

# ENTANGLED FEMININITIES: THE COMPLEXITIES OF FEMALE BONDING IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE BLIND ASSASSIN*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the intricate dynamics of female relationships in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Atwood presents a sophisticated portrayal of female bonding that surpasses conventional narratives of sisterhood and friendship, highlighting the complex interplay of intimacy, rivalry, and betrayal. The novel's multi-layered structure integrates a fictional memoir, a science fiction narrative, and a contemporary storyline. It also mirrors the multifaceted nature of the female connections it depicts. This paper investigates how Atwood subverts traditional notions of solidarity by conducting a detailed analysis of the relationships between Iris and Laura Chase, as well as the broader female characters in their social environment. By exposing the underlying tensions and contradictions within these relationships, Atwood reveals the complexities of female bonds that are not easily reconciled with simplistic ideals of unity or support. The paper situates these relationships within the novel's broader social, historical, and patriarchal contexts, demonstrating how Atwood redefines the possibilities and limitations of female intimacy and alliance. This critical exploration offers insights into how Atwood's narrative challenges prevailing assumptions about women's agency and identity, providing a reflective commentary on the constraints imposed by a patriarchal society and the ways in which female characters navigate these constraints.

**Keywords:** Sisterhood; Obligations; Expectation; Trauma; Conflict; Oppression

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* is a sophisticated narrative that scrutinises conventional representations of female relationships through its innovative structure and thematic depth. Atwood's portrayal of female bonding is notably nuanced, transcending traditional narratives of sisterhood and friendship by emphasising the intricate interplay of intimacy, rivalry, and betrayal. The novel employs a multi-layered narrative structure, integrating a fictional memoir, a science fiction story, and a contemporary plot, thereby reflecting the complexities inherent in the female connections it portrays. Central to this exploration are the relationships between Iris Chase and her sister Laura, which serve as a focal point for understanding broader themes of affection and conflict. The novel's structure mirrors the intricate nature of these relationships, presenting them as multifaceted rather than idealized. Through this approach, Atwood subverts conventional idealisations of female solidarity, instead highlighting the contradictions and tensions that characterise such bonds.

The interplay between intimacy and rivalry is a prominent theme in *The Blind Assassin*. The relationship between Iris and Laura is marked by both deep affection and significant strain, encapsulating the duality inherent in sibling connections. Their interactions reflect a broader commentary on female alliances, where support and enmity coexist. Atwood's portrayal challenges simplistic notions of sisterhood and friendship, suggesting that female bonds are shaped by various influences, including personal ambitions, societal expectations, and familial obligations. Moreover, Atwood situates these relationships within a broader socio-historical and patriarchal context, illustrating how external pressures and gender norms impact the nature of female bonding. The novel critiques the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society, demonstrating how these constraints affect women's capacity to form and sustain authentic connections. Atwood's exploration offers a critical reflection on how societal structures shape and often undermine female relationships.

The narrative structure of *The Blind Assassin* itself is integral to reflecting the complexities of female bonding. By interweaving multiple narrative layers, Atwood creates a rich tapestry that allows for a nuanced exploration of her characters' relationships. The fictional memoir and science fiction story embedded within the novel provide alternative perspectives on the central themes, adding depth to the portrayal of female connections. This multi-layered approach not only enhances the thematic richness of the novel but also underscores the fragmented and multifaceted nature of female relationships. This paper will examine Iris and Laura Chase's relationship, as well as the broader network of female characters, to explore how Atwood challenges traditional notions of solidarity and reveals the underlying tensions within these bonds. The analysis will focus on how Atwood's narrative exposes the limitations and possibilities of female intimacy, offering insights into how female characters navigate their social and personal constraints.

Through this critical examination, the paper aims to highlight how *The Blind Assassin* redefines the potential and constraints of female bonding, providing a reflective commentary on the implications for women's agency and identity within a patriarchal framework. By engaging with Atwood's complex portrayal of female relationships, this

analysis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature can illuminate the multifaceted nature of female connections and the societal forces that shape them.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

“A commemoration of wounds endured and resented” [1]: Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* as feminist memoir. Bouson’s article explores Atwood’s novel through the lens of feminist theory, focusing on how the text functions as a memoir that commemorates personal and collective wounds. Bouson argues that *The Blind Assassin* reflects feminist themes by depicting the struggles and resistances of its female characters. The analysis highlights how the novel serves as a narrative that critiques patriarchal structures and represents women’s experiences of oppression and agency.

The laugh of the Medusa. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” [2] Cixous presents foundational ideas in feminist literary theory, particularly the notion of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing). While not exclusively about *The Blind Assassin*, Cixous’ theories provide a critical framework for understanding Atwood’s narrative strategies and feminist themes. The essay’s ideas can help contextualize the feminist dimensions in Atwood’s work, especially regarding the representation of female identity and voice.

Myths of war and peace [3]: Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* and Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees*. Gillett’s comparative analysis of *The Blind Assassin* and Ann-Marie MacDonald’s *Fall on Your Knees* examines how both novels engage with myths of war and peace. Gillett explores how Atwood’s novel uses historical and mythical frameworks to address themes of conflict, memory, and identity. This comparative approach enriches the understanding of Atwood’s thematic concerns within a broader literary and cultural context.

Love, concealment, and Laura Chase: Review of *The Blind Assassin* [4]. *An Artful Sequence of Words*. Gould’s review provides a detailed critique of Atwood’s novel, focusing on the themes of love and concealment as they relate to the character of Laura Chase. The review offers insights into the novel’s narrative complexity and the interplay between personal and historical narratives. Gould’s perspective is valuable for understanding the intricacies of Atwood’s storytelling and the novel’s thematic richness.

From an obscured gaze to a seeing eye? [5] Iris as victim, villain, and avenger in the role of writer-as-assassin in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*. Hembrough’s article examines the character of Iris in *The Blind Assassin* through the metaphor of the writer-as-assassin. Hembrough argues that Iris embodies multiple roles—victim, villain, and avenger—reflecting the complexities of her narrative voice and perspective. This analysis sheds light on Atwood’s use of unreliable narration and the thematic implications of Iris’s role within the novel.

Waiting for the end: Closure in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*. Ingersoll’s study focuses on the theme of closure in *The Blind Assassin* [6]. The article explores how the novel’s multiple narrative layers and complex structure contribute to its exploration of resolution and endings. Ingersoll’s analysis provides insights into how Atwood constructs narrative closure and the impact of this construction on the reader’s understanding of the text.

This literature review highlights the diverse critical approaches to *The Blind Assassin*, from feminist readings and thematic analyses to narrative structure and character studies. Each source contributes to a deeper understanding of Atwood’s novel and its place within contemporary literary discourse.

## 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

When researching “Entangled Femininities: The Complexities of Female Bonding in Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*,” your methodology should be designed to comprehensively explore how female relationships and bonding are depicted and how they contribute to the novel’s broader themes. Here’s a structured approach to developing your research methodology:

### 1. Research Design

**Qualitative Analysis:** Given the thematic focus on female bonding and complexities, a qualitative approach is most appropriate. This allows for an in-depth exploration of characters’ relationships, narrative structure, and thematic elements.

### 2. Literature Review

Conduct a thorough review of existing literature on *The Blind Assassin* to understand current interpretations and identify gaps in the analysis of female bonding and relationships.

Include feminist literary theory, theories of female friendship, and critical discussions of female characters in literature.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

**Feminist Literary Theory:** Use feminist theory to examine how gender and power dynamics shape female relationships in the novel.

**Theories of Female Bonding:** Incorporate theories on female friendship and bonding to analyze the nature of relationships between female characters.

### 4. Data Collection

**Textual Analysis:** Perform a close reading of *The Blind Assassin*, focusing on passages that depict female relationships, interactions, and character development. Pay particular attention to dialogue, narrative voice, and symbolic elements.

**Character Analysis:** Analyze the relationships between key female characters such as Iris and Laura Chase, and their influence on the narrative and themes of the novel.

### 5. Analytical Methods

**Thematic Analysis:** Identify and analyze themes related to female bonding, such as solidarity, rivalry, and betrayal. Explore how these themes are developed through narrative and character interactions.

**Narrative Analysis:** Examine how Atwood's narrative structure (e.g., the use of multiple perspectives and unreliable narration) impacts the portrayal of female relationships.

**Symbolic and Metaphorical Analysis:** Investigate the use of symbols and metaphors related to femininity and bonding. Consider how these elements contribute to the novel's exploration of female identity and relationships.

#### 6. Comparative Analysis

Compare Atwood's depiction of female bonding in *The Blind Assassin* with other literary works by Atwood and other authors. This can provide insights into how unique or representative Atwood's portrayal is within the broader literary context.

#### 7. Data Interpretation

**Contextualize Findings:** Place your findings within the broader context of feminist literary criticism and theories of female bonding.

**Discuss Implications:** Explore the implications of your findings for understanding female relationships in literature and how Atwood's novel contributes to this discourse.

#### 8. Ethical Considerations

Ensure that interpretations and analyses are conducted with respect for the text and its characters. Avoid imposing external biases on the narrative.

#### 9. Limitations

Acknowledge any limitations in your study, such as potential biases in interpretation or constraints due to the scope of the research.

#### 10. Conclusion and Recommendations

Summarize key findings regarding the complexities of female bonding in *The Blind Assassin*.

Offer recommendations for further research on female relationships in literature or additional studies on Atwood's works.

This methodology will help you systematically explore the intricacies of female bonding in *The Blind Assassin* and contribute to a deeper understanding of Atwood's narrative techniques and thematic concerns.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 The Narrative Technique and Female Bonding

In *The Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood utilises several narrative techniques to explore and portray female relationships. Atwood employs a layered narrative structure with multiple perspectives that enrich the portrayal of female relationships. The novel intertwines a contemporary story with a fictional narrative within the novel. The primary story is told from the viewpoint of Iris Chase, an elderly woman reflecting on her past, while the embedded novel, also titled *The Blind Assassin*, offers a fictional account that parallels and contrasts with Iris's life. This dual narrative allows readers to see the complexities of female relationships from different angles, particularly how Iris's relationships with her sister Laura and other women evolve over time and under different circumstances. The fragmented nature of the narrative, shifting between past and present, as well as between different narrative forms (such as letters, newspaper clippings, and the embedded story), mirrors the fractured and multifaceted nature of Iris's relationships. "Atwood deftly weaves together the various strands of her narrative, slowly revealing the unsettling connections between past and present and the world of social reality and science fiction, she calls attention to the endless repetition of class warfare and violence against women" [1].

This fragmentation reflects the way in which memories and relationships are often pieced together from various perspectives, highlighting the complexity and ambiguity of female bonds. Narrative is not only fragmented but also unreliable. The unreliable narrator creates a "bonding" effect [7]. This occurs when the reader feels engaged or even complicit in uncovering the truth behind the narrator's inconsistencies or omissions. The narrator's unreliability invites the reader to actively participate in constructing the story's meaning or to empathize with the narrator's perspective, even if flawed. Nünning highlights that the unreliability often found in fictional narratives is not seen as threatening or problematic to the audience. Unlike in real-life contexts where unreliable information can lead to misunderstandings, in fiction, it is part of the creative experience. "The narrative becomes metafictional not only in the mis-en-abyme effect of its novel-within-a-novel construction, but also in its masquerading as a novel being generated before the reader's eyes." (Ingersoll, 2003: 546) Readers are generally aware that they are engaging with a constructed narrative that unreliable narration brings does not misled them. "The greatest difference is that unreliability in fictional narratives does not pose any threat to the audience" [8].

Atwood uses inner monologue and stream of consciousness techniques to delve into Iris Chase's thoughts and feelings. This approach provides an intimate look at Iris's internal struggles and her evolving perceptions of her relationships with other women, such as her sister Laura and her daughter, as well as her complicated relationship with her husband. These techniques offer insight into how Iris processes and re-evaluates her relationships over time. The embedded novel within *The Blind Assassin* serves as a metafictional element that comments on and parallels Iris's own story. This fictional story within the story, which features a female protagonist and themes of escape and entrapment, reflects and amplifies the issues Iris faces in her own life. It provides a commentary on the roles and constraints imposed on women,

both in the fictional narrative and in the real world of Iris's life. Atwood uses rich symbolism and imagery to explore female relationships. For example, the recurring motif of the blind assassin, as well as the various references to eyes and sight, symbolise both the clarity and blindness that can characterise female connections. These symbols underscore the themes of perception, revelation, and concealment in Iris's relationships.

The novel includes letters and other documents that provide different perspectives on the characters and their relationships. These elements offer additional viewpoints on Iris's interactions with her sister Laura and other key figures, adding depth to the portrayal of their relationships. Atwood's narrative techniques in *The Blind Assassin* create a rich and complex portrayal of female relationships, highlighting their intricacies, conflicts, and enduring significance. The use of multiple perspectives, fragmented narratives, and symbolic elements all contribute to a deeper understanding of how women relate to one another across different times and circumstances.

Atwood's narrative structure amplifies this complexity by embedding multiple layers of storytelling within the novel. The presence of the fictionalized science fiction tale within *The Blind Assassin*—written by Laura and featuring star-crossed lovers fleeing from an oppressive regime—serves as a parallel narrative that both mirrors and distorts the sisters' lived experiences. This metafictional element provides readers with insights into Laura's inner world, offering glimpses of her suffering, her desires, and her interpretation of the events that shaped her life. Yet, because these stories are mediated through Iris's recounting, they become doubly filtered—once through Laura's imagination and again through Iris's memory. This layered narrative approach complicates the quest for redemption by emphasising the subjective nature of memory and the difficulty of ever truly knowing another person's truth.

## 4.2 The Role of Sisterhood

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* intricately explores the theme of sisterhood, interweaving it through a complex tapestry of memory, trauma, love, and betrayal. Through the nuanced relationship between the sisters Iris and Laura Chase, Atwood dissects the psychological, social, and emotional dimensions of sisterhood, ultimately presenting it as a multifaceted bond. The complexity of this bond is illustrated in Iris's protective instincts and her deep sense of duty toward Laura, which is rooted in both affection and obligation. This complexity is captured in Iris's reflection: "I couldn't let her see how much I was suffering. She had to believe I was strong, that I could protect her, always" [9]. Atwood employs the relationship between Iris and Laura to explore how sisterhood is shaped by a combination of loyalty, guilt, and the struggle for individual identity. This is an integral part of twentieth century feminism to show the survival of women. In the same way, this survival is necessitated by its dependence 'écriture féminine'. In her influential essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous argues that women have been systematically excluded from the literary canon and denied the means to express their own experiences and identities. She states that women must bring themselves into writing within this framework; Margaret Atwood's novel can be interpreted as an embodiment of Cixous's demand for female self-representation. Iris Chase, the protagonist and narrator, uses the form of a fictional autobiography to assert her presence. "Woman must put herself into the text -as into the world and into history -by her own environment." (1976, 875)

From the outset of *The Blind Assassin*, Iris Chase is depicted as the protector of her younger sister, Laura. The early death of their mother and their father's emotional withdrawal thrust Iris into a quasi-parental role. As a teenager, Iris assumes the responsibility of caring for Laura, a role that forces her to mature rapidly and prioritize her sister's needs above her own. In her narrative, Iris frequently reflects on her role as Laura's caretaker following their mother's death. She notes, "I had to be the one who looked after her, kept her in line, made sure she didn't get into trouble or disgrace us in some way. I was the one who was responsible" (Atwood, 89). This passage not only underscores Iris's sense of duty but also hints at the burden of responsibility she feels toward Laura. The phrases "kept her in line" and "didn't get into trouble" imply that Iris perceives her role as one of constant vigilance and correction, revealing the strain of this obligation on her own sense of self.

This responsibility is further compounded by the social and familial expectations imposed on Iris. Her role as Laura's protector is not merely a personal choice; it is shaped by the societal norms of the period and the pressures arising from their deteriorating family circumstances. As J. Brooks Bouson observes, "Iris enacts the role of the dutiful and self-sacrificial daughter when she enters a paternally arranged marriage..." (Bouson, 252). This observation underscores how Iris's actions are driven by a sense of duty imposed by her father and the broader societal expectations of women. In agreeing to marry Richard Griffen, a wealthy industrialist, Iris is making a profound personal sacrifice not out of love but out of a perceived necessity to protect Laura and secure their future. This sense of duty and sacrifice is critical to understanding the psychological dimensions of Iris's character and her relationship with Laura.

As the narrative progresses, Iris reflects on her efforts to shield Laura from the harsh realities of their family's financial decline and their father's deteriorating mental state: "I kept most things from her — the worst things, the things that would have done her in. I wanted to keep her in a cocoon, safe from harm" (Atwood, 145). This statement demonstrates Iris's profound desire to protect Laura from painful truths, underscoring her protective nature. Yet, this protection exacts a cost, both for Iris, who must bear the weight of these secrets alone, and for Laura, who remains in a state of naïveté. By sheltering Laura from the darker realities of their lives, Iris also prevents her from fully understanding their circumstances and developing the resilience necessary to navigate them. This dynamic reveals the inherent tension in their relationship: while Iris's actions are motivated by love and concern, they also reflect a paternalistic approach that restricts Laura's growth and autonomy.

Iris's protective instincts are further complicated by the love she feels for Laura, which is intertwined with feelings of resentment and guilt. The marriage to Richard Griffen, orchestrated by their father, is depicted as the ultimate act of self-sacrifice by Iris. She is willing to compromise her happiness and personal freedom for the sake of protecting Laura from poverty and instability. This decision weighs heavily on Iris, as she finds herself trapped in a loveless and oppressive marriage. "Iris insists that marrying Richard is the sensible thing to do, even though she is filled with dread at the thought of her approaching marriage" (Bouson, 257). This sense of dread reflects the emotional toll of her decision, suggesting that her sense of duty to Laura overrides her own desires and needs.

Furthermore, the theme of sisterhood in the novel is also defined by an underlying sense of betrayal. While Iris is committed to protecting Laura, she also makes choices that betray her own desires and well-being. This internal conflict becomes a central aspect of Iris's character and adds to the complexity of their relationship. As Elizabeth Gould notes, Iris is "weighed down by her father's love as well as the responsibility for the younger and too trusting Laura, a responsibility thrust upon her by parents and housekeeper Reenie" (Gould, 2017). This responsibility is not only externally imposed but is also internalized by Iris, who views herself as Laura's guardian, even at the cost of her own happiness.

Atwood further complicates the theme of sisterhood by exploring the psychological effects of these sacrifices on Iris. The burden of responsibility she carries is compounded by a sense of guilt that persists into her old age. She is continually haunted by the choices she made and their impact on Laura's life. This unresolved guilt suggests that Iris's role as protector is as much a prison for her as it is a source of strength. Her narrative, filled with reflections and justifications, is an attempt to make sense of her past actions and their consequences.

The narrative structure of *The Blind Assassin* also enhances the exploration of sisterhood. The novel's fragmented structure, shifting between Iris's first-person account, Laura's posthumous novel within the novel, and various historical documents, mirrors the disjointed and often contradictory nature of Iris's recollections. This narrative style emphasizes how memory, trauma, and guilt shape Iris's perception of her sister and their relationship. By presenting the story in this manner, Atwood allows the reader to perceive the layered complexity of their bond, which is characterized by both profound love and deep-seated pain.

In sum, Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* presents sisterhood as a deeply complex and multifaceted bond, shaped by a combination of loyalty, love, duty, guilt, and betrayal. Through the relationship between Iris and Laura Chase, Atwood delves into the psychological, social, and emotional dimensions of sisterhood, revealing it to be a connection that is constantly evolving under the pressures of external circumstances and internal conflicts. Atwood's narrative techniques, including her use of metafiction and fragmented storytelling, further enrich this exploration, providing a profound commentary on memory, trauma, and the inescapable ties that bind.

### 4.3 Guilt and Haunting Legacy of Sisterhood

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* delves deeply into themes of guilt and redemption, particularly as they relate to the complex dynamics of sisterhood. At the heart of the novel lies Iris Chase's profound sense of guilt over her sister Laura's tragic death. "I should have known what she would do, but I didn't. I should have taken better care of her. All I could think of was how much I wanted to be out of that house. I did it for money. I was her sister. I should have seen it coming." (55) This guilt permeates the narrative and serves as a driving force behind Iris's actions and decisions, especially her decision to write her memoirs. Iris's sense of responsibility for Laura's death is multifaceted and layered; she feels culpable for a range of choices she made throughout their lives, from her marriage to Richard Griffen, a manipulative and controlling man, to her own extramarital affair with Alex Thomas. "I thought I was doing the right thing for both of us, for Laura and me. But it wasn't right; it was a trap. I see that now. It was a trap for Laura." (112) Ultimately, Iris is haunted by her survival when Laura did not, and Atwood uses this pervasive guilt as a central theme to explore the possibilities—and limitations—of redemption through storytelling. "How could I have let it happen? If I hadn't been so blind, if I hadn't been so wrapped up in my own grief and longing. Laura needed me, but I was not there for her." (273)

Iris's guilt is not a single-dimensional feeling but a complex and evolving sentiment that manifests itself in various forms throughout the novel. Atwood presents this guilt as something that haunts Iris continuously, shaping her present and coloring her interpretation of past events. The most powerful aspect of Iris's guilt is her sense of failure as an older sister who was unable to protect Laura from the abuses and manipulations of Richard Griffen, her husband. Marrying Richard was a decision initially made to secure the financial future of the Chase family, but Iris soon realizes the cost of this decision in terms of Laura's wellbeing. Richard's manipulative and predatory behavior towards Laura is something Iris becomes aware of only later, and her inability to shield her sister from his advances becomes one of the most searing sources of her guilt.

Additionally, Iris feels guilty for her affair with Alex Thomas, a revolutionary writer who captivates both sisters. The affair is not merely an act of personal betrayal but also a factor that contributes to Laura's emotional turmoil. Laura's affection for Alex is palpable, and Iris's clandestine relationship with him further strains the fragile relationship between the sisters. The affair symbolizes Iris's pursuit of a fleeting personal happiness, but it simultaneously becomes a source of anguish for Laura, contributing to her psychological unraveling. "I was thinking about myself, not about what it would do to Laura. I should have known better; I should have been more careful. But I was lonely, and I was selfish." (362) For Iris, the guilt of having a relationship with Alex that potentially exacerbated Laura's instability lingers heavily, amplifying her sense of responsibility for her sister's tragic fate.

Iris's decision to write her memoirs, a narrative interspersed with her reflections and memories, becomes both a confession and an attempt at redemption. "I write these words now in the hope that by telling the truth, I might bring some justice to Laura. She was the good one, the innocent one, and I was the one who failed her." (p. 408) Atwood presents storytelling as a potential means for Iris to confront her guilt and seek absolution, both for herself and on behalf of Laura. The act of writing allows Iris to delve into her past, recounting the events leading up to Laura's death in an effort to understand them better and to explain her actions to herself and to a broader audience. By documenting her life and the choices she made, Iris hopes to offer a posthumous form of justice to Laura, whose life was cut short and whose voice was silenced. "I wanted it to be her voice, Laura's voice, but it ended up as mine. Or maybe it's both of ours, intertwined and inseparable. I can no longer tell where she ends and I begin." (p. 421) Through this act, Atwood suggests that storytelling itself can serve as a powerful form of redemption—a means to reclaim agency, confront unresolved guilt, and seek forgiveness. Iris's memoir can be viewed as a plea for understanding, a narrative constructed in the hope that the reader, or perhaps Laura herself from beyond the grave, might absolve her. Nevertheless, Atwood makes it clear that redemption is not easily achieved. Iris's attempts to come to terms with her past are constantly undermined by her own unreliable memory and by the fact that Laura's version of events is forever lost to time. The memoir becomes an incomplete and ambiguous document, one that reflects the inherent difficulties of fully understanding or atoning for past actions. Atwood uses this ambiguity to explore the limits of redemption and to highlight how guilt can persist, unresolved and unacknowledged, through generations. The fragmented narrative structure and the unreliable nature of Iris's recollections suggest that some truths are irretrievable, and some wounds cannot be healed. However, Atwood complicates this process of redemption by intertwining Iris's memoir with the novel within the novel, *The Blind Assassin*, a work attributed to Laura but published under Iris's name after Laura's death. This metafictional layer serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities of the sisters' relationship and the deep entanglement of their identities. By publishing Laura's novel under her own name, Iris both preserves and erases Laura's voice—an act that further complicates her feelings of guilt and attempts at redemption. The inner narrative becomes a reflection of Laura's psyche, and yet it is mediated through Iris's own perspective, blurring the lines between whose story is truly being told. In many ways, Iris's memoir can be interpreted as an attempt to restore Laura's story to its rightful owner, to acknowledge her sister's pain and give her a voice that was denied in life. Through this, Atwood posits that sisterhood, despite its inherent tensions and conflicts, holds the potential for understanding and reconciliation, even in the shadow of profound guilt.

Atwood also emphasizes that the pursuit of redemption can be an isolating journey, particularly when the individual grapples with self-recrimination and the irreversibility of their actions. Iris's sense of isolation is heightened by her role as the last surviving member of the Chase family, burdened with the task of bearing witness to her family's disintegration and her own perceived failures. "I thought I could write my way out of it, but it's not that simple. There is no undoing what was done. I can only tell my side of it, my half of the story." (p. 511) Her memoir becomes a solitary exercise in reflection and atonement, a written testimony to a life marked by decisions she cannot change and a sister she cannot bring back. In writing her story, Iris is not only grappling with her own culpability but is also attempting to wrestle with the broader implications of memory, history, and narrative control.

Atwood's *novel* presents a nuanced exploration of guilt and redemption within the context of sisterhood. Iris Chase's haunting sense of responsibility for Laura's death drives the narrative forward, compelling her to write her memoirs as both a confession and a plea for forgiveness. "Every night, I lie awake, thinking of Laura. I see her face, hear her voice. She would speak to me, if she could, and what would she say? Would she forgive me?" (p. 478) However, Atwood's layered narrative structure, with its unreliable narrator and its story within a story, complicates this journey toward redemption. Through Iris's fragmented and subjective account, Atwood interrogates the possibility of truly understanding the past or reconciling with it. "Our lives were bound together like a twisted cord. I thought I could cut myself free, but now I see that it was never possible. She was always a part of me, and I of her." (556) In doing so, she reveals that redemption is not a guaranteed or even a fully attainable outcome but rather a continuous and fraught process of self-examination, storytelling, and, ultimately, acceptance of the ambiguities that define human experience.

Gillett has approached this guilt in a different direction, he believes iris has exposed her sister to the "pedophilic attentions of her status-hungry husband" (2012: 10) It suggests that Iris has put her sister in a vulnerable position, allowing her husband, who is portrayed as predator, to exploit her sister. This choice of language implies a significant level of responsibility on Iris's part, suggesting that she is not merely a passive observer but an active agent who, through negligence or willful ignorance, has failed to protect her sister from harm. The harshness of this interpretation emphasizes the ethical and moral complexities of Iris's role, as she is positioned either as a passive enabler or an active participant in her sister's exploitation. The phrase "exposed her sister" indicates that Iris has made a conscious or unconscious decision to place her sister in harm's way, leading to a betrayal of familial duty and trust. This betrayal is not a minor oversight but a fundamental failure of her responsibilities as a sister and a protector. By allowing her sister to be subjected to the predatory nature of her husband, Iris becomes a part of the destructive cycle of abuse and manipulation. Her lack of action—whether motivated by fear, a desire to maintain the social status quo, or sheer ignorance—reveals a troubling moral ambiguity. The concept of betrayal here is not simply about a failure to act; it suggests an emotional and psychological distance that has allowed Iris to prioritize other concerns, such as her marriage or her societal role, over the safety and well-being of her sister.

However, Atwood's portrayal of Iris is more nuanced than Gillett's interpretation allows. While Iris can be seen as complicit in her husband's actions, this complicity is intertwined with her own sense of powerlessness. Trapped in a loveless marriage with Richard, who is manipulative and abusive, Iris is constrained by the very structures that demand

her loyalty. Her loyalty to her husband though rooted in societal expectations and possibly self-preservation, directly conflicts with her loyalty to her sister. This conflict reflects Atwood's exploration of the complexities of loyalty within familial and marital relationships. Iris's inability to fully protect her sister, Laura, is not merely a consequence of negligence but also of her own victimization within a patriarchal and oppressive marriage. Iris's protective instincts, while genuine, often result in choices that inadvertently contribute to Laura's suffering. This contradiction highlights the paradox of sisterly loyalty that Atwood seeks to explore: it is not simply a matter of love or devotion but is shaped by external pressures and internal conflicts. Iris's loyalty is further complicated by the broader social and familial expectations that surround her. As Richard's wife, she is expected to uphold a certain image and maintain the stability of her marriage, even at the expense of her sister's safety. The complexity of this situation is evident when Iris fails to prevent Laura from discovering the truth about Richard's abuse, a revelation that leads to Laura's emotional breakdown and eventual suicide. In this sense, Atwood presents sisterly loyalty as a double-edged sword—it can be both a source of strength and a burden that leads to profound psychological distress.

The notion of loyalty as a form of entrapment is a recurring theme in Atwood's work. For Iris, loyalty is inextricably linked to silence. She chooses to remain silent about many of the truths she knows—Richard's predation, her affair with Alex Thomas, and her knowledge of Laura's suffering—out of a misguided sense of duty to protect Laura from even harsher realities. However, this silence ultimately contributes to Laura's isolation and despair. Atwood shows how loyalty, when coupled with secrecy, becomes a corrosive force that undermines the very relationships it seeks to preserve. This is evident in the way Iris's silence not only fails to protect Laura but also facilitates her continued victimization. The protective silence Iris maintains is, in reality, a tool of oppression, serving the interests of the abuser rather than the abused.

by suggesting that it is intertwined with personal survival. Iris's loyalty to Laura, while deep Atwood complicates the notion of sisterly loyalty further, is not enough to overcome her entrapment in a life dominated by Richard's control. Her decisions are often dictated by her need to survive within the confines of her marriage, where her autonomy is severely restricted. The irony is that while Iris believes she is protecting Laura by staying silent, she is, in fact, enabling Richard's predatory behavior and perpetuating the cycle of abuse. This contradictory dynamic reveals the limitations of traditional notions of loyalty, especially within patriarchal structures that prioritize male authority and control over female agency and solidarity. The relationship between Iris and Laura is emblematic of Atwood's broader critique of societal norms that govern women's behavior and relationships. In many ways, their relationship is a microcosm of the struggles faced by women who are caught between competing loyalties—to their families, to societal expectations, and to themselves. Iris's internal conflict is a manifestation of this broader struggle. She is torn between her duty as a wife and her responsibility as a sister, between her desire for personal freedom and the expectations imposed upon her by society. Her failure to navigate these conflicting loyalties without causing harm to herself and Laura speaks to the broader theme of female disempowerment in a patriarchal world.

Moreover, Atwood does not let Iris off the hook entirely. While she is a victim of her circumstances, she is also complicit in maintaining the very structures that oppress her. Her silence and inaction, while understandable given her situation, are also forms of complicity that have real and devastating consequences for Laura. Atwood thus raises important questions about the nature of agency and the extent to which individuals are responsible for their actions within oppressive systems. While Iris is certainly constrained by her circumstances, she also makes choices that contribute to Laura's suffering. This ambiguity is what makes her character so compelling and tragic—she is both a victim and, to some extent, a perpetrator.

Gillett's interpretation of Iris as a figure of betrayal and complicity in her sister's exploitation offers a harsh but necessary perspective on the dynamics at play. However, Atwood's narrative provides a more nuanced exploration of these dynamics, showing how loyalty, power, and silence intersect in complex ways. Iris is not simply a villain or a passive bystander; she is a deeply flawed character whose actions are shaped by both her circumstances and her inner conflicts. Her story is one of moral ambiguity, where love and loyalty are entangled with betrayal and harm. Atwood challenges the reader to consider the limits of agency and the consequences of silence in the face of exploitation, ultimately presenting a narrative that is as thought-provoking as it is unsettling.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Atwood's portrayal of female relationships in her novels is marked by an intricate web of entanglements—of love, rivalry, solidarity, betrayal, and survival—that challenge simplistic notions of sisterhood or female unity. Her narratives often delve into the power dynamics, societal expectations, and psychological conflicts that shape women's lives and their interactions with each other. Atwood complicates the notion of female bonding by showing how it is influenced by intersecting forces of patriarchy, social expectations, and personal traumas. These forces create a web of entangled femininities, where loyalty can morph into complicity, love into control, and protection into oppression. The relationships between Atwood's female characters reveal how societal pressures and internal conflicts limit their agency, forcing them to navigate their identities and loyalties within oppressive structures. This results in relationships that are as much about survival as they are about solidarity, demonstrating that female bonding is a dynamic and contested space within Atwood's fiction. Ultimately, Atwood's work does not provide a singular definition of female relationships; rather, it challenges readers to reconsider the complexities of women's experiences with each other. Atwood's portrayal suggests that true solidarity among women requires confronting these complexities—recognizing the strength and the fragility of their bonds, the necessity for empathy, and the courage to break the silences that so

often sustain cycles of harm. In doing so, Atwood opens up possibilities for understanding femininity not as a monolithic experience, but as a varied and evolving negotiation of power, identity, and resistance.

### **COMPETING INTERESTS**

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