioral boundaries to the territories of danger and indecency, though she is "tired of keeping an eye on Laura, who didn't appreciate it ... tired of being held accountable for her lapses, her failure to comply" (173). Losing their mother at a young age and shouldering more family responsibilities, Iris has absorbed the idea of women's virtue and complied with it, unlike Laura. Her repression of her desire to leave home is out of family need and for the reputation's sake which is similar to the case of Adelia— though Iris's desire is stronger and more desperate:

I wanted to go to Europe, or the New York , or even to Montreal – to nightclubs, to soirees, to all the exciting places mentioned in Reenie's social magazines – but I was needed at home. Needed at home, needed at home – it sounded like a life sentence. Worse, like a dirge. (173)

Iris strongly senses an urge to get rid of the constraint of home, yet she is unable to make it, or so she thinks. After being married, Iris takes the role of a wife, which is constraining not only physically but also emotionally. Apart from the honeymoon to Europe with Richard, Iris is confined physically to their 'home'. She once said, "In theory I could go wherever I liked, in practice there were invisible barriers" (320). The "barriers" Iris mentions are related to the norms of how a woman should stay in her sweet 'home,' especially those women from the upper class and with money. This denial of mobility is embodied in her maternal ancestors and then internalized by Iris in her childhood and married life.

As a wife, Iris, moreover, has her emotion and desire denied, which can be traced back to Liliana's self-repression in marriage. When Norval fights in World War I, Liliana helps to maintain the operation of the button factory because Benjamin was ill because of the loss of two sons. Besides family business, she starts to engage in public service. Regardless of her health, Liliana devotes herself to help children in need and

that was deemed as a virtue of "selflessness." Exerting her power of helping others, Liliana shows her powerlessness in managing her body and also her marriage especially after Norval comes back from the War with "one good eye and one good leg" (76). Since then, Norval becomes an atheist and the relationship with his wife tenses. Liliana is supposed to understand her husband's situation of needing a woman during the war time, and to forgive what Norval has done. Liliana does so while repressing her inner feelings. However, from the old Iris's narration, we know that Liliana "resented, too, the nurse, or the many nurses, who had tended my father in the various hospitals" (77).

When it comes to Iris and Richard's marriage, the gap between the husband and the wife gets even wider, and the contradiction between the wife's self-denial and the husband's gratifying his desires beyond the marital boundaries, more ironical. This contradiction can be easily seen in Winifred's interpretation of Richard's affairs. As Iris suspects that Richard has affairs, Winifred takes it for granted that Richard has his physical need, and that Iris should 'understand' it:

I'd had one miscarriage and then another. Richard on his part had had one mistress and then another, or so I suspected – inevitable (Winifred would later say) considering my frail state of health, and Richard's urges. Men had urges, in those days; they were numerous [...] (478)

In Winifred's account, then, Richard's affairs are 'inevitable' and Iris's physical frailty is partly to blame. However, Iris herself is ironical implicitly, suggesting that men have 'numerous' desires is not their "nature", but because 'in those days' society legitimizes their desires. What is worse, in this vicious circle of women's self-denial and men's self-centeredness, wives cooperate to their utmost at the expense of their health and emotional well-being. Despite Liliana's illness, Norval Chase satisfies his 'need,' regardless of his wife's frail body. Little Iris could tell something is wrong in her mother's illness, as Iris the narrator points out, "so I knew my mother was in danger of some kind, something to do with health and something to do with Father" (88). What she did not understand in Liliana's situation she does understand when she herself undergoes a similar situation in her marriage. Though Richard does not touch Iris when she is not well, she suffers more since for a while Richard enjoys his sexual conquer over her. Seeing sex as an act of conquering, Richard is proud of the bruises he has left on Iris's body, which Iris tries so hard to get rid of. The binary opposition of men's revealing/satisfying their desires on the one hand, and women's repressing their desires and concealing their wounds on the other is, thus sadly overt in the Chase

family.

Silence and self-repressiveness is not only deemed a female virtue under the roof of such upper-class family as the Chases, but also a mode of their lives together. As Iris recalls, her parents spend their time together in an apparent silent peacefulness: "here we are in the autumn of 1919, the three of us together – my father, my mother, myself – making an effort" (80). On this ordinary day, they sit together in a room, where there is only the sound of the three-year-old Iris reading an alphabet book. Liliana is busy with sewing clothes for Iris, while Norval Chase is leaning on a chair, looking out of the window. Seen from afar, the scene could be considered an ideal image of family life, yet it is peacefulness made with efforts, since, neither parent knows how to be with the other. Moreover, Iris in her narration suspects that her father, in looking out of the window, wants to go back to the war field, though he never voices such intention. This apparent coziness of the family scene is only an appearance, hiding the actual anxiety underneath it.

In Iris's marriage, there are lots of scenes similar to those of her parent's reservation and silence. When dining with Richard, Iris remains silent and nods when Richard solicits her response from time to time. The lack of interaction remains the same as before they get married: "Richard read the newspapers, I read magazines. The conversations we had were not different in kind than those we'd had before the wedding" (242). Even though they travel together, they don't have too many emotional connections. Most of the time Iris does her own sight-seeing, and Richard deals with his business somewhere else. Iris often feels that she is "alone and therefore neglected, neglected and therefore unsuccessful" (245). Silence distances Richard and Iris, and results in Iris's sense of powerless in her marriage.

What makes the relationship between Iris and Richard different, however, is first the intervention of Winifred, who is desperate to keep her position higher than Iris in the family, and second the big gap between Iris's and Richard's ages. In a way, Winifred plays the role of stepmother for Iris, though later there is also a power struggle between Winifred and Iris over Richard. The first thing Iris learns about Winifred is her brightly colored attire. In the parties held by the button factory, Laura and Iris have been taught to wear dresses that were considered moderate in Reenie's criteria. "The overblown display of luxury had always been discouraged in our household" (177), Iris said. However, downplaying their richness is one thing, and wearing old clothes when the button factory is going downhill and they can no longer afford new clothes is another. After seeing Winifred's colorful clothing, Iris commends, "Still, I

thought how nice it would be to have such lovely clothes" (176), revealing her envy of the shallow glamour of the newly rich. In the presence of Winifred, Iris has the feelings of inferiority. When Iris is going to marry Richard to salvage her family business, as a consequence, Winifred serves as a (step-)mother to dress Iris up, to change every detail of her appearance, with which Iris keeps complying to the degree of having her whole self shaped by Winifred:

Clothes could always be purchased, naturally, but I would have to learn to wear them to effect. "As if they're your skin, dear," she said. My hair was out of question – long, unwaved, combed straight back,... Then there was question of my fingernails. (233)

After the refashioning ceremony, Iris seems to officially join the camp of capitalism. Making her clothes speaking for her, Iris is further muted. Under the refined clothes as status symbol, her personality and inner feeling are left unheeded. Pursuing the fashion Winifred is taking, Iris is then reconstructing a new identity for herself, since fashion, as Du Paul Gay points out, is a "means to express one's identity or the prospect of transforming themselves" (126). This new identity, however, is formed in the shape of Winifred. Iris has claimed, "I was now of the tribe of Winifred myself. Or I was partly" (306). Another characteristic of pursuing fashion is that it "compels us to discard a garment before it has outlived" (121). Interestingly, this is true to Winifred not only in garments but also in food. Iris notices that Winifred never finishes a meal. At first, Iris is furious about it, which is against the doctrine her mother and Reenie give – never forget there is someone elsewhere who is starving. Later, she knows it is a kind of fashion Winifred shows, exhibiting a form of power, the power of money, she owns.

Not only is Winifred re-making Iris, but also Richard. In their honeymoon trip to Europe, Richard pushes Iris to do some sightseeing of famous buildings, or renowned parks, which he thinks will make Iris qualified in her status. Iris then is trying to fulfill the expectation of his. But as Iris tries to do so, she can't feel the same effort on Richard's part. "He was effacing himself, or was it concealment? Withdrawal to a vantage point. I myself however was taking shape – the shape intended for me, by him" (303). During their honeymoon, Iris goes outside the hotel mostly by herself, and with a driver in London, while Richard has business to take care of. Thus, they are heading on the opposite side from each other by and by, while simultaneously Iris is parting from the identity of a daughter in a degenerating family and takes up the role of a wife to a nouveau riche.

Richard and Winifred, in this way, are like parents 'taking care' and educate Iris in her early years of marriage. Two dozen years older than Iris, they two together plan everything in Iris's life. This is not the first time that Iris feels powerless in her life, nor is she the only Chase woman to be in such situation. However, she is even more powerless than her previous 'mothers,' Adelia and Liliana, since her house is chosen and prepared by Winifred and her tasks as a wife assigned by the latter. When Iris comes back from her honeymoon and sees the house well-prepared, she feels as if she is a child:

Not for the first time, I felt like a child excluded by its parents. Genial brutal parents, up to their necks in collusion, determined on the rightness of their choices, in everything I could tell already that my birthday presents from Richard would always be something I didn't want. (306)

Richard and Winifred, however, are not only referred to as "brutal parents," but also as tigers and wolves, seizing chances to symbolically gobble down Iris as their prey. Therefore, for most of the time in this part of her life, Iris is made blind and passive, doing things according to others' standards but not her own will, but now she is not only selfless but also "bodiless." During the honeymoon trip, Iris suffers serious seasickness, but she is required to attend important occasions in repressing her body's illness. At this moment, Iris "felt bodiless and flaccid and crepey-skinned, like a deflating balloon (344). She has to deny the existence of her body and what is left are things attaching to her: material coverings, well-trained manners, and an identity attached to Richard.

In between Iris's biological (grand)parents and Richard and Winifred as her adoptive parents, there is Reenie, whose influence lasts longer and goes deeper in Iris's life. The role Reenie, the housekeeper, plays is like that of a mother, but she is in some ways stronger than Adelia and Liliana. Though Adelia and Liliana are models for Iris to follow, Reenie is the one that makes her following possible. Adelia died before Iris was born. What Iris learns about her grandmother comes mostly from Reenie's description. Apart from the construction of Avilion, the tablewares selected by Adelia, the deed Adelia accomplished were all embodied in Reenie's story. After the death of Adelia and Liliana, Reenie takes the responsibility to ensure the practices of upper class values in Iris and Laura. As I pointed out before, they are not allowed to talk to strangers, or to walk freely in the street out of consideration of their safety. Also, they have to behave as "ladies": "a lady never went out without her hat" is one of Reenie's

many proverbial sentences toward the two sisters (153). Iris internalizes these maxims as covers or protection, not much different from the clothes Winifred gives to her, a cover of self. In a way, Iris is not completely selfless when she is under Richard and Winifred's control, or under the traditional education of her well-meaning mothers. The polite, reserved and dignified appearance she learns to adopt serve to protect her and avoid an exposure of her real self or desires. Interestingly, commodities such as clothes, hats, gloves are used here as objects with double values — to reveal class differences, and to conceal real selves.

Of all the 'mothers,' Reenie's influence lasts till the last years of Iris's life, as she fills the absence of Liliana, Iris's biological mother. As a surrogate mother, Reenie not only teaches with her proverbial expressions, but also comforts. Whenever Iris has trouble in life, she recalls what Reenie has told her. As hearing the news of Laura's death, Iris says, "What I remember then was Reenie, from when we were little... *Tell me where it hurts, she'd say. Stop howling. Just calm down and show me where* " (2). At this moment, Iris realizes that she is shaking, yet those words of Reenie serve as consolation and teach her to face the situation. Similarly, on the day Iris comes back from her honeymoon trip only to hear from Laura the death of Norval Chase, and before she is going to face Richard to find out why the telegrams have been hidden from her, Reenie's teachings emerge again. "Lose your temper and you lose the fight, Reenie used to say" (308). Not only when Iris is in trouble but when she seems to do something wrong, she thinks of Reenie, in the image of a mentor trying to direct her where to go. "Reenie is back. She's none too pleased with me. *Well, young lady. What do you have to say for yourself?* " (428). Iris here is being accused by Reenie (maybe in her dream or in her fantasy) because Iris knows she fails in her responsibility to Laura, according to the standard set by her mother and Reenie. Nevertheless, Iris's sense of guilt resulting from the failure to conform is relieved later when she writes to realize that she is actually being "thwarted" by those mother figures. By writing, Iris comes to recognize during the last years of her life how those 'mothers' together resulted in her self-denial in the first stage of her life.

Writing as Means of Escape, Self-Fulfillment and Recording Growth

1. Writing as Escape and Self-Fulfillment

Recording or creating stories in private means for the married Iris a way to escape from her daily oppression and to fulfill her desires. After being married, Iris divided her life into two: "a daytime one and a nighttime one" (371). During the daytime, she has hours of her own, in which she manages in whatever possible way to live a life

she wants, aside from many chores arranged by Winifred for her to occupy her time. But at nighttime, Iris has to endure the sexual abuses of Richard. "Sometimes – increasingly, as time went by – there were bruises, purple, then blue, then yellow" (371). Being a social bride, Iris can not escape from the hand of the wolf physically. Then she tries to find a way out of Richard's control. Iris has described that those bruises on her body make her feel like an object of recording. "I was sand, I was snow –written on, rewritten, smoothed over" (371). Richard is the writer writing on her so as to demonstrate his power over her. After the act of conquering, Iris will "take a shower, to get rid of the night" (371). But, then there are still endless night waiting for Iris. To resist the nightmare of being a physically controlled victim, Iris starts to write. She assumes her right to write in which she fulfills her desire to have her own space, and to resist patriarchal oppression. Iris later on confesses that she wrote *The Blind Assassin*, which was earlier assumed written by Laura, in her helpless days. "I wrote it myself, during my long evenings alone, when I was waiting for Alex to come back, and then afterwards, once I knew he wouldn't... I wanted a memorial. That was how it began. For Alex, but also for myself" (512).

The female character Iris creates in her work is not necessary to be 'Iris' in the real life, but it is one of her projections that is close to the self of Iris. The woman speaking in her story has a secret lover who tells her a detective story of a blind assassin and some others stories. This woman, like Iris, is deprived of spatial freedom, comes from an esteemed family, and has a lover outside like the real Iris seeing Alex. This is also the first time Iris literally presents another self that oversteps, after nineteen years of obeying others' expectations, the boundary of being moral. To escape the identity of a social bride, Iris writes to search a place for herself. As an author of her book, no one is able to dominant her will, not to mention that most of people are led to believe Laura is the author by which she is free of any moral accusations. The act of writing fulfills Iris's desire of both recording a relationship and searching for the voice deeply buried in her. What she had have been taught is to repress her feelings after she no longer feels it, but the image of a muted maiden changes at the moment as she encounters Alex in the street and starts to envision this in her writing, to have an existence. "I stretched out my hand, like a drowning person beseeching rescue. In that moment I had already committed treachery in my heart. Was this a betrayal, or was it an act of courage? Perhaps both" (321). For Iris, to ask for help is to betray. But betrayal of what and to whom? It is a betrayal to the social Iris who follows the patriarchal ideals of women. The identity of the social Iris is contradictory to the Iris with inner feelings, struggles, hates and loves. Such inner feelings are embodied in her writing. Iris once tried to have her heroine think of an ending for the science

fiction in the romance. It is a happy ending in which the assassin rescues the girl, who is going to be sacrificed to gods, and they live a happy life thereafter as the traditional characters in fairy tales. As naive as it may be, it is what Iris yearns for: a man comes to rescue her from her present situation. At this stage, Iris still feels betrayal because of being true to her inner desire and voices. Nevertheless, Iris thinks it could be a symbol of courage because she never dares to cross the line of obedience. At any rate, this initiates Iris's first step toward self-claiming by writing.

Writing the romance, Iris uses the present tense as though she is more alive in it than in the married life. The narrating Iris uses a present tense only in the romance, while she uses past tenses in recording her life most of the time. This special use of narrative present tense could imply for Iris that she lives a more vivid life in the romance, where she is free from the patriarchal constraints she lives under. Escaping from her nighttime activities with Richard, Iris searches for a relief in her writing, in which she thinks she really lives.

2. Recording Growth: From Self differentiation to Self Assertion

I say "her," because I don't recall having been present, not in any meaningful sense of the word. I and the girl in the picture have ceased to be the same person. I am her outcome, the result of the life she once lived headlong; whereas she, if she can be said to exist at all, is composed only of what I remember. (239)

In her own memoir, Iris's identity is in the process of construction. Laura used to say that Iris is asleep because she thinks Iris can't or is unwilling to face what happens in their lives. But the narrating Iris, after the death of Laura, is awakened and is recollecting every piece of her life with "a better view" than the narrated Iris. In describing the wedding picture, the old Iris uses the third person narrative to differentiate the narrating Iris from the narrated Iris. The narrating Iris is Iris in her present life writing back, and she refuses to be the same person with the past one, the social bride who is without voices of her own, without a self. Now Iris takes a stand to break up with an identity she earlier held in a resolute and doomed attitude. This is different from the attitude of her earlier writing, which she undertook secretly with fear and uncertainty of its righteousness, and even uses Laura's name when the book was published. This change of attitude presents two distinctive sides of Iris. Alison Lee, a critic of postmodern writing, points out, "subjectivity, like meaning, is plural, and in the tensions and differences between subjectivities, social change can take place" (59). Iris here undergoes a split of subjectivity and she clearly indicates which self who she wants to identify with. The alienation of the young Iris, the image of an

ideal woman is completed when Iris views the woman in the wedding picture from a perspective of an outsider.

This position of viewer often shows in her writing. On the one hand, the old Iris is narrating her life; on the other, she gives comments or explanations on those events the narrated Iris undergoes. Oftentimes the comments and recording are separated by the usage of tenses or highlighted with parenthesis. Comments are treated as though Iris is sharing a secret directly with a reader. For instance, at the time when Liliana was on her death bed, she said to Iris, "underneath it all, your father loves you" (102). Child Iris didn't see the meaning of it, but the narrating Iris does:

Now I think it was more complicated than that. It may have been a warning. It may also have been a burden. Even if love was underneath it all, there was great deal piled on top, and what would you find when you dug down? (102)

The narrating Iris elaborates the meaning of her mother's envoi; that is she realizes a negative meaning for the love of her father. The hindsight of the old Iris interprets Liliana's words as warning to the burden of her father's love. The love is "a heavy thing for me to carry around with me, slung on its iron chain around my neck", judges wise Iris (102). The following is another example of Iris's reinterpreting past events:

My mother was a Methodist, but my father was Anglican: thus my mother was below my father's level socially, as such thing were accounted then. (If she's lived, my Grandmother Adelia would never have allowed the marriage, or so I decided later.) (67)

Iris is now measuring the social position of her parents, and taking a guess of her grandmother's opinions toward their knotting together. Iris concludes that Adelia is a conservative person who will never give her consent to this marriage. While reconstructing the past, Iris creates not only events but meanings which she can re-impose onto past. When Iris is young, she has a habit of being silent about everything. By writing, Iris once again has the chance of articulating in an observant and self-examining way. Furthermore, with broader knowledge and a wider perspective looking at her past self, Iris seems to send some messages to any possible readers, especially women, of not living a similar life as hers. The past self she presents therefore serves as a didactic function, as a warning, and also as a self-defense. With the comparison of past and present, Iris creates a new identity that is unknown to the public, which may suggest that access through official means of

knowing is deficient or distorting.

In addition to the choice of tenses with which two selves are distinct, there is disparity between the vision of the old Iris and that of the young Iris. Aging Iris lives with self-awareness, and time-awareness, and is attentive to the environment around her.

The season is turning on its hinges, the earth swings farther from the light; under the roadside bushes the paper trash of summer drifts like an omen of snow. The air is drying out, preparing us for the coming Sahara of centrally heated winter.
(222)

The language Iris adopts is poetic. Every tiny change of the world means a lot for her, and she is eager to participate in, sometimes with her pen. From time to time the old Iris shows her concern with time passing, and her yearning to live longer. Conversely, the vision of the young Iris is more limited, and time seems meaningless in her life. A trivial and romantic observation toward the outside world hardly appears in the life of the young Iris. She is then obsessed to be someone else, to take up an identity others shape for her, which leaves no room for other concerns of things around her, namely, the young Iris most of the time is blind. Take her honeymoon for instance. Iris is then so numb to her own feelings. She even needs the waiter in a hotel in Paris to tell her that she is sad and then she can cry. Moreover, the young Iris is not only blind to her feelings, but to Laura's sufferings. She is blind to Laura's sufferings to accept Richard and Winifred's story about Laura's delusions. She misses Laura's messages till Reenie reminds her that Laura has left some codes for her. By retrospection, the old Iris understands the blindness of her previous doings. The disability to observe what really happened in her early life is what the old Iris wants to recover or represent in her memoir both as a defense for her innocence and as a warning to others.

Though resuming the ability to see, and to speak, Iris is still trapped in her marriage, economic stability, till the death of Laura. As Hilde Staels has pointed out, "The fall is a symbolic killing of Iris's social identity, a final beckoning for a spiritual death-rebirth" (158). The fall Staels referred is Laura's death. Staels thinks Laura's death is a turning point for Iris to break up with her social identity, the image of a wife of a prominent industrialist, a social bride. It is true that after Laura's death, Iris starts to fight back to the domination of Winifred and Richard. She moves out and threatens them with the scandal – Richard raped Laura. Because of Laura's death, Iris finds the notebooks Laura left in which she recorded what had happened, and then Iris comes to discover the sufferings Richard and Winifred imposed on Laura. At this moment,

Iris faces and confesses her blindness to Laura's sufferings and sacrifices of her own, that is marriage. "It had been there all along, right before my very eyes. How could I have been so blind?" (500) By then, Iris realizes that she is actually the blind assassin herself in terms of Laura's tragic. She misses Laura's message for calling for help and ignores her suggestion of escaping together. The recognition of blindness leads to a brand new perspective for Iris to re-posit her self as well as other women, and to link all of those together.

Questioning and answering by herself in the process of writing enables Iris to ensure the role of an author, which is self-assertive, display her power in controlling her own discourse, and form a network among people she cares and who may care her. "The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read" (283). The narrating Iris said so in chapter seven of her memoir. Nevertheless, reading over her work, we can find that there is an addressee or many others to her memoir. Frequently, the old Iris is talking directly to someone, named or unnamed. "As for the book, Laura didn't write a word of it. But you must have known that for some time" (512). "Which may be news for you, Myra " (446). Is this, expecting an addressee, saying that what she writes down isn't the truth? As a matter of fact, Iris's writing serves not to build a history that is absolutely "real," but with her personal purpose to communicate among women and to relocate them in the context of certain periods. Iris here employs the position as an author/speaker to create a network between the 'you,' Myra , Sabrina, and herself. Within this network, Iris stands a chance to be remembered as she is or as one she wants to be. "What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth. I thought myself as recording" (517). Recording or recreating a life she once lived or she believed in living is a means of pulling herself together.

Why is it we want so badly to memorialize ourselves? Even while we're still alive. We wish to assert our existence, like dogs peeing on fire hydrants. We put on display our framed photographs, our parchment diplomas, our silver-plated cups; we monogram our linen, we carve our names on trees, we scrawl them on washroom walls. (95)

Here, Iris finds the answer to her writing and/or other people or living being's recording activity. It is a display of self, an announcement of a once living being, and in passing it generation through generation, people live eternally in between the words. I've just discussed the old Iris's fear of death, and writing, as a form of immortality, it is the way by which she can resolve her anxiety of disappearing without a sign of

living but only with distorted notions of her, of Laura, of Sabrina, and even other women, in public or official discourse.

Resistance to Official Discourse

Iris's memoir is not only a personal indictment of her life but a collective experience in women's history. Most human beings conceive things through an established ideology shaped in the form of numerous commodities and historical documents, in which people are only exposed to a partial reality or even a distorted history without much consciousness. Iris's personal account serves as a protest to those pre-setting norms. To reveal those forms of protesting, I will first look at the media she uses to record women's lives: photos and buildings. After that, I will discuss how Iris juxtaposes them with newspaper reports and statues to reveal the fallacy or shallowness of the latter.

While writing the memoir, Iris juxtaposes different forms of how we perceive past events – newspaper clippings, artwork, and statues – to highlight the contradictions between discourses, while at the same time she disrupts the authority of official accounts, and calls attention to the linguistic constructions of each. Linda Hutcheon has raised the issue of the problematic aspects of history revealed in historiographic fictions: "What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past" (89). Hutcheon balances the position between history and literature by positing both in the same place— forms of discourse —and invokes further thoughts on the validity of official history and the possibility of fiction representing and/or telling more about past events.

This historical awareness in fiction is increasingly expanding, especially in women's writings. In his analysis in *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse*, Magali Cornier Michael calls attention to the marginalization of women's story and fictional writings.

As I have argued, The Handmaid's Tale engages both deconstructive and reconstructive (postmodern) strategies in order to criticize the inherent biases in Western culture's notion and reading of history as a monolithic objective entity, while simultaneously inserting a woman's oral story-history within the margins or cracks of the texts written by men; as a result, these subversive strategies relativize history and open up a space for women's traditionally marginalized stories-histories. (169)

Women's narrating space, as Michael points out, is opened up in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the woman's story is posited in the marginalized space of the whole novel. I want to elaborate in saying that the narrating space is extended in *The Blind Assassin*. In *The Blind Assassin*, the woman's 'story-history' is in the center while the authentic discourse serves as a parody to it or is marginalized. Positioning the memoir in the center, Iris challenges different agents of official discourse, the discourse which mostly is conducted by men and thus men-centered, by parodying them. Next, I would like to use several examples to see how Atwood centers on the significance of women's recording while problematizing those conventional ways of historicizing.

Taking pictures is one medium used by Laura to record her lives. The way she keeps photographs shows her selective ways of remembering. Laura cuts the photograph of Alex, Iris and herself in a picnic according to her liking. The one Laura keeps for herself is without Iris, and other one she gives Iris is without her. She told Iris, "[because] that's what you want to remember" (220). This means that photograph is not simply an unbiased existence of the past but is subject to deliberate revision. Laura wants to remember the picnic with Alex and without Iris, so she mends the evidence. Therefore, the photo suggests a perspective Laura takes to view the event. Her perspective is not make-up but only partial. People want to retrieve the past or assert their existence in a certain historical moment, and in Atwood's work photographs are one of the direct means to achieve their ends. The woman in the romance comments: "The picture is of happiness, the story not" (518). Pictures ostensibly contain ideas of what really happens; nevertheless, in addition to its seemingly objective representation, they can be a more subjective recording due to human's purposeful alterations.

Buildings, like photos, are evidence of once existing phenomena, from which Iris carves her personal history. During the honeymoon, Iris has been to many countries and visited numerous historical spots, yet she claims that she remembers those places by hotels. She has seen many ancient buildings which people think is full of historical meanings, yet Iris feels none of these. Hotels in London, Paris, Rome and Berlin mean more than "the Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, Kensington, Westminster Abbey..." for Iris (302). This is because Iris feels more comfortable and close to self within the bathroom of those hotels, in which she doesn't have to deal with others' expectations of her and she can stop performing as Richard's wife. Thus, Iris endows bathrooms with the meaning of a private space where she can make the memories of her own. Diverse meanings are attached to buildings according to distinct demands from different parties. The conversion of Avilion, for instance, into a

tourist spot is to promote the development of tourism in Port Ticonderoga. Some historical traces of the button factory there are deemed as part of industrialization's reality, which I will indicate in Chapter Two, is to a degree superficial. Atwood juxtaposes material objects that people think can speak for the past with Iris's story as to point out the fallacy of the material ones. One of the techniques used often in the novel is the representative official recording: newspaper reports.

The death of Laura is a classical one in its contrast between Iris's account and the newspapers'. In the beginning of the book, we have seen Iris's suspended version of Laura's death. Readers are led to doubt that Laura's death may not be a simple suicide. Followed by Iris's suspicious version, one newspaper clipping reports the event which has a very different focus as a conclusion. After ruling out the possibilities of Laura's suicidal part by Iris's statement only, the news concludes, "The accident has occasioned renewed protests over the state of the streetcar tracks on this stretch of roadway" (3). In other words, Laura's death means a reminder to avoid public dangers for government. The effect appears often in Iris's memoir. As a family saga, the book is oftentimes crossing the line of personal with political in a humorous way. When the news of Laura's runaway has been reported fictively in *The Toronto Star*, it ends in that the whole incidence is the fault of "postal delivery," and appeals for government's attention (258). Like the death of Laura, those events become an agenda for newspapers to present to government. The public concerns issued in each newspaper clippings are used here as propaganda to call for government's attention in seeing the problems and making a better life for people, while the significance of the cause of the event disappears. Iris's delineation of Laura's missing and death is comparatively a long story and enticing process for readers to go through. Under such comparison, the authenticity in official history thus seems comical and no longer a formal and realistic representation that we usually take for granted.

Another way people retrieve the past is through art, but again how art presents what happens is, in the novel, called into question. Port Ticonderoga, the location of the button factory, is named by Colonel Parkman, who led a decisive war during American Revolution. Therefore, there is a statue in town to remember him. But the statue of Colonel Parkman is from imagination, namely, no body ever saw him or knew what he looked like, "since he left no pictorial evidence of himself and the statue wasn't erected until 1885, but he looks like this now. Such is the tyranny of Art" (145). The non-realistic statue of Colonel Parkman is well-accepted by the town people without doubt. The town's name and the statue even let some travelers misunderstand that the town is where the war took place back then. Those misconceptions resulting from artwork are rarely perceived by people because they

are mostly intimidated by the word "art" which generates a rigid image that is authoritative and prestigious.

Another bias resulting from art's monopolization is embodied in the young Iris's attitude toward Callista, an "artist" from outside of the town. "I was in awe of Callista because she was an artist, and was consulted like a man, and strode around the shook hands like one as well, and smoked cigarettes in a short black holder, and knew about Coco Chanel" (147). The child Iris hardly knows the nature of Callista's work, despite her innocence, she is still convinced by the word "artist" as a title worth revering like the effect the word "history" generates. When Callista comes to Ticonderoga, she changes the stereotype of woman in Iris's eyes. Unlike other women in the town Iris used to see, the "artist", Callista acts as a man, and a man's words are powerful and convincing. This equation of art and masculine power exemplifies people's bias: man is connected to influential power and woman to a weak one. Such bias reveals people's superficiality in perceiving the world. Many pre-setting norms, like art or history, confine people's ability to see and to challenge injustice. Those public discourses represent ideas and concepts or even ideologies which develop people's cognition, attitude and perspectives toward the world.

Ways of understanding the past vary dramatically from one to another, people are free to choose what to believe, while simultaneously understanding its potential deficiencies and recognizing the existence of other forms to know the past which people for most of the time fail to perceive. This awareness of the danger of being blind enables us to bridge the distance between self and others. In the case of Iris, she first writes to gain self-assertion, and then widens the scope to mend her relations with others. In addition to her personal justification, Iris's writing brings the lives of Alex and Laura into the center of the history. Hilde Staels says, "Both Laura and Alex are marginalized by bourgeois society, Alex being doubly marginalized as an orphan. Laura acts strangely from the point of view of dominant society" (157). Because of Alex and Laura's unusual behavior and mode of thinking, they are ruled off the stage in the orthodox system. Here I argue that being marginalized by the official history, Alex and Laura are brought back to the center with Iris's writing. Iris published her work under the name of Laura, and creates a posthumous fame for her sister. As for Alex, Iris's memoir creates a space of Alex, in which his image is more positive than the one people learn from the official account, an extreme agitator. Other than this, those intricately-nested stories reflect the lives of those female protagonists and explain their influence on each other, in which Atwood's concern with women reverberate again and again. While creating a community for women, Iris invites

audience into her history. As I have pointed out earlier there are expected readers to Iris's memoir, they are all in the network of this female community. This is an ever expanding community, not only because Atwood/Iris's writing addresses us readers, but also because the writing shows a broader historical knowledge, thus making its space of oppression and resistance not limited to one person or one family, but translatable to us and our families. It is Atwood/Iris's historical understanding of capitalism that I will get to in the next chapter.

Notes

1. See <http://www.marxist.com/women/women_and_capitalism.501.html>
2. After the World War II, there are some issues related to women's work: many women are reluctant to give up their paychecks and independence. Till 1947, one forth Canadian women is in the work force: poor white women, single mothers, native women, black domestic servants, etc. At that period, professional jobs were largely unavailable to women. Their jobs were mostly factory labour, domestic service, sales and secretary (David. Taras, and Beverly Rasporich, eds).
3. By "capitalist history," I refer mainly to its three periods: industrial capitalism— the period after industrial revolution starts, "state capitalism," when the private industries enlarge enormously in size and functions, becoming causes for military invasion, and "international or post-industrial capitalism," when service industry dominates and information becomes the main kind of commodity. The history of capitalism, however, is a lot longer than the periods I cover; it started from the breakup of feudalism, and then took place as a dominant economic system in the Western world. It is also called "free market economy," replacing the convention of government intervention.

See "economic system." Encyclopedia Britannica.
 <<http://www.britanica.com/eb/article?tocId=6118>>