Houses, Clothes, and Pregnant Women
Re-Construction of Memory and Identity in Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace

Introduction
The paper deals with the interpretation of Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace with the focus on the problem of subject. Alias Grace is a postmodern novel which includes various genres. Moreover, it uses published confessions, letters from doctors, maps, pictures and other documents and thus palimpsest is created. As each section’s name corresponds to a quilt pattern name – the quilt pattern and section titles create intertextuality. Quilting is used as a metaphor for Grace’s construction of her story, memory and, consequently, of her identity. This metafiction supports our perception of the subject as non-fixed, fluid, multilayered, multiple and socially constructed.

Palimpsest
Margaret Atwood’s Alias Grace is based on a “celebrated” maidservant Grace Marks, who, in 1843, may or may not have participated in the murder of her master Mr Kinnear and his housekeeper / mistress Nancy Montgomery. The novel is a postmodern metanarrative including various genres, such as ghost story, detective story, Gothic story, autobiography, Victorian novel, etc. Moreover, it uses the published confessions, letters from doctors, maps, pictures, contemporary newspaper articles and other documents (research on Spiritualism, Mesmerism, psychology) and thus “transtextual” relations are created. The author’s afterword comments on the boundaries between fiction and reality, but the boundaries are not clear, because Grace herself gave three different versions of the murder and James Mc Dermott gave two. The novel also uses Susanna Moodie’s Life in the Clearings (1853), “a third hand-account” (Atwood, 538) influenced by Dickens’ hypotext Oliver Twist. The written accounts, the author used, were so “contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally ‘known’” (Atwood, 541). The hints and gaps in the records enable the author (and the reader) to fictionalize and invent. Palimpsests are open texts, open sources of plural interpretations. Originally, palimpsest is a vellum which has been used more than once for
writing on and the previous writing has been removed. We use the term palimpsest not only as a literary term but also as a metaphor for Grace’s quilts that recycle old clothes and Grace’s subjectivity. The purity of genres has been put into question as well as the sense of a single, fixed and coherent identity. Atwood’s re-writing of the historical event is woven from other texts: references, quotations taking the shape of a transformed, translated and re-interpreted palimpsest.

“The function of the conjunction of the historiographic and the metafictive in much contemporary fiction is to make the reader aware of the distinction between the events of the past real and the facts by which we give meaning to that past” (Hutcheon, 223). Atwood’s historiographic metafiction challenges the borders of fiction and the verifiably historical facts. According to Sharon A. Wilson, “Alias Grace uses postmodern techniques such as self-reflexiveness and intertextuality to foreground issues of class, sexual politics, and other political issues, including those of postcolonial condition” (Margaret, 122). Even the form of this postmodern novel supports the idea of intertextuality. The image of quilting is used to represent the piecing together of various texts into an original, re-stored pattern. Besides, each chapter’s name corresponds to a name of a quilt pattern, and so the quilts comment on the story and create another kind of metatext.

**Quilting**

The motif of quilting is important not only as a formal device, but it is also a basic dynamics of Grace’s story. Grace quilts while serving her prison sentence for the murders and constructs her story to an American psychoanalyst Simon Jordan. Grace creates the quilt of her story and memory, chooses the facts. She changes the pattern of her quilt to suit her own fiction about fiction. Her coherent story must hang together to save her life and to be believed according to plausibility. She constructs her story in order to satisfy her lawyer and later Dr. Jordan: “[...] he asks me what I think about this thing he has brought, and I say something about it just to keep him happy, and he writes it down” (Atwood, 76). Grace’s story is created in the discourse with Dr Jordan, who is sewn into her narrative. His dreams and letters complete the postmodern tapestry. In accordance with the image of quilt he sees a human body knit together, “composed of a thousand of Ariadne’s clues, all leading to the brain, that shadowy central den where the human bones lie scattered and the monsters lurk [...]” (Atwood, 217). He sees Grace as a Pandora’s Box or as a Secret Drawer and he wants to open it. These images hunt him in his dreams and thus they create another layer
of palimpsest. On the other hand, Grace is obsessed with the fear of being opened up, dissected, cut open. He supposes that “below the threshold of her consciousness” he must discover her buried memories. Her mind represents “a secret world” (Atwood, 159) of the maids he was not supposed to explore as a boy. He expects to discover the thing that defines her, “the dire surprise” (Atwood, 216), the centre of her. He represents the hope of a unified subject, of the sense of wholeness formulated by Reverend Verringer: “We cannot be mere patchworks!” (Atwood, 471) This quotation articulates a fear of liberal humanism and its notion of autonomous, centred, homogenous and totalizing subject.

Dr. Jordan is seduced to see her in Victorian stereotypes, as a monster or an angel, murderer or victim, object of horror or object of pity. Freud’s theories mark the death of the unitary I; the subject is split between the conscious and the unconscious levels of the psyche. According to Lacan, Freud discovers a heteronomy within man; however, the Freudian approach sees patient in danger of losing control and a sense of a real, true self or identity. On the other hand, Lacan’s theory rejects the idea of a self-centred subject in control. Lacan conceives the other side of consciousness in a radically new way. “Without ‘the discourse of the Other’ – which is one of Lacan’s names for the unconscious – there would be neither the desire for recognition nor recognition of desire, for no object is adequate to desire [...]” (Fenves). Lacan then defines desire as the desire of the Other and it indicates that the self desires only as the Other. It is in and through language that the subject becomes a subject. Language allows us to communicate with others, but it also intensifies our experience of “lack”. Our entry into language and the symbolic opens up a gap between our need and the promise and failure of language; it is in this gap that desire emerges. “Desire involves an ongoing movement which destroys identity (the ego) in favour of a metonymic ‘sliding’ from one signifier to another – but always by producing a new identity in the place of old one” (Brockelman).

Her more aggressive and liberal Other is repressed in the cellar with dead Nancy, the more outspoken and democratic Other is free in the attic. Grace’s subject is constructed in the discourse with Dr. Jordan, her lawyer and the others. Her subject is in the process; her pluralized subjectivity is not fixed or finished. In this paper, quilting is used as a metaphor for Grace’s reconstruction of her story, memory and, consequently, of her subjectivity. The narrator constructs the ‘truth’, the story/fact/fiction and thus constructs the sense of unified identity.
The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self’ [...] If we feel that we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’ about ourselves (Hall, 277).

Houses / memory
Grace claims she has no memory of certain events; her memory is “only in scraps, like a plate that’s been broken. There are always some pieces that would seem to belong to another plate altogether; and then there are the empty spaces, where you cannot fit anything in” (Atwood, 119). She may suffer from emotional-hysterical amnesia, it is the memory loss caused by psychological trauma. Stedman’s Medical Dictionary claims it is a temporary condition. Dr. Jordan rereads the works on association and suggestion wishing to find a key to her lost memories of what happened in the cellar. But is she a true amnesiac?

Physiologically speaking, a memory is the result of chemical or even structural changes in synaptic transmissions between neurons. As these changes occur, a pathway is created. This pathway is called a memory trace. Signals can travel along these memory traces through the brain (Stedman, 334).

But Grace Marks leaves no traces, no marks: “On the edge of sleep I thought: It’s as if I never existed, because no trace of me remains, I have left no marks [...] It is almost the same as being innocent” (Atwood, 398). Her identity is strongly linked with her memory. She claims she does not remember the murders. Does it mean she is innocent? John Locke in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (Book II, Chapter 27) famously identified the self with memory. In his view, a person’s identity extends to whatever of his or her past he or she can remember. Consequently, past experiences, thoughts or actions that the person does not remember are not part of his/her identity. For Locke, selfhood consists entirely in continuity of memory. His identification of the self with memory has proved very popular over the years.

Grace exists in the gaps of her memory, beyond the “truth” . Her memory is a Pandora’s Box for Dr. Jordan and the readers. She tries to repress her memories, aggressiveness and dreams. Her memories, passion and obsession with blood are hidden in the cellar of her unconsciousness. Nevertheless, if
we knew her memories, would we know the truth? Her memories can be false. The testimonies of the witnesses are also contradictory. Is her story a trick? Is she an object of pity or horror? Does she suffer from amnesia or multiple personality disorder? Or both? Did she have sex with McDermott or Mr Kinnear? Or both? She creates a puzzle, and “the unknown is always more wonderful [...] and more convincing” (Atwood, 311). “For if people wish to believe a thing, and long for it, is it cheating to help them to their own belief...?” (Atwood, 311).

We cannot distinguish the truth from fiction. She exists in the gaps between reality and fiction, her story is constructed/deconstructed in the process of reading/quilting/narrating. Under the male gaze of Dr. Jordan and/or her husband Jammie, she narrates her story and she “lies” to please them. “You [Dr. Jordan] were as eager as Mr Walsh is to hear about my sufferings and my hardships in life; and not only that, but you would write them down as well. I could tell when your interest was slacking, as your gaze would wander” (Atwood, 531). According to Pam Morris, “identity is constructed on this intertextuality of boundary between the unconscious drives and the social, self is thus a dialogic interaction of these two dispositions and produces a subject always ‘in process’ – a pluralized identity never fixed or finished” (Eagleton, 189-190).

Clothes
Grace Marks constructs her story, but the reader has to deconstruct it, because she is not a very reliable narrator. Her story “hangs together”, however, she selects what to hide and forget, too. The selection of clothes, trying clothes on, borrowing clothes, and discarding clothes can represent “the creation, transformation and abandonment of a sense of self or a sense of different selves” (Modern, 189-190). She chooses to wear Nancy’s dress when she is trying to escape, but also on trial for the murder. She has taken Nancy’s box and calls it “mine”. Nancy, despite the fact that she is a housekeeper, is “a gracefully dressed lady” (Atwood, 242), a mistress of Mr. Kinnear whom Grace fancies. Grace wanted to find in Nancy another Mary Whitney, her alias. She used to borrow Mary Whitney’s clothes and she borrowed Mary’s name as her alias when she was escaping. On the other hand, the link between clothes and identity is even stronger when Grace is being hypnotized / playing a trick (?) and Mary Whitney confesses to the murder, she claims she “only borrowed her [Grace’s] clothing for a time” (Atwood, 468). This Gothic-like explanation serves an assumption that Grace suffers from multiple personality disorder. In the essay Multiple
Personality and the Postmodern Subject, Marta Caminero-Santangelo theorizes that:

[... ] multiple personality disorder as experienced by women is not significantly different from other forms of female “madness” such as hysteria a century ago or anorexia nervosa today, which enact a protest against socially constructed category of femininity even while they reside fully within that category (Caminero-Santangelo, 97).

Mary Whitney is Grace’s freer, un-Victorian – less socialized, more aggressive and more vulgar Other. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers created many archetypal doubles to speak for them: “[...] from a female point of view, the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation [...]” (Gilbert et al., 79). Similarly, Grace represses her dead friend’s more revengeful aspect as well as her desire to be at Nancy’s place (in Mr. Kinnear’s bed). These repressed memories and obsession with blood can be associated with a recurrent motif of red flowers which unifies the whole design of the novel. By refracting the single identity of Grace, the liberating aspect of a multiple, plural subjectivity is emphasized. If the emergence of the Double was a survival strategy at the beginning when she used the name Mary Whitney for the first time, the psychic multiplicity is later welcomed.

Grace’s memories are strongly associated with clothes: her mother’s shawl, Mary’s red petticoat, crinolines, her prison yellow nightdress, Nancy’s second best dress she lent her when going to church, Miss Lydia’s dress, her mother’s kerchief she forgot to take off Nancy’s neck...On the other hand, after the murders, she took off her clothes, because she wished to forget. “[...] and I could almost see Nancy and Mary beginning to take shape again inside their clothes [...]” (Atwood, 516).

A negative aspect of the construction of the self is manifested when she is leaving prison. Grace perceives the new fashion and her new clothes as masquerade. She does not like the colours, and big bunches of cloth pulled to the back and she regrets she had no chance to wear a crinoline. Judith Butler in her Gender Troubles quotes Luce Irigaray’s remarks on masquerade: “[...] the masquerade [...] is what women do [...] to participate in man’s desire, but at the cost of giving up their own” (Butler, 60). Together with her new clothes, she is getting used to her new identity of someone who has been rescued. “It was very strange to realize that I would not be a celebrated
murderess any more, but seen perhaps as an innocent woman wrongly accused and imprisoned unjustly [...]” (Atwood, 513). The box with her clothes, or scrapes of clothes, functions as the Governor’s wife’s scrapbook. She “cuts the crimes out of the newspapers and pastes them in” (Atwood, 29) to remember the famous criminals. Her scrapbook is an alternation of Grace’s memory quilt created of the scrapes of clothes.

**Pregnant women / subject**

Margaret Atwood portrays the lives of 19th century women enclosed in kitchens, imprisoned in sewing rooms, trapped under the pile of laundry. Significantly, the explosive violence in the cellar and free, articulated anger in the attic can be seen as a moment of escape. Specifically, her hysteria, amnesia and/or multiple personality disorder can be closely associated with this pattern. While knitting, knotting, sewing are female activities associated with pregnancy and perceived as a creative process in Atwood’s books, Mary, Nancy and Grace’s mother are imprisoned and entrapped by it, they are in trouble, and they cannot escape.

Destroyed by traditional female activities – cooking, nursing, needling, knotting – which ought to have given them life as they themselves give life to men, the women of this underground harem are obviously buried in (and by) patriarchal definitions of their sexuality (Gilbert et al., 94).

Metaphorically, Grace cannot leave the cellar of her dream, because she is blocked by a man “standing there with a candle” (Atwood, 7). Her escape is her recreated story, her escape is a Scheherazade’s amusing tale. At the end of the novel, Grace (married and pregnant or ill) uses the pieces of Mary Whitney’s white petticoat, her nightgown from prison and Nancy’s pink-and-white flowered dress to form a pattern of her quilt. “And so we will be all together” (Atwood, 534). In the same way, the text itself presents a patchwork of styles and genres. Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous posit multiplicity at the basis of the feminine. “On account of their psychic plurality, women reveal capacity to allow for difference and alterity, to accept otherness within the self” (Rao, 45). Nancy and Mary are Grace’s desired Others. Grace undergoes bodily (clothes) and psychic transformations (using Mary’s bad language, her name). She accepts otherness within the self. As Luce Irigaray states in *This Sex Which Is Not One* the woman is “neither one nor two” (363).
Conclusion
Grace is “alias Grace”, because her subjectivity is not fixed, it is always in the process, multiple and de-centred. Grace exists as an alias, fiction, construction and self-deconstruction. The gap, she has in memory, is the place where she exists, between the reality and fiction, between the cellar and the attic. She is not the angel or monster, she is not the object of horror or the object of pity, the either/or axis can be broken down in order to accept the both/and of multiplicity. “Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion” (Hutcheon, 61).

Works Cited
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