



A Study of Hélène Cixous' Concepts of Neuter and Other in Margaret Atwood's *Life before Man*

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Received: 30-12-2013

Accepted: 01-02-2014

Published: 01-05-2014

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.3n.3p.104

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.3n.3p.104>

Abstract

This study tries to find the evidences of similarity in thoughts and beliefs common between two female writers, Hélène Cixous and Margaret Atwood; therefore, the main concepts, neuter and other that Cixous introduced and discussed by means of her Feminine writing, are applied in Atwood's novel, *Life before Man*. The research is done by studying the main characters of the above-mentioned novel. The results show that none of characters is able to cope and connect with other that leads to their unhappy lives and their failure.

Keywords: Hélène Cixous, Margaret Atwood, Neuter, Other, Feminine writing

1. Introduction

The concept of neuter in Cixous' writing should be considered as a necessary pre-stage of otherness. In *Rootprints* (1997), she says, "it is rich in meaning possibilities." (51) She uses this concept in her writing to reflect human mystery that they put an end on it violently. Because most of people do not like mysteries since they cannot keep it under their control or explain it with their framed and rigid rules of understanding, therefore they generally exclude it and at last, it is settled. To clarify this point Cixous gives an instance:

I remember having heard the following sentence: a Down's syndrome patient is a vegetable, at best an animal. One can ask oneself what that means. That sentence was the expression of a doctor. It is we, with our language, who make the law. Who draw the borders and produce the exclusion. Who grant admittance... we admit or we reject. (ibid)

Neuter accompanies with loss, or in Cixous' words, when a human reaches to a situation that she calls it "dust." Here is the start point of a new stage and it becomes possible to find new aspects of things such as energy and sublime memory that are lost in our everyday life. In "Reaching to The Point of Wheat" (1987), she writes:

What I want to emphasize is the "no one." One can reach that point of equanimity, which is also felicity, only if one has been able to achieve a very difficult attitude toward oneself. This is what Clarice calls "de-personalization," getting rid of the ego, coming to the point where one is so free of egocentrism that one can be open completely to the other. (18)

Cixous gives us the simple and straight meaning of neuter: "no one," or as what Clarice Lispector calls "de-personalization." In this state of mind, we are free of the bonds of ego that means we do not become angry or sad especially in difficult situations, so it means absolute happiness. In addition, in this state we are open to the other that could be our new and different self or someone/thing else.

In *Coming to Writing* (1991), she gives us the formula for reaching to the neuter state:

Listen: you owe nothing to the past; you owe nothing to the law. *Gain* your freedom: get rid of everything, vomit up everything, give up every-thing. Give up absolutely everything, do you hear me? *All of it!* Give up your goods. Done? Don't keep anything; whatever you value, give it up. Are you with me? Search yourself, seek out the shattered, the multiple I, that you will be still further on, and emerge from one self, shed the old body, shake off the Law. Let it fall with all its weight, and you, take off, don't turn back: it's not worth it, there's nothing behind you, everything is yet to come. (40)

If we want to become the other that means a new self, we must give up everything; there is nothing left in the past and its laws. But here this self has a different meaning it is not possible to give a definite and limited definition of it according to what had been defined by past philosophers. There is just a possibility of give some of its characteristics, however they are not fixed: We should not keep anything, any value from the past; we should search ourselves for new and for unseen that is the multiple I and is open to the human or none human other and kills no one or nothing in her/him self.

As it has been discussed, when the self loses everyday values and reaches to neutral state, it is ready to become the other and at the same time to accept the other. This is a new opportunity to search and find new dimensions of life that are hidden in everyday life. It is necessary to have a look on the origin of the other. It has been used widely not only by Cixous but also by lots of writers and philosophers. The other for the first time used for construction of self/ other binary and is inscribed to woman in opposition to man as the self. Cixous uses this concept in a way to put under question validity of binary system and subvert it; on the other hand, she gives new meaning to the other, which vice versa to its past negative meaning is a positive one. She uses other as a metaphor that represents those seditious exiled energies that can be considered a great threat and crumble the coherence of phallogocentric thoughts. Cixous looks at the world from the window of otherness. In *Rootprints* she argues: “we deprive ourselves of otherness-of the otherness of the earth. We ourselves finish by no longer seeing it from another point of view, while it absolutely needs this. The earth seen from the point of view of the moon is revived: it is unknown; to be rediscovered.” (10)

In her writing when she mentions human it has nothing to do with humanism, she does not believe in anthropocentrism. She talks about better human, so the word human becomes something new and strange by which all traditional beliefs and accepted borderlines crosses. The human being enters into a new phase and expands from others that can be animal, mineral or vegetal. Because of this, Cixous becomes interested in Clarice Lispector. The most important impact of Clarice writing on her thought has shown in the way that she talks about the relationship between human and none-human other. Lispector searches the various relations between the human and none-human other. In nearly all of her works, Cixous attempts to explore moral principles of none violence towards difference or the other, which she considers vital if our aim is to transform the powerful modes of destructive thinking. In a certain period Cixous studied Clarice works and she borrowed many objects of Clarice writings to demonstrate her own ideas. One of these concepts is “Clandestine Felicity” (secret happiness) or in Cixous’ own words the art of having what we have. In the case of Clarice in *Reading with Clarice Lispector* (1990), Cixous writes: “she knows how to go on having in the middle of having, how not to have a closed, but an open, trembling kind of having...she shows the mechanism of non-possession in possession.”(125)

Cixous insists on effacement of subjects that results in making free, being born and giving birth. She talks about the state of otherness or alterity (Altérité) which cannot be reduced to the binary self/other. She wants alterity to speak as alterity, by this she implies tolerance, acceptance and none understanding of the other. This otherness goes beyond colonizing logic of binary and its foundation reaches to difference. On the other hand, other shows the great limitations of the knowable. Because of this Cixous is always on the side of unknown and all the times talks about the other as unknown, but when she calls the other unknown she means that it is something, which is new, above everyday life and it must be found in exchange or connection between the self and the other.

Her aim is to tell us without other, self is meaningless and nothing. This is the other, which gives us our portrait: “The other in all his or her forms gives me *I*. It is on the occasion of the other that *I* catch sight of me; or that *I* catch *me* at: reacting, choosing, refusing, accepting. It is the other who makes my portrait.”(1997: 13) Cixous sees the other in different sorts; it may be a human, an object or even an event, but instead of terror, she receives this variety as a kind of richness: “And luckily the other of all sorts, is also of all diverse richness. The more the other is rich, the more I am rich. The other, rich, will make all his or her richness resonate in me and will enrich me.”(ibid) In Cixous’ view, we all make a big mistake when we think that the other will take something from us, but exactly opposite the other always brings to us; it does not matter that other is our friend or our enemy. Even our enemy can shows us our weak points, which leads to our vulnerability.

In her idea when the other stays strange to us there are always something new and interesting in it/his/her that we can discover it. In “The Laugh of Medusa” (1976), Cixous goes on with other and gives the meaning of living in her own veiw: “but I do desire the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female; because living means wanting everything that is, everything that lives, and wanting it alive.”(891)

2. Literary Background

2.1 Hélène Cixous

Hélène Cixous was born in 1937 in Algeria, from an Austro-German mother and French-Jewish father. She worked on *The Exile* (1918) of James Joys and received her doctorate degree in 1968. In 1975 she wrote, “The Laugh of Medusa”, which has been considered a revolutionary point in her critical career. At the present time, she is living in Paris and is known as a professor, writer, philosopher and critic. Jacques Derrida said in her honor: “I have often declared my admiration for Hélène Cixous, for the person and for the work: immense, powerful, so multiple but unique in this century.” (qtd in Hélène Cixous, 2007: VIII)

From her early childhood many events influenced Cixous’ life and career wildly. First, her mixed cultural heritage made her situation in the world fragile and she condemned to exile, which became one of recurrent subjects in her writing. In *Coming to Writing*, Cixous asserts: “No serious declared language. In German, I weep; in English, I play; in French, I fly, I am a thief. No permanent residence.”(36) On the other hand, she receives this condition as a gift that made her free from oppressive and exclusive types of naming. She chooses writing as her bondless country and opens a space within herself for the other. This choice gives her the power to write in vast field of countries and nations without boundaries.

Another event in her childhood that touched her life deeply was her father death, inspired by poetic and philosophical feeling of loss, she mourned for him through writing. The result is loss and melancholy that takes her down to the neuter

state and teaches her how to start a new beginning. In *Encounters* (2013), she says: “some years earlier I’d already lost everything and especially for a time my mind and that seemed like a preparation for other beginnings.”(36) She mentions: “I was surrounded by human events; I experienced this very early on: that is, I could share the experience of humanity, crime, fiction and punishment. In other words, she learns “how to be human, with the feeling of walking on hot coils without being a fakir.”(51) Death became for her, initiation of living and thinking deeply through writing. Cixous believes for human death is one of the worst sufferings, with a strange profit. In her *Rootprints* she says, “human beings try to live through the worst sufferings. To make humanity of them.”(19)

By means of her Feminine writing, she passes through the death, which results in birth of new indestructible state. Cixous rejects death as excuse for loss of passion, freedom, love and justice. She declares, death must be passed in order to achieve the real life, which goes beyond deaths:

There is always the feeling that something has been found again, a fragment of human nature; or else that something has been saved. What fills me with joy is that this thing that was found again or saved with the instrument of writing is a life and not death factor. Because I think that what daily life brings us, to a very great extent, is death. (98)

Her writing started fighting against self-destruction and destructions of other. Other for her comes from difference and She creatively wants “to have a courageous relationship to difference, to the other” (Bray, 2004: 6-7) which helps her to master the source of unknown fear and destructive thinking. She became someone who found her will to write and live through death and free relation with the other. Cixous’ unique philosophy and thoughts makes it difficult to understand her writing easily.

2.2 Margaret Atwood

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada, on 18 November 1939. She has travelled and lived in different countries such as the USA, France, England, and Scotland and received some honorary doctorates from several universities such as Harvard, as well as Cambridge and the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris. Now she is still one of the famous and respected living writers, she works and writes as a writer, poet and critic, but she still in a clever way denies the titles and biographies that are written about her life and works.

There are some concerns in Atwood’s writing that are worthwhile to mention, the first one of them is ecological concern. Her father and the lifestyle he established for his family resulted in Atwood’s later focus on ecological awareness. Her next concern in her works is nationalist one, she was surprised by the fact that how little people knew of Canada and Canadian culture. She mentions: “I live in the society; I also put the society into my books so that you get a box within a box effect.” (Ingersoll; 1991, 28) In all of her works, Atwood writes about all the things that worries her: threats to the environment; to human rights generally and Canadian Cultural autonomy. But there is a deeper concern in her writing, a dark pressure. It is often described as the gothic pressure of her work; the strong feeling of terror that she brings forth by means of her ambiguous characterization, strange and mysterious settings, which are the key characteristics of gothic beauties.

The question is that where does this darkness come from? The first source is Atwood’s own interest in supernatural and gothic things and her identification that villains are parts of a powerful story. All of these interests come from her childhood and her fascination with fairy tales and as a teenager; she spent her time on reading mystery novels. For her graduation thesis she worked on the role of supernatural in Henry James writing and used them later in her *Surfacing* (1972) and *Lady Oracle* (1976), and she wrote her doctoral dissertation on the nineteenth century metaphysical romance, which is was one of the gothic novels descendants. Atwood’s wide readings guided her frequently to dark places. And she shows these dark places in her works by her power of artistry. As it happened above the source of darkness in Atwood’s writing was searched, and now it is necessary to distinguish these different types of darkness and their elements carefully.

Macpherson in her *Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood* (2010) suggests four shades of darkness in her works that transforms into the levels in which the central character of Atwood’s work becomes aware of her relationship to it. The first stage is threat that means when the darkness is noticed as an indistinct threat from outside. The second stage is recognition: when the nature of that darkness is recognized. The third stage is self-recognition: when the darkness is perceived to be within as well as without. The fourth or the last stage is error: when the quality of darkness becomes ambiguous, when the central character looks more closely to it. And in following chapter of the work the central character or characters travel toward accepting the responsibility of their own error or their interaction with what they had become aware to be darkness. The interesting point is that the stages of darkness in her works are somehow similar to Cixous’s key words, neuter and other. These similarities make it possible to study Cixous’s concepts in Atwood’s works.

3. Discussion

3.1 Neuter

The novel starts with incidents that show all the characters are moving toward neutrality, but none of them gets free from her/his ego completely to achieve pure neutrality. As it had been discussed in last chapter, the state of neutrality is accompanied by loss and *Life Before Man* (1979) is reach in loss, through the story progress, we find out all the characters step by step lose all the things they have considered them important and valuable especially their relationships. They go through different relationships very easily and through those relationships, they lose all their

values, which doom their relationships to failure. We will have a look on main characters separately to find neuter elements.

3.1.1 Elizabeth

Elizabeth is the first character the novel starts with, As Cixous mentions the first experience of loss is death and the first part of the novel starts with death of Elizabeth lover, Chris. Atwood shows Elizabeth feeling through her thought after Chris's suicide:

I don't know how should I live. I don't know how anyone should live. All I know is how do I live...You wanted to make damn good and sure I'd never be able to turn over in bed again without feeling that body beside me, not there but tangible, like a leg that's been cut off. Gone but the place still hurts. (28-9)

All these lines show her first step toward neutrality, she thinks how empty she is, nothing is left inside her just grudge and anger. She admits in the first line that she even does not know how to live as she is left frustrated; and is filled with loss as if she had lost a part of her body but it is place still hurts.

In the next lines, Atwood gives the reader more information about Elizabeth situation:

She is not in. she is somewhere between her body, which is lying sedately on the bed...And the ceiling with its hairline cracks. She can see herself there, a thickening of the air, like albumin. What comes out when you boil an egg and the shell cracks. She knows about the vacuum on the other side of the ceiling...into the black vacuum the air is being sucked with a soft, barely audible whistle. She could be pulled up and into like smoke. (30)

This is the description of her body in neuter state; she does not know where she is exactly, somewhere between her body or out of it. She feels as if she does not have nor weight and neither body, she is like the smoke that can be vanished easily by a vacuum cleaner.

In spite of her long attempt to forget Chris's death, she does not succeed and faces mental and spiritual problems. She claims that most of the time she hears a loud sound, at last she guesses that maybe something is wrong with her ears and decides to visit a doctor. She is waiting to visit the doctor and Atwood describes her thought and mood at this moment:

She doesn't want to be left with nothing she can concentrate on, and at the moment she can't bear the kinds of magazines they keep in such places. Full-color magazines, brighter than life, about health and motherhood and washing your hair in mayonnaise. She needs something in black and white. Bodies falling from tenth-floor balconies, explosions. Real life. (117)

Now she looks on life as something black and white, which is something neuter in her eyes. She knows that what she sees around is not real life. A colorful cover talks about everyday life such as health and motherhood to show real life brighter.

According to the political backdrop, it is probable to expect that the novel face with feminism as a political movement, but none of the female characters is in correlation with feminist characteristics. Both of them have neuter feeling about politics. For instance, Elizabeth is not interested in any sort of news that surprises Nate: "Elizabeth, on the other hand, has no interest in watching any sort of news whatsoever. She hardly even reads the papers. Nate has never known anyone with as little interest in the news as Elizabeth." (138)

3.1.2 Nate

Nate is somehow in the same situation as Elizabeth, he is angry because he is aware that they lost all the values such as love and honesty that had bound their marriage and life like a rope. He is sure that Elizabeth boyfriend was more important for her than him and she blames him for everything even Chris death: "Nate wants to do something, perform something, smash his hand through the kitchen window. But on the other side of the glass there's a screen. That would neutralize him. Whatever he does now will be absurd." (39)

Although he tries to perform something to prove his existence against what Elizabeth thinks about him but he knows that it will be absurd.

He starts his drift toward neuter state by breaking with his ladyfriend, Martha; he goes to her house to finish everything in peace. But Martha's reaction is not as what he expected and after an argument he leaves her:

He pedals his bicycle through the rain, aiming deliberately for puddles, soaking his legs. Fool. There's something missing in him the other people have. He can never foresee the future, that's it, even when it's clear. It's a kind of deformity, like being tall. Other people walk through doorways, he hits his head. Once or twice, and a rat would learn to stoop. How many times, how long will it take? (72)

He is not aware of what is happening to him, he just has a strange feeling of changes inside him. He considers it as a kind of deformity.

Nate's toys that are his handmaids reflex his situation:

Today he's been painting eyes. Round eyes, expressionless, the eyes of creatures made to be ridden for the pleasure of others. The black eyeliner of the girls on the Strip. This isn't how he intended the horses to look: he intended joy. But more and more, recently, the toys he makes have this blank look, as if they can't see him. (85- 6)

Although he tries to show joy in his toys by painting but he does not succeed. He conveys his own feeling of neutrality to his toys. Their expressionless and blank eyes are emblems of neutrality.

There are other facts that approve he is moving toward neutrality:

His lapses of memory are beginning to bother him. It's not only Elizabeth, the way (he deduces) she must have been, that's slipping away from him. He loved her, he wanted to marry her, they got married, and he can recall only fragments. Almost a year of law school is gone now; his adolescence is hazy...And the children. What did they look like, when did they walk, what did they say, how did he feel? He knows events have taken place, important events of which he is now ignorant. (286)

He finds out that his view about people around him changed. Their picture in his mind is blurring and is fading gradually. There are gaps in his memory of his relationships with Elizabeth, his children and even his own life before his marriage that he cannot fill them. In fact, people around him are losing their validity as if they are just some unreal pictures. All these events are symptoms of going toward neuter state.

3.1.3 Lesje

Lesje could be considered the only character that moves toward neuter state faster than the others could. From the beginning of the story she compares human with dinosaurs, she has a neutral view about human, there is no difference between man and dinosaurs in her view: "men replaced dinosaurs, true, in her head as in geological time; but thinking about men has become too unrewarding." (44), even she finds it unsatisfying to think about human.

During the story as what happens to Elizabeth and Nate, it happens to her that step by step she finds all the important things and people around her invaluable.

One of the interesting points about Lesje is that she is neuter even in her daydreams; Atwood gives the first clues about her neutrality at the first parts of the novel. When she introduces Lesje to the reader, mentions: "Lesje crouches in the topmost frond-cluster of one of these trees, watching through binoculars, blissful, uninvolved. None of the dinosaurs takes the slightest interest in her. If they do happen to see or smell her, they will not notice her." (42) Dinosaurs do not notice her at all, which is sign of her neutrality.

Another sign of her neutrality is that in spite of feminist expectations to find feminist indications in female characters, Lesje thought and action shows her neuter. For instance, Lesje is afraid she has not suffered enough at the hands of men: "Though her own conservatism, unsuspected till now, appalls her, she wants to belong, to be seen to belong; she wants to be classifiable, a member of a group. There is already a group of Mrs. Schoenhofs: one is Nate's mother, the other is the mother of his children. Lesje isn't the mother of anyone; officially she is nothing." (457)

In all parts of the novel, it is easy to find indications that women meetings are frightening for Lesje because she is always worried about saying something wrong and being accused. Her interaction with other woman is limited to lunch and shopping, although she is happy with none of these activities. Even she takes part in Elizabeth party against her will: and Elizabeth uses the life boat game to humiliate her or in another word to show Lesje that she is a neuter thing:

But still, she can't think of a single reason why she should be permitted to remain alive. She isn't a good cook, and besides there's nothing much to cook. She can't build shelters. The CBC woman has used up the babies, and anyway Lesje has a narrow pelvis. What is she good for? None of the things she knows, knows well, is in any way necessary for survival. (272)

When Elizabeth asks her to give a reason, why she should stay alive, she is unable to give her answer. She appears as an unfinished character, who takes what other say about her.

In the last parts of the novel, she finds her dream to have a child with Nate something neutral:

She could have an abortion, stop time. She knows it's easier than it used to be. She hasn't yet told Nate, she doesn't need to tell him. Everything could go on as before. Which is not what she wants. She can't tell whether he will be delighted or angry or despairing; possibly, considering his feelings about his two other children, he will be all three. But whatever his reaction is, she knows her final decision will not be based on it. Nate has been displaced, if only slightly, from the center of the universe. (525-26)

Even she founds Nate neutral, she does not care anymore if he knows what is happening in her life or not? She decides to exclude him from her life.

3.2 Other

As it had been discussed in previous section, other expression was created by phallogocentric philosophy and used in binary opposition. Other is a negative expression given to woman; but Cixous gives a new positive meaning to this word, which is beyond binary opposition. When a person reaches to neuter state, she/he is ready to accept the other or become the other. We can find instances of other in *Life before Man*, all the characters in the novel are involved with the other that is human, other world etc. The point is that their approach to other is not positive; they are not successful in becoming the other or accepting the other. They all go through otherness or alterity just for a short time.

3.2.1 Lesje

As it had been mentioned before, the only character that we can consider her as the one who reaches to the neutral state sooner than the others is Lesje. When we meet her for the first time, she is almost on the middle of neutralization path. At the beginning of the novel, Atwood introduces her in this way:

Lesje is wandering in prehistory. Under a sun more orange than her own has ever been, in the middle of a swampy plain lush with thick-stalked plants and oversized ferns, a group of bony-plated stegosaurus is grazing...She is something so

totally alien to them that they will not be able to focus on her. When the aborigines sighted Captain Cook's ships, they ignored them because they knew such things could not exist. It's the next best thing to being invisible. (42-3)

She chooses prehistory as other world for herself. In her other world other creatures, dinosaurs and plants, live not human. It seems that she is more talented in communicating with none human other, because in this relationship, she is much free to create without any fear of objection or rejection:

Lesje knows, when she thinks about it, that this is probably not everyone's idea of a restful fantasy...In general she is clear-eyed, objective, and doctrinaire enough during business hours, which is all the more reason, she feels, for her extravagance here in the Jurassic swamps. She mixes eras, adds colors: why not a metallic blue Stegosaurus with red and yellow dots instead of the dull greys and browns postulated by the experts? Of which she, in a minor way, is one. (43)

In fact, by mixing era and adding colors she tries to bring dinosaurs to the present time because this world is more alive for her. She sees herself in a minor way one of these others that is result of one of this free creations.

She is aware that her daydreams are not acceptable by others and she is regressing:

Lesje knows she's regressing. She's been doing that a lot lately. This is a daydream left over from her childhood and early adolescence, shelved some time ago in favor of other speculations. Men replaced dinosaurs, true, in her head as in geological time; but thinking about men has become too unrewarding. Anyway, that part of her life is settled for the time being...Right now men means William. William regards them both as settled. He sees no reason why anything should ever change. Neither does Lesje, when she considers it. (44)

After a certain period of time she sees it necessary to replace dinosaurs with men, however she is not successful in accepting and communicating with other men. She is locked in a routine relationship with her boyfriend, William, without thinking about changes.

Most of the time Lesji's thoughts and action shows her different from other characters, and sometimes she unconsciously wants to be the other, free from other people's control. She is searching everywhere or anyway to be someone else:

Lesji has been spending quite a lot of time lately in these same shops, on her way home from work. She flips through the racks, looking for something that might become her, something she might become. She almost never buys anything. The dresses she tries on are long, flowing. Embroidered, very different from the denims and subdued classics she habitually wears. (59)

However, she is not brave enough to cope with this situation and make changes that are necessary to become the other.

One of interesting point about Lesji is that her view confirms Cixous' idea about other, she does not believe in anthropocentrism too. She believes in none-human other more than human:

the real question is: Does she care whether the human race survives or not? She doesn't know. The dinosaurs didn't survive and it wasn't the end of the world. In her bleaker moments, of which, she realizes, this is one, she feels the human race has it coming. Nature will think up something else. Or not, as the case maybe. (61)

She compares human race with dinosaurs and sees human being an unnecessary part of the world. She does not believe that if the human being does not survive, it will be the end of the world. Nature may replace them with some other thing.

3.2.2 Nate

As other characters in the novel, there are emblems of other around or in Nate himself, but he could be considered as the only character that is able to accept his otherness and in case of other people around him he is sometimes able to understand their otherness but is not able to communicate and understand them completely. For instance, deformity is considered as one of the emblems of otherness, and Nate possesses this feature physically:

An evolutionary mistake, the doctor said, meaning his height; men should have stopped at five feet. Now they were unbalanced. He told Nate that his right leg was infinitesimally shorter than his left, not uncommon in tall men, and he should wear a built-up heel. A piece of information about which Nate has done nothing. (94)

He accepts his deformity hence he does nothing about it that means he accepts his alterity.

As the reader goes on it is possible to find different proves of Nate's tendency to change and enter into alterity, even unintentionally:

Nate begins to shave. He lathers his throat, meaning to trim around the edges of his beard, free his neck and the underside of his jaw of bristles; but he finds the razor moving upwards, circling the edges of his beard like a lawnmower circling a lawn. He's shaved his beard half off before he knows that it's his intention to destroy it. From behind the coarse dark hair his face emerges. The face he hasn't seen in five years... his hands have decided it's time for him to be someone else. (86)

All these lines are prove of his intention toward alterity, he starts changes from his appearance, even he is eager to destroy his past identity in a way to become someone new.

He tries to go through relationship with other human, and sometimes he understands and likes its strangeness. His relation with Lesji is one instance; at first, he is somehow successful:

Holding Lesje would be like holding some strange plant, smooth, thin, with sudden orange flowers. Exotics, the florists called them. The light would be odd, the ground underfoot littered with bones. Over which she would have power. She would stand before him, the bearer of healing wisdom, swathed in veils. He would fall to his knees, dissolve. (131)

He is experiencing other relationship, and understands Lesji's strangeness.

His first encounters with Lesji are the signs of his temporal success in relationship with other:

But it's too soon to touch her. He knows she gets up in the morning, eats breakfast, goes to work where she does incomprehensible things, disappears at intervals into the ladies' room, but he doesn't want to contemplate these details. He knows nothing about her actual life and he doesn't want to know anything. Not too much, not yet. (132)

He wants her in herself, without any specific details, he wants to give her space and time and get closer to her gradually.

3.2.3 Elizabeth

Elizabeth is the only character who gains the least success in understanding and coping with the other. One of the main reasons is her bad memories of her childhood, which influenced her character deeply. She passed a very difficult childhood, her father left them and her mother became a drunker, left them and died. Thus, their aunt accepted their responsibility, and behaved them restrictedly. All these events decreased her flexibility, and consequently made her unable to get along with others. This is the reason that she rejects Chris firmly, which results in his suicide.

It is noteworthy to know that: The interesting point about Elizabeth is that her younger sister, Caroline, which died many years ago could be considered as her other. This point can be illustrated in this way, she did all the things that Elizabeth did not dare to do against their aunts will, she has behaved different from Elizabeth: They never went to church before they moved to Auntie Muriel's. Which Auntie Muriel might have known. Elizabeth won a prize for memorizing scripture verses. Caroline, on the other hand, made a spectacle of herself...Look, look, said Caroline, standing up. She was pointing at the stained glass window, the center one where Christ in purple knocked at a door...The minister frowned from his grape-draped pulpit and Caroline began to scream. Auntie Muriel took hold of her arm, but she broke free and pushed past the line of knees and ran down the aisle...She said afterwards that the purple was falling on her, but Auntie Muriel told everyone she'd just had an upset stomach. (156-57)

Some years later, Caroline stopped eating and moving and they took her to a mental institute that lead to her death: She lays on her side with her knees curled up to her chest, eyes closed, hands fisted. Elizabeth sat beside her, breathing the sickly smell of inert flesh. Damn you, Caroline, she whispered. I know you're in there. Sometimes Elizabeth has wondered whether Caroline did it on purpose, whether all along, inside that sealed body, she'd been conscious and waiting for the chance. She has wondered why. Sometimes, though, she's merely wondered why she herself has never done the same thing. At these times Caroline is clear, logical, pure; marble in contrast to her own slowly percolating flesh, the gasps of her decaying lungs and spongy, many fingered heart. (157-58)

Caroline's action and finally her death transformed her to the other; she could be considered as Elizabeth's other, who dared to perform actions, which Elizabeth wonders why she herself never dared to do? Elizabeth wonders about Caroline actions because she fails to understand her sister as the other and consequently fails to become other herself.

So "the voice says that the ancients used to believe people could become stars or constellations when they died, which was a poetic thought but of course not true." (152-53)

At the moment: Stars begin to fall, a few at a time, then more and more. They aren't really stars, the voice explains, merely meteorites. Meteorites come in showers. They are probably debris left over from exploded stars. As the stars fall, slides of paintings— crowd scenes, Dances of Death, burning buildings — (ash on the dome and the voice recites a few verses from Shakespeare. Then the voice produces some Northern Lights and begins to discuss their causes. Some people claim to have heard them, a high rustling noise, but this has never been recorded. Elizabeth feels a thin whisper close to her ear. (155-56)

We would see: Elizabeth, shivering, stares up at the sky, which isn't really a sky but a complicated machine with tiny lights projected by slides and push-buttons. People do not become stars of any kind when they die. Comets do not really cause plagues. Really there is nobody in the sky. Really there is no round sphere of darkness, no black sun, no frozen silver man. (159)

It is clear "they are unobtrusive and they pay their rent, nervously, always a day ahead. Are they fighting a long war to oust her? There are no signs of it. These paintings are from a place so utterly alien to her that it might as well be on the moon." (183)

So to speak: she hadn't found those people in the sixties who'd torn their cats apart and jumped out of high-rise windows because they thought they were birds in the least glamorous: she'd found them stupid. Anyone who had ever heard those voices before or seen what they could do would have known what they were saying. (190)

4. Conclusion

As it had been discussed before, Cixous emphasizes on more humanity and considers two necessary factors, neuter state and otherness to achieve this issue. The study of characters in *Life before Man* showed that Atwood tried to picture the lack of these two factors in their lives, which is the result of characters inability to understand and follow them. The result is the relationships that are based on wrong factors and consequently instead of shaping new possibility leads to destruction, failure and loss.

When we have a close look on every character, it becomes clear that reality is different from what appears in the story, Elizabeth and her family life is a powerful statement of reality that is unhappy and could be considered zero. Lesji is another character that her attitude and actions shows the wrong effect of old believes and culture on human life. At the end of novel, she finds all the things around her invaluable and decides to break up with Nate. She is going to make herself ready for single parenthood.

At the beginning when Nate decides to start a relationship with Lesji he is somehow successful, but at the end he does not succeed and tries to escape from Lesje too. He is unable to manage his relationship with his wife, his children or Lesji and he is unable to manage none of his jobs, as lawyer or toy makers. He is unable to see beyond limitation of his own view that results in his failure to understand and accept the other.

It seems that the novel finishes in the point that characters are unfinished; it means they are in a neutral state without any result or outcome. They are unable to put a step beyond neutrality to reach the other or become the other and if happens it is just for a very short time and in one or two cases, without any result. We can see all of them in despair and loneliness, which happens because they are not able to accept other. This situation is not limited to the characters in this novel, it includes modern human and his/her believes, costumes and ways of life.

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