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MAKING OF A STONE WOMAN IN 'A STONE WOMAN'

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ABSTRACT

A S Byatt is one of the leading short story writers, whose thematic concerns revolve around female issues and their ever evolving notions of identity. One such unique and different presentation is in form of 'A Stone Woman', where the protagonist undergoes certain transformations in her biological frame work and thus receives certain innate changes in her identity that makes her static, stony instead of a living.

Key words: Transformation, Metamorphosis, grief, embodiment, petrification, woman, identity , growth, self, Ines, gems, stones, change, stone woman, Iceland, Byatt, self, silence, stone, solitude

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A S Byatt always loves a good and dark short story. She's been writing these stories since Emily, protagonist of the very first story of her first collection, *Sugar* (1987), who looks up from analysing Phèdre and saw "creatures gesticulating on the fringed edge of her consciousness like blown ghosts trying to pass over the Styx". The story, "Racine and the Tablecloth", presents the places, subjects and lives of good old-fashioned English educated society that suggest girls and women shouldn't go near those places that are prohibited for them. Thus, Byatt's fiction (and especially her short fiction) presents a calmness in tone, a lightness in the handling and an underlying sense of threatened explosion - all typical of her talent for the airy, daring distillation of so much scholarliness and imaginative capacity. Besides, she loves a paradox; a simple, crucial, endlessly complex co-existence. To Byatt, this world is full of literal otherworldliness and, as a character puts in an earlier story, "black is the colour of light" and her *Little Black Book of Stories*, that's her fifth collection, is a paradox in itself. "It is bleak than surprisingly funny, very dark indeed than full of inconceivable sources of light".

The stories in this collection presents Byatt in a different shade of her creativity and presentation, particularly the story called 'A New Woman':

serumptious ... these are raw, tough, disruptive stories about memory, duty, madness, guilt, cruelty and loss, stories that grope and reel, that tgroob with secret longings, secret histories, artistic yearning and thrashes and groans of a slinking damnation in the underbrush.(Miami Herald)

This story is supremely elegant as Byatt peels off the surface from everyday life with her unique presentation of Ines, the protagonist and her frustrating state of mind. This story presents a grieving woman who busies herself with work and "with tidying love away", but she turns literally, to stone. Such a transformation allows

Byatt to polish off some rare gems: chabazite, obsidian, analcime and azurmalachite. Among such agile transformation best of all is, "droplets of alabaster and peridot clustering in her grey hair like the eggs of some mythic louse". Thus, through such representations Byatt brings home the point that life and its harsh endorsements finally carves a stone out of a human who ultimately receives the life the way it comes.

Hence, the present story is a rich exploration of the concept of 'turning to stone' as both a literalized conceit, a figure of grief and other such transformations. Petrification, as Byatt imagines it, is an applied metaphor for chronic degenerative illness that may change not only embodiment, mobility and even appearance, but also perspective and patterns of living in social and physical environments. Such transformations transform a person's ideology totally and such a transformed person visualizes the world through his transformative experiences. The story also explores how we see and respect the living and dead in monuments and memorials and how far they are responsible for our changed perceptions towards the living world.

'A Stone Woman' takes the greatest imaginative leap, describing the transformation of a woman who literally turns to a stone. Ines who lost her mother and then loses her own physic to a sudden unacceptable transformation which is difficult to accept. Here in this story, Byatt wallows in close description and beautifully conveys the connection of man and culture, "I have problems", Ines admits, but turning to stone ultimately is not a problem but something she eagerly embraces, odd but compelling. Here, she chooses a role thrust by the age old customs and gives it a different dimension and wavelength. She begins to accept her metamorphosis as a mode of development and her petrification seems to symbolize her liberated self. The concluding note in the last movement of Ines's metamorphosis and so of her life, is not of melancholy or desolation, but of happiness," she now saw ...figures, spinning and bowing in a rapid dance on a huge, lithe, stony legs...she jiggled a little as though gathering momentum, and then began dancing run, into the blizzard."(156) At the same time, one questions that why an essentialised, romantic Iceland is the only rational "other" location that can be conceived as a home for the new Ines. She might aspire for a better place, but the story is still in the exile.

Indeed, A S Byatt herself has used her short fiction to make imaginative journeys as this world seems unable to give front to the idyllic concepts of the characters. Such attempts were made by Byatt earlier as e.g, 'The Dried Witch' set in China, 'Crocodile Tears' which basis the mythology of the Mediterranean, 'The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye' set in present Turkey and again 'A Stone Woman' which derives inspiration from Nordic myths and stories of trolls. Although, such representations apparently seem an escape from the present chaotic life but reality is that it is an attempt to revisit those idyllic and blissful times when life was not as crucial as it is made now.

Hence, 'A Stone Woman' captures a different journey of a woman's grief and the transformation afterwards. Ines, a daughter grieved her mother's death while something vile happens to her gut, "twisted and gangrenous gut"(112) and she develops hard studs on her body. Followed by her hospital stay, she discovers a surprising change in her body. It seems to be turning into a stone. Her body becomes a, "raised shape, like a starfish, like the whirling arms of a nebula in the heavens" that gradually spreads to the rest of her, forming "ruddy veins" across her tummy and "greenish-white crystals sprouting in her armpits"(119). For Ines this process is fatal and she, "observes (death's) approach in a new fantastic form"(121). At that point, Ines decides to write a record for those who will find her after her death. She studies the names and nature of minerals in order to understand and describe her metamorphosis. Her new mineralizing identity gives her a new way of perception and she realizes that stones can be dynamic and living as well as static and dead; minerals are memorials to the relationships and a connection between living creatures and dead ones.

However, Ines finds herself unable to record her transformation and enjoys to be outdoors. While exploring the city, she looks for, "a place to stand in ... before she became immobile".(127) While she wonders the old graveyard, she gets accustomed with Thorsten in, an old Icelandic stonecutter who is also mourning the death (probably of a child). Ines finds a confidant in stone cutter and shares the secret of her metamorphosis and travels with him to his homeland, geologically young place where stones are alive and

myths delve "striding stone women."(147) Thorsten in here carves a standing stone image of Ines that reflects his ability to see her as she is and finds her beautiful,"petra faction that she existed , in there."(150) Thus, becomes a icosatetrahedral, a frozen crystal with so many faces and living identity somewhere in the past.

Ines's metamorphosis culminates in her inability to see or speak as a human and her ability to perceive a whole new realm of living creature, "earth bubbles and earth monsters"(151) and other stone people who are "flinging their arms wide in invitation"(156). She joins their wild dance and becomes "a polite old woman" that has to get accustomed to "solitude and silence". She shows a deep concern about memory and past "found herself preoccupied with time and dust, for minutes that seemed like hours and hours that seemed like minutes."(133) Thus, Ines establishes a new form of woman; a form that is strange and unimaginable;

...the superb centerpiece 'A Stone Woman', a survivor of life- threatening surgery undergoes a "metamorphosis" that takes her beyond her cramped personal world to the alluring landscape of Iceland... and a strange, unforeseen and unimaginable liberation. (Kirkuk Review)

Thereby, presents the frailty, impermanence and disturbing complexity of human body. The story not only emerges as a contemporary version of ancient myth of a woman turning to stone, but as a highly original and imaginative rendering of biological ageing. Swinging between transience and permanence, the animate and the inanimate, mutability and eternity, the literary dialogue reflects on the meaning and implications of ageing of a woman at the behest of solitude and loneliness and its effects on one's personality.

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