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Exploring (ab)normalcy and neurosis in Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988)

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Abstract:

*Social normalcy can be observed as an ambivalent concept, as it is understood differently in various social, spatial, and temporal contexts. The notion of (ab)normalcy is a result of social normativity, i.e. presumptive codes and customs based on repetitive performance in a social environment, which functions under the guise of social conformism or social restrictions. Studying this social phenomenon from a psychological perspective demonstrates further intricacies and brings to light its detrimental impacts on the individual psyche in the form of neurosis. In globalized, multicultural societies, any singular idea of being normal automatically should become void, which is not the case. Rather, only a set of standardized traits related to beauty, colour, body shape, size, and religion find validation in societies and thus are deemed "normal". This article aims to scrutinize different facets of social (ab)normalcy and maladjustment in relation to neurotic identity formation in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988). It intends to establish that there is a corresponding role of social*

(ab)normalcy in provoking and sustaining the condition of neurosis in modern societies. To intervene in this discussion, the study draws upon Karen Horney's theory of neurosis and George Serban's scholarship on (ab)normalcy. It contributes to both the literary and the theoretical fields by employing this synergistic framework of inquiry to scrutinize Atwood's novel.

Introduction

From the outset of her career, Margaret Atwood's fictional works, such as *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), and *Cat's Eye* (1988), have explored the experiences of women in a predominantly male and chauvinistic Canadian context. While research has been carried out on the theme of female trauma, hysteria, and exploitation (Batroukha, 2017; Hobgood, 2002; Mustafa, 2018; Schönfelder, 2013; Streeter, 2008), none of the previous studies applied the concept of (ab)normalcy to examine any of these novels, which represents a significant research gap. This study aims to address this gap by bringing both concepts (normalcy and neurosis) together into a single framework, basing its arguments on George Serban's concepts of "normalcy" and "social conformity", which are inconspicuously imposed on individuals within a particular society as a collective "norm", as well as on German psychoanalyst Karen Horney's work on the concept of "neurosis", inherently aligning with an individual's lack of mental capacity to cope with social anxieties and which results, in turn, in a perceived behavioural deviancy, as observed in the selected novel. This synergistic approach intersects the psychological concept of neurosis with the social praxis of normalcy, aiming to provide a holistic and interdisciplinary understanding of the matter.

The present study analyses Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) from the perspective of neurosis and (ab)normalcy. It explores neurosis not only as a diagnostic category but also as a modern social phenomenon that proliferates in contemporary, globalized societies due to oppressive, normative practices, as can be observed in the case of the protagonist of *Cat's Eye*. The article argues that the prevalent notions of social normativity in regard to gender, religion, caste, and class, and their strict pursuit in the form of social conformity, can produce neurotic anxieties for individuals. In this regard, Furlanetto and Meinel remark, "Neurosis speaks to the tension between the individual (corporeal and emotional) experience of daily life and the pressures to conform. Rather than manifesting an illness that necessitates medical or psychological care,...expressions of neurosis ask us to question the narratives of normalcy that function to brand patterns, behaviors, and individuals as neurotic" (Furlanetto & Meinel, 2018, p. 15). The article is built upon this foundation where "expressions of neurosis" are not observed merely as psychological phenomena but also as the result of social normative

practices where certain kinds of gendered or racial “patterns, behaviour, and dispositions” are declared normal, making other kinds of beliefs and convictions automatically abnormal, as in the case of Cordelia and Elaine in *Cat’s Eye*.

The term neurosis was first used by Scottish doctor William Cullen to define disorders of the nervous system in 1769. Jean Martin Charcot, a French neurologist, called it “the great neurosis” and considered it a disorder specific to women’s ovaries. While the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud gave importance to uncontrolled libidinal instincts for the occurrence of neurosis, Karen Horney reasoned sociocultural factors for the same (Markam et al., 2024, p. 74). In the medical field, while the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual I (DSM I) could not explain the term beyond its definition as a process and pattern of anxiety, DSM II also featured inadequacies in aetiological definitional specification, and the problem of classification of neurotic disorders. For this reason, DSM III in 1980 dropped the term “neurosis” from its medical usage and replaced it with multiple nouns assigned to specific mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety, among others (Townsend et al. 1983). In the realm of medical sciences, this became a watershed development that contributes to addressing the subtle nuances of the human psyche, enabling psychologists and psychiatrists to treat patients more effectively. Revisions were made in different versions, such as DSM-IV and DSM-V, but the term “neurosis” could not retain its position in these manuals. In DSM-V, all mental disorders have been described with a set of diagnostic features and differences between them. So, terms like anxiety, hysteria, obsessive compulsive disorders, etc, which were previously interchangeable with neurosis, are now treated as separate disorders. In this manner, the term “neurosis” lost its diagnostic category in the field of medical science. But when studied in social aspects, neurosis (including aspects of neuroticism) is not a term merely denoting psychological disorders, but also personality traits, triggered by repressed anxieties or social exclusion, that encompass a number of behavioural deviancies, initially explained by Karen Horney which are pervasive in the cultural praxis – even if they are still mostly absent from the prevalent discourse on “trauma” and “trauma narratives”. Horney defines neurosis as a basic psychological conflict between three kinds of general unconscious tendencies that exist in every person’s psyche to fight the general anxieties of life: moving toward people, moving away from people, and moving against people (1992, pp. 42-43). These are elaborated as three personality traits, and a disharmonious disturbance among them results in multiple kinds of mental disorders that we can include in the umbrella term of neurosis. In this way, Horney does not scrupulously differentiate between aspects of personality and aspects of mental disorders, but rather synergistically propounds a theory that

brings a holistic perspective to understanding neurosis (including what is understood as neuroticism), situating it within society. Therefore, this article also does not distinguish between the two and employs the term “neurosis” to refer to personality traits as well as a set of mental disorders, since “fiction [...] shows very little concern for diagnostic exactness” rather the textual focus informs of societal role in the process of mental stigma (Furlanetto & Meinel, 2018, p. 14).

The conditions and dimensions of (ab)normalcy in Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* (1988) can be read through a social and psychological lens. This notion elaborates on the relationship between what is perceived as socially normal (i.e. conformity, or the performance thereof, to social norms) and neurotic identity formation in the context of the novel. Through her novel, Atwood portrays late 20th-century Canadian society in its multifaceted reality, incorporating themes of political, national, social, gender, racial, and psychological significance. The article’s focus is directed toward the women characters, intending to highlight what is meant by “normalcy” in the gendered aspect of the term and how the performance of normativity plays a crucial role in society and in the context of the novel.

Further, the oppression triggered by prevalent “gender” norms as a form of “social conformism” provokes psychological disturbances, constant stigma, and neurotic behaviour for those women who realize their persecution but find themselves restrained by the social barriers of so-called “normalcy” to fight their oppression and for their acceptance and recognition in society. This becomes a reason why modernist and post-modernist female authors produced characters who are socially perceived as “normal” but psychologically depressed, agitated, or anxious, such as Clarissa Dalloway from *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Esther Greenwood from *The Bell Jar* (1963). In this regard, Margaret Atwood, in one of her interviews, remarks that the novel *Cat’s Eye* represented the socialization process typical of that time. However, it was not deemed as a form of “socialization” – rather, it reflects a general tendency to look beyond the phenomenon of ideological inculcation of a specific set of codes, customs, norms, and beliefs during early stages of life that form the fundamental schema of mind to perceive and perform acts in a specific manner, which are understood as “normal” in a particular society (Atwood & Richards, 1993, p. 9). Atwood’s comment reflects on how the formative years of childhood, in particular socio-cultural settings, leave indelible impressions on one’s personality, influencing one’s “psychological condition and behaviour” (Hussain et al. 2023), a process that creates a frame of perceived social normalcy for that particular person. On the other hand, anything that deviates from this performance of normativity is automatically considered “abnormal”. Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* examines how this concept of normalcy

encourages social conformism in an attempt to form a homogenized social group. On this aspect, Venanzi writes, “Groups form out of a feeling of likeness and identification among members.... We also find among insiders’ feelings of pride, loyalty and superiority that in the long run may turn into an attitude of contempt towards outsiders” (2005, p. 118). This kind of attitude of repulsion towards Elaine Risley (the protagonist who is new in Toronto and thus perceived and treated as an outsider) by her peers becomes the fundamental reason for her neurotic identity formation, as Bethan Jones mentions, the “psychological ramification of bullying...that occurs among young children, and the resulting dynamic within the group, are...devastating and destabilizing” (2008, p. 30) in *Cat’s Eye*.

In this way, the novel, through its multiple female characters, eclectically highlights how women themselves with internalized misogyny can become oppressors for other women who desire to be free, thus grappling with societal constraints of gender roles as a hindrance to personal development, or, as ND Jong writes, “*Cat’s Eye* turns out to be an all-female version of women’s fight for their own subjectivity” (1998, p. 98). The present article is structured into three sections: while the first section elaborates on the theoretical framework, the second and third sections examine the text, reading it through the lens of (ab)normalcy and neurosis.

From (ab)normalcy to neurosis: A psychosocial perspective

Since the article inherently deals with the notion of norms and their functioning in society, a distinction between allied concepts such as “normativity”, “normality”, and “normalcy” should also be briefly discussed. On the phenomenological existence of norms, Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 31) remarks in one of his lectures, “There is no given universality; there is only a presumptive universality”. In this way, he observes “norm” as a structure based on common shared behaviour and practices that are sometimes historically induced or are based on “preferred attitude statistically more frequent, which gives a new kind of unity to behavior” (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, p. 159). Therefore, there are no set rules or laws (of behaviour, colour, or performance) that dictate norms; rather, their very practice creates the aforementioned “presumptive universality” and gives a certain kind of recognition and a status of “normality” in a society, thus making the whole notion of normalcy “tricky and ambiguous” (Spina, 2012, p. 43). Since normative values are presumptive, normative practices have a limited spatiotemporal dimension, even if they are generally believed to be universal. Marco Spina (2012) delineates two distinctive aspects of “norm”: “normativity” and “normality”. While normativity is related to the propositional foundation of presumptive laws, codes, and norms of a social order, normality refers to the successful resultant inculcation of those laws in an individual; in other

words, “normativity is linked to its aim; normality pertains to its result” (Spina, 2012, p. 43). A key aspect of this discussion is that different societies can have different norms, thereby differing in their respective notions of what is normal. It is in this vein that the article employs George Serban’s scholarship on normalcy, which is synonymous with “normality”, and is centrally situated in social aspects and does not take into account phenomenological philosophical standpoints; it nevertheless concords with Merleau-Ponty’s argument.

On the ontology of “normalcy”, George Serban writes, “There are no universal standards of normalcy, and the notion of normal well-adjusted has currency only within the context of a particular society with its peculiar customs and beliefs” (2017, p. 30). However, in a contemporary, globalized world, rather than challenging the impositions of a fixed, unified concept of “normalcy”, its perpetuation and imposition continue to occur. Contrarily, social normalcy presupposes that its subjects need to comply with a set of norms and social codes without opposition or resistance. Inferentially, a non-compliant person would automatically be treated as abnormal, alien, or an outsider. One has to conform to established social rules in order to be treated and be perceived as “normal”. This inconspicuous operationalization of social normalcy is the central foundation for the additional re-interpretation of neurosis as a cultural and social phenomenon in this article. As observed in *Cat’s Eye*, there are “insiders’ feelings” of pride, status, and gendered norms in the child characters of Grace and Carol who continue to show their disdain towards Elaine and her parents, who are perceived as outsiders due to their unconventional lifestyle and beliefs which do not fit entirely into the urban values of Toronto (Venanzi, 2005, p. 118).

For this reason, social conformity can be understood as a form of social constraint, part of “the material structures of society like urbanization, technologies, communications, and external structural constraints induced by kinship, family ties, or outer social framework” (Serban, 2017, p. 1). To Serban’s list of such social constraints, one can also add religious, political, racial, gender, and multiple ideological state apparatuses that contribute to the formulation of a collective mechanism of social conformity. For instance, gender norms with a “presumptive universality” have tended to associate certain mannerisms and acts (such as cooking, cleaning, and household chores) predominantly with women for generations. If a woman desires something outside the purview of the household, it is unacceptable to society and thus treated as a social as well as behavioural abnormality. The central argument of the paper becomes palpable in the quintessential example of “Nosedive”, an episode from the *Black Mirror* series (Brooker, 2016). The protagonist, Lacie, lives in a futuristic world where social rating on an Instagram-like universal app, based on daily interactions with people,

has become a dominant cultural tool for determining people's status and social identity. The veneer of a forever-smiley face, beauty, amicability, party head, and noble social connections on the app becomes a determinant for one's status in society. In her endeavour to climb up the social ladder, Lacie represses her true self and professes to embody the qualities of a likeable social persona. However, when she cannot pretend anymore and accidentally expresses her real feelings – she gets irritated and angry in a public space – her social rating suddenly tumbles. She becomes inadmissible in society. Furthermore, by the final scene of the episode, she is hysterical and is being carried to prison. So, the compulsion to conform and maintain a social status leads to her eventual mental breakdown. In the case of Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, the trope of normalcy becomes even more palpable since Cordelia, Grace, and Carol explicitly make Elaine feel a socially awkward and abnormal person, as Elaine speaks self-reflectively in the novel, "I am not normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me. Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time" (Atwood, 2007, p. 118). Her childhood then becomes a sole quest for seeking validation of normalcy from those she thought were her best friends. To clear it further, the children do not imply this abnormality to be a psychological but rather a very social phenomenon, which is further scrutinized in the next section. In this way, Atwood's portrayal materializes this otherwise surreptitious social pressure through her young characters. It is this pressure that leads to a superficial form of conformity and, at the same time, generates detrimental neurotic conflicts in Elaine's psyche.

According to Karen Horney (1992, p. 128), traumatic childhood experiences and the underdevelopment of the ego during this period can affect a child's ability to cope with social anxieties, generating inner conflicts which, at a later stage, can very likely lead to neurosis. Psychologically, during childhood, one's social environment and interpersonal relationships tend to shape one's personality by balancing the three types of mental tendencies (trends), as mentioned by Horney: moving away from people, moving towards people, and moving against people (1992, pp. 42-43). These strategies are used to cope with mundane problems and adversities; however, when a weak ego, facing severe anxieties in society, is unable to establish harmony among them and chooses one of the trends as its dominant tendency, it is referred to as one's neurotic trend. This disturbance in the psyche is mentioned as "neurosis" by Horney (1992, p. 43). Neurosis significantly impacts an individual's ability to resolve internal and external conflicts, whether in terms of decision-making, problem-solving, or general cognitive-behavioural judgments. While a neurotic tendency functions as a coping mechanism and helps the neurotic maintain social appearances, it slowly disrupts the psyche of the individual, resulting in constant dissatisfaction, anxiety, chronic depression, emotional breakdown, a sense

of meaninglessness, boredom, and many other forms of mental and social behavioural conflict (Maddie, 1967, p. 313). In brief, neurosis refers to one's inability to cope with social and personal anxieties in a healthy manner.

In order to look for the inherent link between (ab)normalcy and neurosis, one must examine George Serban's examples of anomic fictional characters. In his book *The Mask of Normalcy* (2014), Serban referred to some characters, including Willy Loman from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Meursault from Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), and Lester Burnham from the movie *American Beauty* (1999), as wearing masks of normal personalities while coping with extreme mental disturbances. These characters' depictions reiterate the vicious functioning of social normalcy. In their unsuccessful attempt to cope with the social normative values of their societies, these characters actually suffer from neurotic anxieties. As mentioned above, such characters, since they are unable to conform to social norms, are considered socially maladjusted and, due to their continuous desire for social validation, repress the psychological suffering and actually become neurotic. In this manner, their efforts to fit into the idea of social normalcy of their respective societies lead to their mental disturbance. In this regard, Serban writes,

If they [characters] fail to conform they might be classified according to the researchers as either anomics or autonomous. Anomic means maladjusted.... they are "ungoverned" and noncompliant with the social rules.... In modern psychiatric nosology they seem to be people with severe personality disorders, antisocial personalities, and psychotics in relative remission. (2017, p. 4)

Since the article concerns itself with aspects of neurosis, its distinction from trauma or psychosis also needs to be discussed. The central difference lies in the discreet nature of neurosis, which contrasts with trauma or psychosis, which are usually very apparent in the behaviour of a person. Neurosis does not manifest itself in conspicuous ways in a person's behaviour; rather, it surreptitiously deteriorates their mental strength, undermining the neurotic's ability to resolve long-lasting, deeply buried psychological conflict. In this way, symptoms such as chronic anxiety, headaches, depression, meaninglessness, and emotional numbness, among others, take over a person's life, destroy their spirit, and leave the neurotic feeling distraught, discontented, and sadistic. Therefore, John Russon (2003, p. 1) grounds neurosis in a Western European philosophy of embodiment, temporality, and intersubjectivity. According to him, the experiences, the expectations, and tensions of everyday life contribute to the formation of neurosis as an expression of moments "when some sector of a person's life cannot function compatibly with the demands of intersubjective life... [and with] other sectors of that person's life" (Russon, 2003, p. 81). This article argues that the restraints of social

conformity vis-à-vis “social normalcy” can be unbearable for certain marginalized groups and people and thus function as pounding expectations and tensions of everyday life, which results in neurotic identity formation as analysed in *Cat’s Eye*.

Ambivalent (ab)normalcy in Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*

The novel *Cat’s Eye* is written in a retrospective first-person narrative. Elaine, the narrator, is a painter visiting Toronto for an art exhibition, where she also spent her childhood years. This visit prompts her to reflect on repressed childhood traumas, as she reminisces about her life in a stream-of-consciousness manner. Due to her father’s profession as an entomologist, she lived an unconventional life of travel until the age of eight, when her parents decided to settle permanently in Toronto. Due to constant travel and life in the wilderness, Elaine was unconventionally raised and could never make friends in the past. For the first time she befriended three girls, Carol, Grace, and Cordelia, and thought they were good people. Since her behaviour did not fit into the more sophisticated mannerisms of city life, the trio promised to make Elaine a civilized person, which, for the first time, inculcated her with a perception of being a socially abnormal person, as quoted in the previous section. On the other hand, Elaine, a naïve girl who sees the other girls as her best friends, follows what she is told and is bullied for most of her childhood. Among the girls, Carol and Grace were brought up in the city and, for this reason, have already internalized strict gendered roles and religious beliefs, reflecting Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...” (1997, p. 295). *Cat’s Eye* shows this becoming of women and how culturally gendered roles and behaviours are normalized in a very subtle manner by the women and for the women in the novel. A large part of their behaviours of social conformity correlate to historically enforced norms and codes that they considered “normal” and, therefore, unheedingly expected these norms and codes to be followed by others. Grace’s mother, Mrs Smeath, and her missionary sister, Aunt Mildred, significantly contributed to developing this twisted understanding of the normalcy in Grace’s personality, inspiring her mission to civilize Elaine. As Elaine narrates,

“She [Elaine] is exactly like a heathen,” says Aunt Mildred....

“She is learning her Bible, Grace tells me,” Mrs. Smeath says....

“They’ll learn all that,” says Aunt Mildred. “Till you’re blue in the face. But it’s all rote learning, it doesn’t sink in. The minute your back is turned they’ll go right back the way they were.”

“What can you expect, with that family?” says Mrs. Smeath. She doesn’t go on to say what’s wrong with my family. “The other children sense it. They Know.”

“You don’t think they’re being too hard on her?” says Aunt Mildred....

“It’s God’s punishment,” says Mrs. Smeath. “It serves her right” (Atwood, 2007, pp. 179-80).

This adult conversation surreptitiously conveys a vague sense of (ab)normalcy into the children (Grace, Carole, and Cordelia) in the novel. They are not explicitly told to do anything, but they “sense it.” Inferentially, this ability to distinguish between what is considered “normal” and “abnormal” is developed as an inherent feature of their socialization process according to the prevalent norms of society. Carol and Grace represent this powerful force of normativity that dominated Canadian society during the late 20th century. Cordelia, on the other hand, is not a social conformist. She is disobedient, intractable, distressed, and subjugated in her home; she is the epitome of resistance to the standards set for women; in other words, she has been characterized as an “aware victim of normalization” (Hafezikermani and Fazli, 2013, pp. 46-47). The patriarchal repression Cordelia had to deal with, and the subtle normalization of gender in a familial setting, are meaningfully expressed in the following extract from the novel,

When he [Cordelia’s father] isn’t there, things are slapdash. Mummie comes to the table absent-mindedly still in her painting smock, Perdie and Mirrie and also Cordelia appear in blue jeans with a man’s shirt over top and their hair in pin-curls. They jump up from the table, saunter into the kitchen for more butter, or the salt which has been forgotten. They talk at once in languid, amused way, and groan when it’s their turn to clear the table, while Mummie says “Now girls” but without conviction. She is losing the energy for disappointment. But when Cordelia’s father is there, everything is different. There are flowers on the table, and candles. Mummy has on her pearls, the napkins are under the edges of the plates. Nothing is forgotten. There are no pin-curls, no elbows on the table, even the spines are straighter. (Atwood, 2007, pp. 248-249)

Cordelia found this kind of hegemonic power over herself utterly repulsive. This is the reason why, as a child, she is intentionally deviant and rebellious in her day-to-day behaviours. She used to keep the collar of her blouse straight and socks pulled down, drew a picture of penises over the blackboard, and stole things from other children. There is a double connotation to these seemingly meaningless acts. First, her nonsensical acts of mischief imply her symbolic protest against social conditions set by her father and against her gendered destiny as a woman, and second, the social stigma that she suffers as a girl finds respite through these digressive acts. Additionally, this also affects her psyche in a very negative way since she channels her frustration with her parents onto Elaine, a socially alienated outsider who then becomes a target of her mockery. It pertains to the idea that marginalization can lead individuals to perpetuate the very systems of oppression they suffer. Not only Cordelia, but Grace’s mother and aunt are unknowingly doing the same thing by being conformists; the transference of their own marginalization onto future generations. This particular analysis reveals the cyclical nature of

not only social conformity but also gender disparity pervasive in modern societies. Commenting on how this patriarchal chauvinistic dominance is represented in the novel, Christine W Sizemore states the following: “*Cat’s Eye* seems to be primarily a personal novel, but gender and colonial politics lie behind the seemingly private stories” (1997, p. 75). In the novel, Cordelia is treated as what Serban calls an eccentric, or “...nonconformists who, while functioning more or less within the parameters of the law, exhibit behaviors that don’t follow the standards of the community.... they take liberties with fashion by...behaving in an unconventional manner or organizing their personal life in an unusual style that puts its imprint on their social interaction” (2017, p. 136). It is for this reason that Elaine and Cordelia are two sides of the same coin; both of them are victims of gendered normative values and suffer psychological disturbance at a later stage of their lives. There is, though a stark difference between their attitude towards so-called social normativity: while Elaine, as a child, subconsciously tries to sacrifice her real self in her unsuccessful negotiation of normalcy and becomes neurotic, Cordelia, in her resistance against any dominant notion of gendered normativity, is actually punished by society since she is declared abnormal and is put in a mental asylum.

Interestingly, Elaine’s parents are also nonconformists, although in a completely different manner. They, too, are declared abnormal by Grace’s mother, as they did not believe in religion and had a deep interest in natural wilderness. However, being adults, unlike Cordelia, they were able to harmonize their own beliefs with societal expectations without compromising their individuality. They tried to encourage these qualities in Elaine by not forcing any modern values on her identity, as is evidenced in the following quote: “Are you sure you really want to go [to church]?... Are you really sure?... Don’t believe everything you hear” (Atwood, 2007, p. 96). Nonetheless, Elaine was intensely influenced by her new peers and therefore unsure of which path to choose. She seems to want to be seen as “socially normal”, as her friends promised to help her become. Elaine’s parents were not rebelling against society but rather preferred to follow their own moral code, making their way of living inherently resistant to the social practices of oppression, albeit in a positive manner.

Based on the above-discussed different patterns of behaviour of characters in *Cat’s Eye*, three distinctive attitudes toward normalcy can be observed: a) characters who are inadvertently or deliberately submissive toward social norms; b) characters who blatantly oppose the established idea of normalcy by asserting their individual self; c) and those who wish to be diluted into the persona of perceived social normalcy but are unable to reconcile with a particular social order due to a weakened ego. The first category includes characters

who also play the role of agents enforcing and sustaining a conception of perceived normalcy in society. Furthermore, these are conformists and have adapted to the discreetly practised oppression of normalcy and, for this reason, are unable to recognize it. Characters such as Mrs Smeath, Aunt Mildred, Carol, and Grace belong to this category, who coerce Elaine to become more like themselves. To a certain degree, Elaine's parents and Cordelia can be included in the second category of behavioural patterns. According to Mrs Smeath and Aunt Mildred, Elaine's family are heathens, uncivilized, and wild, thus representing what is perceived as abnormal; however, the parents are intentionally non-conformist and refuse to give in to certain social norms based on gender, religion, and class. On the other hand, Cordelia (who also belongs to the second category), being an adolescent, exhibits resistance to social norms, an impulse met with disciplinary action from her parents, which eventually results in a psychological imbalance in her adulthood. Lastly, Elaine symbolizes the third category of behavioural patterns, namely, a conscious belief in the concept of social (ab)normalcy. She earnestly tries to adapt to the normative values of Toronto but fails to do so.

According to Erik Erikson (1968, p. 49), the childhood phase is responsible for the development of the nascent ego. The ego is strengthened through positive reinforcement from parents, friends, teachers, and social validation during childhood, resulting in the development of self-esteem in a child. In the absence of such reinforcement, the ego remains weak. Since, during her childhood, Elaine was traumatized by her friends' bullying, enacted with the intent of "educating" her, her adult life was deeply impacted. Elaine's experiences with her new friends deteriorate her still-budding ego and traumatize her, as can be observed in the following quote,

I lie with my knees up, as close to my body as I can get them. I'm peeling the skin off my feet; I can do it without looking, by touch. I worry about what I've said today, the expression of my face, how I walk, what I wear, because all of these things need improvement. I am not normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me. Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time. (Atwood, 2007, p. 118)

Remarking on the behavioural aspect of Elaine's traumatic experience as a child, Pundir writes, "Her mental anguish becomes so great that she forgets how to laugh, begins to feel secure when ill, and contemplates suicide, desires invisibility and faints at will!" (2012, pp. 64-65). This highlights that Elaine's suffering started in her early youth as a result of intensifying inner conflicts that were overwhelming and incomprehensible to her. There is no individual identity that is formed with her own will; rather, it is Cordelia and other girls who define her, "who ascribes her the role of Other, thereby preventing her from forming her sense of self" (Jong, 1998, p. 98). The weakness of Elaine's ego is further reflected in her self-belief that she is "not

normal” (as quoted above), and her friends’ treatment is, for this reason, the right course of action. Inferentially, the so-called “wildness” of Elaine’s personality is acknowledged through the eyes of her new, more “civilized” friends. However, in the aforementioned quote, situational ambivalence is only evident in hindsight, as the reader can discern that the bullying, superciliousness, and admonitions of her three friends ironically symbolize the wildness that resides in urban hearts, an interiority juxtaposed against their external performance of sophistication. Regarding this paradoxical portrayal, Atwood herself considered it a “risky business” to focus on the cruelty of little girls towards each other, a theme that features prominently in the novel (Atwood, 1990, p. 236).

In this way, *Cat’s Eye’s* narrative illustrates how Elaine is compelled to conform to the exploitative norms of a perceived “civil” society, ultimately losing the sense of self she had developed during her formative childhood years (the life of constant traveling). This is exemplified in the way Elaine questions the division of treatment between men and women, a realization that is deemed peculiar by her, as she has never witnessed these gender-specific roles while living in the wilderness. It was a major change in her life. She suddenly found herself in a society where constructs surrounding class, race, religion, and gender hierarchies are quite pervasive, where ideas of beauty, femininity, and domesticity define womanhood. Since they were adults, her parents were able to adapt to this environment; however, Elaine, largely due to her friends’ hostile behaviour, found this urban environment too estranged and, despite her continuous attempts, could not cope with it and, for these reasons, became neurotic at a later stage. In this regard, Serban’s psychosocial approach points out, “the assumed notion of being well-adjusted normal ignores the emotional drama of unfulfilled ambitions, or inner conflicts that may consume, exasperate, and frustrate people unless they decide to disobey social rules and regulations” (2017, p. 24). To conform to a preconceived notion of what a well-adjusted, normal person is, Elaine forced herself into a persona her friends had imposed on her. While disregarding Elaine’s emotional state, urban society’s demands continue to envelop her with its normative rules and, eventually, play a crucial role in her neurotic identity formation, as will be explored in the next section. It is only by pursuing this construct in the name of “civility” that Elaine begins to wear what Serban calls “the mask of normalcy”.

(Ab)normalcy as a factor in neurosis

Cat’s Eye follows the journey of its protagonist from social persecution to her resulting neurotic identity formation. What triggers the neurotic manifestation in Elaine’s personality is a traumatic incident. While returning from school, Cordelia throws Elaine’s hat into a ravine

from a bridge and forces her to fetch it back. When Elaine reaches the bottom, the other children abandon her there. She finds herself in a state of alienation, confusion, and anger. Since her friends left her trapped in the ravine, she contemplates and questions their friendship, as well as Jesus, whom she prayed to but found no consolation. Then, all of a sudden, she sees a lady in a white cloak, whom she believes is the Virgin Mary, on the bridge over the ravine. This incident aggravates a psychological struggle. Elaine's weak ego opts for "move away from people" as a coping mechanism in order to repress this incident, and brings about an artificial form of integration into her life. The loss of faith in Jesus can also be interpreted as resistance against patriarchal society, since, for Elaine, Jesus was a figure of authority and justice who failed to protect and provide her with solace, which she expected. This represented her spiritual loss. However, she finds comfort in the image of the Virgin Mary because while Elaine feels abandoned or judged by Jesus, Mary, a maternal and compassionate figure, resonates more with her desire for empathy, understanding, comfort, and safety. This sense of abandonment is not generated by this singular event; rather, a lot of incidents of bullying by her peers in a misguided effort to create a "civilized" member of society actually pushed her towards neurosis. This final section focuses on the aftermath of the transition, how Elaine's sense of instability keeps her away from her authentic self, in a sadistic adherence to an idealized neurotic image of herself. It should be noted that this article does not at all claim that social normativity is the only cause of neurosis; nevertheless, in *Cat's Eye*, it functions as a stimulus driving Elaine towards psychological disturbance.

The fundamental argument in "neurosis" states that a person's inability to conform spontaneously to social normativity can evoke neurotic elements in one's personality, as elaborated in the theoretical section. This kind of inability coerces an individual to maintain an artificial external appearance, which is an intrinsic trait of neurosis and indicates inner conflict in a person's psyche. In order to deal with such conflicts and bring about an artificial feeling of psychological integrity or normalcy, a neurotic can also form a fictitious "idealized image" of herself or himself, which is "what the neurotic believes himself [or herself] to be, or of what at the time he feels he can or ought to be. Conscious or unconscious, the image is always, to a large degree, removed from reality, though the influence it exerts on the person's life is very real indeed" (Horney, 1992, p. 96). This is a sign of a subconscious attempt to maintain an artificial veneer of normalcy in society, to gain validation and social approval. The need for approval is particularly important because "the more unrealistic the image, the more it makes the person vulnerable and avid for outside affirmation and recognition" (Horney, 1992, p. 97).

In other words, one does not seek validation for one's real qualities, but for those questionable claims that one professes to be.

In the case of Elaine, it is due to this neurotic idealized image that she is able to maintain social appearance even after severe psychological struggle. Elaine's personality changes due to the traumatic experience at the ravine, after which she subconsciously constructs an idealized image of herself as a fierce person who does not need friends. Following the incident, Elaine condescendingly enjoys the fearsome power that accompanies this new self-image, proudly characterizing her presence in school in the following words: "Girls at school learn to look out for my mean mouth and avoid it.... And I am treated with caution, which suits me fine.... The girls are afraid of me...." (Atwood, 2007, p. 234). As a reaction to the traumatic event, Elaine tries to project herself as a paramour of resistance; she blatantly accepts,

She [Mrs. Smeath] is right, I am a heathen. I cannot forgive. (Atwood, 2007, p. 180)

It's girls I feel awkward with, it's girls I feel I have to defend myself against; not boys". (Atwood, 2007, p. 237)

What becomes evident in this conversation is the sudden change in her attitude towards life. From a meek, scared, and submissive girl, she becomes a feared, blunt, and audacious person who is reckless about other people's emotions. These acts represent her neurotic idealized image that gives her a sense of power. This detachment from others is a coping mechanism that indicates an unconscious neurotic tendency of moving away from people, over the other two tendencies mentioned previously. This uni-directional psychological movement provides her with a sense of artificial unity to sustain what could be perceived as a normal life in society. While she experiences a surge of powerful energy to carry on with her life, her adult life is steeped in emotionlessness, dissatisfaction, meaninglessness, and a series of anxiety episodes. However, the repressed past does not completely elude her, but often reaches out to her consciousness, which she time and again represses to the best of her ability, as reflected in the following passage,

I've forgotten things, I've forgotten them....I don't know I don't like the thought of Mrs. Smeath, but I've forgotten why. I've forgotten about fainting...about falling into the creek and also about seeing the Virgin Mary. I've forgotten all of the bad things that happened. (Atwood, 2007, pp. 200-1)

The emotional numbness and long-harboured resentment against her childhood acquaintances due to their bullying make Elaine apathetic and sadistic. Even during high school, she began dominating other girls, enjoying her supremacy over them, especially over Cordelia as evident in her narration, “I’m surprised at how much pleasure this gives me, to know she’s [Cordelia] so uneasy, to know I have this much power over her. . . .energy has passed between us, and I am stronger” (Atwood, 2007, p. 233). Another instance is when one of her fellows at art academy, Susie, falls pregnant with their teacher’s baby, Elaine does not show any signs of sympathy but rather blames Susie for her misery, showing the identical superciliousness of Mrs Smeath (quoted in the previous section), as her narrations indicates, “But there is also another voice; a small, mean voice, ancient and smug, that comes from somewhere deep inside my head: *It serves her right*” (Atwood, 2007, p. 321, emphasis in original). These incidents indicate inherent neurotic sadism that developed as a result of her neurotic identity.

After almost a decade, her repressed neurotic anxieties resurface with an unplanned pregnancy and her fear of Jon’s (her husband’s) reaction to it. The resultant anxiety is enhanced to a degree that she has to bite her nails in order to remain calm in social spaces. It is in this context that Elaine needs to maintain an appearance to adhere to a standard of social norms, even at the cost of psychological disturbance. The idealized image, an unconscious component of a maladjusted personality, helps her maintain desired social appearances while suppressing the aspects of personality that in any way contradict the traits of the constructed idealized image. While aggressive and detaching tendencies manifest more strongly in Elaine’s personality, other emotions, such as empathy, pity, and amicability, that contradict with her idealized self-image, result in emotional distancing. This whole paraphernalia of psychological repression represents her way of coping with repressed childhood trauma. However, every now and then, the adult Elaine finds herself in situations demanding her empathy towards Cordelia, the very person who tormented her the most in her childhood. While Elaine acknowledges Cordelia’s plights at the hand of her father, she is not empathetic toward her; rather, she finds it malevolently pleasurable, since doing otherwise would betray her own idealized self-image, which would make her feel weak. She avoids any information or knowledge that can deteriorate her idealized self-image, as she notes, “Knowing too much about other people puts you in their power, they have a claim on you, you are forced to understand their reasons for doing things, and then you are weakened” (Atwood, 2007, p. 217). Cordelia, once a bully, is described as frail and timid in her adulthood. Elaine finds her (Cordelia) living in an asylum after a suicide attempt. The child Cordelia is portrayed as an embodiment of resistance against gendered social norms in order to attain freedom, but since her behaviour was considered deviant in the eyes

of her own parents (who stand as a symbol for society's normativity), she becomes anomalous in her adulthood. Every once in a while, this faded realization of Cordelia's suffering evokes Elaine's true emotions of sympathy towards her, emotions which she continuously attempts to repress. In this regard, Horney remarks,

If, finally, the focus is upon the discrepancy between the idealized image and the actual self, then all he is aware of and all we can observe are his incessant attempts to bridge the gap and whip himself [or herself] into perfection. In this event he [or she] keeps reiterating the word "should" with amazing frequency. He keeps telling us what he should have felt, thought, done. (1992, p. 98)

This gap and the resultant internal struggle between idealized and realistic self-images are reflected in Elaine's unexplained hallucinations of Cordelia's voice and face. She becomes extremely agitated and tries to end her life by cutting her wrists. The sadism of her idealized image contradicts the guilt of her real self. These confounding and jumbled emotions symbolize inner conflicts of her neurotic personality, a manifestation of what had long been unresolved. Therefore, there is greater significance to Elaine's artistic endeavour as a painter in the novel. Her paintings are the windows to her mind, revealing what lies beneath the surface of her personality, rather than portraying her outward characteristics. Instead, they offer impressionistic panoramas of her experiences. The aforementioned "forgetting" of her past is evident in many of her paintings, manifesting not only her subconscious trauma and conflicts but also providing solace and healing. We find characters, images, and things auto-narratively drawn without any conscious effort on the part of Elaine. She narrates, "I begin to paint things that aren't there.... I have no image of myself in relation to them. They are suffused with anxiety, but it's not my own anxiety. The anxiety in the things themselves" (Atwood, 2007, p. 337). Without the contextual remembrance of objects such as a silver toaster, a wringer washing machine, three sofas, a glass jar, and so on, she draws them vividly, simultaneously having a faint realization that these things must be "memories" (Atwood, 2007, p. 337). In regard to the characters in Elaine's paintings, Vickroy comments, "She achieves distance through her gaze and her pictures punish her persecutors or reward her sympathizers" (2005, p. 134). For instance, she subconsciously portrays "Mrs. Smeath stuck to her back, being screwed like a beetle... unwrapped from white tissue paper" (Atwood, 2007, p. 404). The twisted shapes of Mrs Smeath's body parts reflect pungent mockery and desecration of her so-called self-righteousness and moral superiority. Mrs Smeath's mangled body parts in many of her paintings thus indicate Elaine's repressed anger, need for justice, and a kind of revenge. In this regard, Vickroy writes, "For a time, Elaine cannot access her inner life except through her

art, which helps her locate some of her repressed feelings, such as her anger at Mrs. Smeath” (2005, p. 135). In a similar manner, her other paintings also carry autobiographical elements from her past, such as Cordelia’s painting titled “Half a Face” reflects Elaine’s incomplete and complex understanding of Cordelia in relation to her own identity (Howells, 1994, p. 206). She subconsciously sees the dark side of her own neurotic identity through Cordelia’s “Half a Face”, as she narrates, “We are like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key” (Atwood, 2007, p. 411), indicating this recognition that she has become the double of Cordelia, “who tortured her [Elaine] in the childhood” (Nikolic, 2017, p. 92). In this way, Cordelia’s existence functions “like a mirror that shows [Elaine]...the ruined half of... [her] face”, the repressed past that holds the resolution to all her problems (Atwood, 2007, p. 410). It is due to this psychological mirroring that she eventually sees that both of them are the eventual victims of societal pressures. And it is this subconscious desire to find a sense of unity in her life that drives her to actively seek out Cordelia upon her return to Toronto. Furthermore, the painting “Cat’s Eye”, a self-portrait featuring “three small figures, dressed in winter clothing”, evokes the traumatic memory of the ravine where her friends abandoned her alone. But her perspective carries the cat’s eye translucent marble as a medium for sketching distorted figures. This provides her with a momentary sense of power over those figures she is sketching. So, the paintings represent Elaine’s inner emotional world, her trauma, her identity, and her evolving understanding of womanhood. Painting those women, in a way, allows her to diminish them and expose her feelings in shapes on a canvas where she doesn’t have to deal with them in real life, implying that Elaine’s past never eluded her, even after her claim to have forgotten it.

Thus, it is Elaine’s return to Toronto for her art exhibition after decades that prompted this backward gaze into the past, bringing her back to the place where the roots of her present anxieties lie buried. This theme of returning to the heart of the problem is also central to Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972), a novel about an unnamed narrator who represents a lost self and identity, and returns to her childhood home in northern Quebec almost a decade later to search for her mysteriously missing father. The unnamed narrator’s return to her childhood home in *Surfacing* and Elaine’s return to Toronto to attend a retrospective exhibition in *Cat’s Eye* trigger their respective repressed emotions and feelings, forcing them to encounter their real image and making them realize their artificial façade of normalcy in these novels. For Elaine, her return to Toronto becomes a fissure in the continuity of her neurotic-idealized image, making her conscious of her repressed past. Although the return brings old anxieties to the surface, it also helps these characters accept their true selves. In *Cat’s Eye*, it changed Elaine’s

perspective toward her own art. What was previously incomprehensible to her mind became meaningful. In the latter part of the novel, reflecting on one of Mrs Smeath's paintings, Elaine comments,

They are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholy, heavy with unloved duty.... Now I can see myself, through these painted eyes of Mrs. Smeath.... I was unbaptized, a nest for demons: how could she know what germs of blasphemy and unfaith were breeding in me? And yet she took me in.... I have not done it justice, or rather mercy. Instead I went for vengeance. An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness. (Atwood, 2007, p. 405)

The extract indicates Elaine's ability to gain a deeper understanding of others' conditions, as Mrs Smeath was the product of her own culture and limitations. Elaine's confrontation with the repressed past eventually made her feel more connected to her real self. It is at the end of the novel that, though indistinctly, Elaine begins to understand the many reasons behind her constant state of dissatisfaction and emotional numbness. On the aspect of healing through art in *Cat's Eye*, Vickroy remarks that Elaine's ability to personalize and reinvigorate artistic traditions helps her to reconsider, reinterpret, and reassess her traumatic past (2005, pp. 130-131). So, the long retrospection, in which the whole novel is formulated, helps Elaine integrate the shattered experiences of her past. In this way, her paintings contribute to regaining control of her own life, rekindling suppressed emotions of empathy and compassion toward Cordelia and acknowledging her childhood victimhood, as elaborated,

These visual artefacts (always of course mediated through/invented by language) represent the relation between 'vision' and 'a vision' (what it's assumed you've seen and what it's assumed you haven't), where socially accepted codes of seeing are challenged by the eye of the artist. As Elaine looks through the lens of her *Cat's Eye*, her Third Eye, 'the single eye that sees more than anyone else looking', she sees more because she sees differently. (Howells, 1994, p. 206)

In this manner, *Cat's Eye*, in its entirety, deftly exposes the façade of normalcy and social conformism, which are the basic oppressive tools against women, forcing them toward social persecution and mental stigma. In this context, the state of neurosis is not only perceived as a personal failure but also as a social failure, resulting in the social exclusion of marginalized individuals. The abovementioned characters by Serban, as well as Elaine from *Cat's Eye*, put in much effort but are unable to fully conform to their respective societies; thus, in a symbolic sense, these characters wear, what Serban titled his book, "the mask of normalcy", showing a sham of external social conformity as they want to survive and be accepted in society,

inadvertently, at the expense of psychological harmony. While the social malpractice of (ab)normalcy has been extensively discussed in the first section of the article, this section highlighted the psychological impact of such a practice on the protagonist's mind in the form of neurosis, its psychic operationalization, and portrayal of childhood trauma in her paintings, thus transiting from external (ab)normalcy to internal dissonance, which justifies our discussion of (ab)normalcy as a factor in neurosis.

Conclusion

This article argues that the concept of (ab)normalcy is inherently flawed, helping to sustain certain types of social oppression in society. There are two distinct ways in which the notion of (ab)normalcy is construed as ambivalent in the article: a) due to spatiotemporal dimensions, any idea of normativity cannot remain fixed in a modern multicultural urban society where one's notion of normalcy becomes abnormal for the other; b) for some people, to adapt to new environments of social normalcy becomes very problematic owing to a weak ego and can take the form of a neurotic idealized image, which is a psychologically abnormal condition representing their maladjustment to current social norms and a repressed sense of self. It is precisely for this reason that Marco Spina has observed a fixed collective consciousness of normality, "a tricky and ambiguous notion, surrounded by an aura of social dangerousness, because it can easily spread pressures, inhibitions, and discrimination within a community" (Spina, 2012, p. 43). This kind of "social dangerousness" not only draws from others but also from one's own sense of existence in a social structure, because "The judgement of normality is at the same time judgement of the individual on himself and judgement of the other on the individual" (Spina, 2012, p. 49). It is crucial to understand that it is merely a collective "perception" that sustains any idea of normativity and normalcy. It is in this vein that Carol and Grace are reared under the influence of Mrs Smeath and Aunt Mildred and genuinely consider Elaine abnormal, because she grew up with completely different normative values from theirs.

Considering this theoretical build-up, the article concurs that it is problematic to consider a person socially normal or abnormal in the contemporary globalized form of social order. It further shows through the analysis of *Cat's Eye* how the strict notion of gendered normativity resulted in Elaine's psychological disturbance, as she is not able to cope with her changed social environment in Toronto. However, this argument is not limited to gendered aspects as the article briefly covered; it can further be explored, in future studies, by questioning colonial, racist, religious, urban, rural, or any kind of fixed normative values that otherize and

abnormalize groups and people based on them. In this way, this study aims to foster inclusive tendencies in society. Further, the psychoanalytical approach of neurosis to the novelistic analysis further shows how presumptive universal normativity in social aspects can negatively affect the mental health of people who find it difficult to adapt to changing social circumstances. The protagonist, Elaine, thus becomes a victim of the vicious practice of normalcy and suffers from neurotic anxieties throughout her life. The article also discussed how Elaine's art plays a pivotal role in the portrayal of her repressed neurotic anxieties as well as in the healing process. Based on these ideas, the article, in the context of the novel, derives the conclusion that there are no universal standards of normalcy, and the notion of normal/well-adjusted has currency only within the context of a particular society with its peculiar customs and beliefs that also alter, considering the transitory nature of society itself.

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