Unravelling the Understanding of How Identity, Language, and the Conscious Operate within Atwood's Novel the Blind Assassin: A Comparative Study with Plato's Allegory of the Cave Theory and Kierkegaard's Three Stages of Existence

[1]Ifrah Mohi ud din* and [2]Dr. Sadhana Agrawal

*[1]Ph.D. scholar, Govt. MLB Arts and Commerce college, Gwalior, MP
E-Mail: imrather55@gmail.com
[2]Assistant professor, Govt. MLB Arts and Commerce college, Gwalior, MP
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Abstract:

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000) intricately weaves themes of identity, language, and consciousness through its nested narratives, including Iris Chase Griffen's memoir, a speculative fiction tale, and scattered news clippings. This comparative study examines these elements by drawing parallels with Plato's Allegory of the Cave from *The Republic* and Søren Kierkegaard's three stages of existence—aesthetic, ethical, and religious—as outlined in works like *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*. In Plato's allegory, prisoners chained in a cave perceive shadows as reality until one escape to encounter true forms, symbolizing the journey from illusion to enlightenment. Kierkegaard's stages depict human development: the aesthetic stage of sensory pleasure and immediacy, the ethical stage of societal norms and commitments, and the religious stage of individual faith and transcendence beyond reason. The analysis reveals how Atwood portrays identity as a shadowed construct, shaped by societal illusions akin to Plato's cave shadows and Kierkegaard's aesthetic indulgences, yet capable of ethical restructuring and religious authenticity. Language serves as both a binding chain—reinforcing deceptive narratives—and a liberatory tool for dialectical ascent, mirroring Platonic recollection (anamnesis) and Kierkegaardian leaps of faith. Consciousness emerges as a dynamic process, grappling with unconscious depths, progressing from cave-bound deception through ethical awareness to religious insight. Drawing on literary criticism, it underscores the novel's engagement with memory, gender, and subjectivity, offering interdisciplinary insights into contemporary literature's exploration of awareness and authenticity.

Keywords: Identity; Language; Conscious**;** The Blind Assassin; Allegory of Cave; Three Stage of Existence.

1. Introduction:

Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, published in 2000, stands as a masterful exploration of the human condition, blending historical fiction, memoir, and speculative elements to delve into the complexities of identity, language, and consciousness. Set against the backdrop of early 20th-century Canada, the novel centres on Iris Chase Griffen, an octogenarian reflecting on her life marked by tragedy, secrecy, and societal pressures. Her narrative intertwines with that of her sister Laura, whose apparent suicide opens the book, and an embedded pulp science-fiction story titled *The Blind Assassin*, which chronicles a clandestine affair between a leftist storyteller and a wealthy woman. Interspersed newspaper clippings provide a public facade, contrasting the private turmoil. This multifaceted structure invites readers to question the nature of truth and perception, themes that resonate deeply with Plato's Allegory of the Cave in Book VII of *The Republic*. Plato describes prisoners shackled in a cave, facing a wall where shadows cast by puppeteers behind them represent their entire reality. When one prisoner breaks free, ascends to the surface, and beholds the sun-lit world of true forms, he undergoes painful enlightenment, only to face rejection upon returning to liberate others. This allegory illustrates the transition from sensory deception to philosophical knowledge through anamnesis, or recollection of innate ideas obscured by illusion (Plato, 1997, p. 1132).

Complementing Plato's framework is Søren Kierkegaard's existential philosophy, particularly his three stages of existence. In *Either/Or* (1843) and *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), Kierkegaard outlines a progression of life modes. The aesthetic stage involves living for immediate pleasure, beauty, and sensory experiences, often leading to boredom and despair due to its lack of commitment. The ethical stage emphasizes duty, social norms, and universal principles, such as marriage and moral responsibility, providing structure but potentially stifling individuality. The religious stage transcends both, requiring a "leap of faith" into the absurd, where the individual relates directly to the infinite, embracing paradox and personal truth beyond rational ethics (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987, pp. 12-15; Kierkegaard, 1845/1988, pp. 7-10).

Atwood's novel aligns these philosophies in critiquing illusionary existence under patriarchal and economic oppression. Iris's memoir functions as an ascent from cave-like confinement, recollecting suppressed truths amid societal shadows. The science-fiction narrative, with its alien worlds and blind assassins, embodies aesthetic escapism, while the clippings represent ethical facades of public morality. Literary critics note the novel's emphasis on gendered power dynamics, with Iris evolving from passive victim to active narrator, disrupting traditional roles (Staels, 2004, p. 148). This feminist lens enhances the philosophical parallels, as Atwood uses storytelling to challenge deception and affirm agency.

The paper's sections explore identity as a dynamic construct, forged in Platonic shadows and Kierkegaardian stages; language as a dual force of constraint and liberation; and consciousness as an evolving awareness mirroring cave ascent and existential progression. Subsequent analyses of the symbolic (ethical norms), imaginary (aesthetic illusions), real (religious transcendence), and mirror stage (self-recognition moments) further dissect these elements. Ultimately, Atwood's work bridges philosophy and literature, illuminating the psyche's potential for enlightenment amid perpetual lack.

Historical context enriches this reading. Set during the Great Depression and World War II, the novel critiques capitalism's impact on personal lives, with the Chase family's factory symbolizing ethical compromises. Iris's arranged marriage to industrialist Richard Griffen echoes Kierkegaard's ethical stage, where societal duties mask inner despair. Plato's allegory critiques such illusions, urging recollection of authentic forms. Critics highlight Atwood's use of multiperspective narratives to frame identity and history, unravelling layers of deception (Michael, 2010, p. 89). Kierkegaard's influence, though less directly applied in Atwood scholarship, offers fresh insights. His emphasis on subjective truth aligns with Iris's subjective memoir, contrasting objective clippings. The leap to religious stage parallels her late-life revelations, embracing the absurdities of her past. Plato's innate ideas resonate with Kierkegaard's notion of the self as a synthesis of finite and infinite, recollected through introspection (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 13).

This comparative approach not only elucidates Atwood's themes but also contributes to interdisciplinary discourse on human awareness in literature. By examining how identity, language, and consciousness operate within constrained environments, the study reveals the

novel's affirmation of transcendence through narrative recollection and existential commitment.

Identity Formation:

In *The Blind Assassin*, identity emerges as a fluid, contested entity, shaped by external illusions and internal reckonings, paralleling Plato's cave shadows and Kierkegaard's existential stages. Iris Chase Griffen's self evolves from a shadowed construct—molded by patriarchal expectations—to an enlightened authenticity, achieved through recollection and leaps of faith. Plato's allegory portrays identity as deceived perception: prisoners identify with shadows, mistaking them for essence until ascent reveals true forms (Plato, 1997, p. 1132). Similarly, Iris's early identity is confined to societal projections. As daughter of a factory owner, she is interpolated into roles of obedience and commodity, her arranged marriage to Richard Griffen reducing her to a bargaining chip in economic survival. This mirrors the cave's chains, where sensory deceptions obscure innate truths. Her memoir becomes an anamnesis, recollecting buried authenticity amid generational traumas.

Kierkegaard's stages provide a developmental lens. In the aesthetic stage, identity is fragmented and pleasure-seeking, avoiding commitment. Laura Chase embodies this: her rebellious, enigmatic persona resists norms, living in imaginative realms like the sci-fi tale she purportedly authors. Yet, this leads to despair, culminating in her suicide—a failure to transcend immediacy. Iris, initially aesthetic in her passive indulgences, transitions to the ethical stage through marriage and motherhood, adopting universal duties. However, these ethical identities prove illusory, as Richard's abuse and societal hypocrisy expose their hollowness (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987, pp. 254-256). The religious stage offers resolution: identity as individual relation to the infinite. Iris's late reflections represent a leap of faith, embracing the absurd contradictions of her life—revealing herself as the true author of *The Blind Assassin*. This transcends ethical norms, affirming personal truth. Plato's escapee parallels this, blinded by light yet gaining insight. Literary analyses emphasize emulation and repetition in identity formation (Michael, 2010, p. 90). Iris emulates her mother's stoicism, repeating patterns of silence, but breaks cycles through narrative. The novel's nested structure underscores shifting identities: the sci-fi assassin's blindness symbolizes obscured selfhood, his tales subverting dominant narratives.

Gender complicates this. Feminist critics view Iris's evolution as reclamation from objectification, her "obscured gaze" sharpening to agency (Hembrough, 2017, p. 2). Kierkegaard's male-centric stages adapt here to feminine consciousness, with Iris's leap embodying existential feminism. Generational legacies—Aimee and Sabrina—highlight inherited identities, recollecting suppressed truths. Ultimately, identity in Atwood's novel is dynamic, bridging Platonic enlightenment and Kierkegaardian progression, critiquing illusions while affirming transcendence.

Role of Language:

Language in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* serves as a multifaceted instrument, simultaneously constructing deceptive realities and facilitating pathways to enlightenment and authenticity. Through the novel's intricate narrative layers—Iris Chase Griffen's introspective memoir, the embedded pulp science-fiction story, and the interspersed newspaper clippings—Atwood illustrates language's dual capacity to imprison individuals within societal illusions and to empower them toward self-revelation. This duality resonates profoundly with Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where language manifests as the misleading echoes and shadows that bind prisoners to false perceptions, yet also as the dialectical tool enabling recollection (anamnesis) of innate truths. Complementing this is Søren Kierkegaard's three stages of existence, which frame language's evolution from aesthetic indirection and pleasure-seeking expression, through ethical normative discourse, to religious passionate communication that leaps beyond rational constraints toward subjective truth. At its core, the novel portrays language as a binding mechanism, akin to the shadows in Plato's cave. The prisoners, chained and facing a wall, interpret the projected shadows and accompanying echoes as the totality of reality, unaware of the puppeteers manipulating firelight behind them. Similarly, in *The Blind Assassin*, the newspaper clippings function as linguistic shadows—terse, objective reports that distort and simplify complex personal histories into public myths. These articles, detailing events like Laura Chase's suicide or the Chase family's social standing, present a sanitized, authoritative version of truth that chains characters and readers alike to superficial interpretations. For instance, the opening clipping announces Laura's death with clinical detachment: "Why is it that we want so badly to memorialize ourselves? Even while we're still alive" (Atwood, 2000, p. 1). This rhetorical question, embedded in journalistic prose,

masks the deeper traumas and secrets, echoing Plato's deceptive sensory inputs that obscure innate ideas. Atwood critiques how such language reinforces patriarchal and capitalist structures in early 20th-century Canada, where women like Iris are reduced to silent commodities, their voices appropriated by male-dominated narratives (Plato, 1997, p. 1133). Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage further illuminates this imprisoning aspect of language, where expression is characterized by poetic indirection, sensory allure, and avoidance of commitment. In this mode, language prioritizes beauty and immediacy, often leading to fragmentation and despair. The embedded science-fiction tale, *The Blind Assassin*, exemplifies aesthetic language: a nameless man's improvised stories of the planet Zycron, told to his lover in seedy hotel rooms, weave tales of mute sacrificial maidens and blind assassins who navigate by touch and sound. This narrative employs vivid metaphors and sensory details—"the peach women of Aa'A, with their eyes that glowed like hot coals" (Atwood, 2000, p. 29)—to seduce and escape the harsh realities of Depression-era poverty and political unrest. However, its fragmented, episodic structure mirrors the aesthetic individual's inability to sustain meaning, culminating in existential boredom. Laura Chase, often associated with this tale (though Iris later reveals her authorship), embodies aesthetic language through her cryptic notes and drawings, which resist straightforward interpretation. Her rephrasing of biblical passages or enigmatic car writings, such as "He was one of the ones who could make you feel as if you were the only person in the world," evade direct confrontation, much like Kierkegaard's aesthete who hides behind irony and multiplicity to avoid despair (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987, p. 259).

Yet, language in Atwood's novel is not merely deceptive; it also acts as a liberatory force, paralleling Plato's dialectical ascent. In the allegory, the freed prisoner's journey involves painful dialogue and recollection, confronting the blinding light of true forms. Iris's memoir serves this dialectical role, using reflective, confessional language to unearth suppressed memories and challenge the shadows of her past. Through introspective prose, she recollects innate authenticity obscured by societal deceptions—her arranged marriage, her sister's exploitation, and her own complicity in silence. Sentences like "I knew I was a cold fish, but I didn't care" (Atwood, 2000, p. 197) reveal a gradual awakening, where language facilitates anamnesis, piecing together fragmented identities into a coherent, if painful, whole. Atwood's use of multiple narrative voices—shifting from Iris's first-person reflections to the third-person sci-fi excerpts—creates a dialogic interplay that disrupts monolithic truths, encouraging

readers to ascend beyond surface illusions (Atwood, 2000, p. 287). Transitioning to Kierkegaard's ethical stage, language assumes a normative, structuring function, emphasizing universal principles and social commitments. Here, discourse enforces moral and societal contracts, providing order but often at the expense of individuality. In the novel, this manifests in the formal rhetoric of power figures like Richard Griffen, whose manipulative speeches and letters impose ethical facades. His promises of security to Iris during courtship mask abusive intentions, mirroring Kierkegaard's ethical individual who adheres to duties like marriage, yet encounters inner hollowness. The factory slogans and political orations in the background—evoking labor unrest and wartime propaganda—further illustrate ethical language's role in maintaining illusions, akin to Plato's cave echoes that reinforce collective deception. Iris initially participates in this, her early writings conforming to propriety, but her memoir subverts it by exposing hypocrisies, such as the gap between public virtue and private vice (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987, p. 295).

The pinnacle of language's role emerges in Kierkegaard's religious stage, where communication becomes a passionate, subjective leap of faith, transcending rational ethics toward the infinite. This aligns with Plato's ultimate enlightenment, where the escapee beholds the sun as the form of the good, embracing paradox and ineffability. Iris's late revelations in the memoir represent this leap: admitting her authorship of the sci-fi tale, she employs language not for aesthetic pleasure or ethical justification, but for authentic testimony. Her prose turns fervent and paradoxical—"Everything I've believed in, during my whole life, has been a mistake" (Atwood, 2000, p. 513)—embracing the absurd contradictions of her existence, much like Kierkegaard's Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, who communicates through silence and action beyond words. Atwood highlights language's limits in trauma, where the Real irrupts as unspeakable—Laura's suicide, the war's horrors—pointing to a religious silence that recollects deeper truths (Kierkegaard, 1843/1983, p. 56).

Feminist dimensions enrich this analysis, as Atwood critiques patriarchal language that silences women, equating voicelessness with powerlessness. The mute women in Zycron symbolize this, their tongues cut out for sacrificial purity, yet the blind assassins' tactile navigation suggests alternative, non-verbal languages of resistance. Iris's narrative reclaims voice, disrupting phallocentric orders through écriture-like fluidity, blending genres to subvert

linearity. Literary critics underscore Atwood's rhetorical strategies, such as irony and metafiction, which layer meanings and invite reader participation in truth-construction (Harrison, 2024, p. 32). The novel's engagement with semiotics—the gap between signifier and signified—further aligns with Platonic illusions, where words are arbitrary shadows, yet capable of pointing to forms through dialectical refinement.

In bridging Plato and Kierkegaard, Atwood affirms language's transformative potential amid deception. From aesthetic escapism to ethical constraint to religious transcendence, language evolves as a tool for existential progression, mirroring the cave ascent. The novel's nested structures emphasize this, with each layer peeling back illusions to reveal innate authenticity. Ultimately, *The Blind Assassin* critiques language's complicity in oppression while celebrating its role in feminist and philosophical enlightenment, offering profound insights into how words shape, confine, and liberate the human psyche in a world of shadows and leaps.

Working of the Conscious:

Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* emerges as a dynamic, layered process, interweaving perception, memory, and introspection to navigate the illusions of societal constraints and personal traumas. Through the novel's nested narratives—Iris Chase Griffen's reflective memoir, the speculative science-fiction tale, and fragmented news clippings—Atwood depicts consciousness as a contested terrain, where individuals grapple with unconscious depths and external deceptions. This portrayal aligns closely with Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which illustrates consciousness as an ascent from shadowed illusions to enlightened truth, achieved through painful recollection (anamnesis) of innate ideas. Complementing this is Søren Kierkegaard's three stages of existence, framing consciousness as a progressive evolution: from the aesthetic stage of immediate sensory experiences and despair, through the ethical stage of normative awareness and duty, to the religious stage of transcendent faith and subjective authenticity. In Atwood's work, consciousness is not static but evolves amid patriarchal oppression and historical upheavals, critiquing illusionary existence while affirming the potential for feminist enlightenment.

Plato's allegory provides a foundational metaphor for consciousness in the novel. The prisoners, bound in the cave and mistaking flickering shadows for reality, represent a limited, deceived awareness shaped by sensory inputs. Only through escape and confrontation with the

blinding sun—symbolizing true forms—does consciousness expand via anamnesis, recollecting obscured truths. In *The Blind Assassin*, Iris's consciousness mirrors this ascent. As a young woman, her awareness is confined to societal shadows: the patriarchal expectations of her family, the economic pressures of the Great Depression, and her arranged marriage to Richard Griffen. These external projections chain her psyche, reducing her to passive observer, much like Plato's prisoners who "see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another" (Plato, 1997, p. 1132). Her memoir, written in old age, becomes the vehicle for enlightenment, as she recollects repressed memories—her sister's exploitation, her own infidelity, and the family's moral compromises. This process is painful, akin to the escapee's disorientation, as Iris confronts the "double exposure" of her life, superimposing childlike naivety with adult hindsight. The novel's structure reinforces this: clippings offer superficial, public consciousness—objective reports that distort truths—while the memoir delves into private, introspective depths, stripping away illusions to reveal innate authenticity (Plato, 1997, p. 1134).

Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage further elucidates the initial workings of consciousness in Atwood's characters, characterized by sensory immediacy, pleasure-seeking, and eventual boredom leading to despair. In this mode, awareness is fragmented and evasive, avoiding deep commitment. Laura Chase embodies this aesthetic consciousness: her literal interpretations of language and defiant actions reflect a childlike, unfiltered perception that clashes with societal norms. For instance, her struggles with metaphorical idioms—like mistaking "knuckle sandwiches" for literal food or "up the spout" for pregnancy—highlight an awakening to the opacity of language, yet her inability to integrate these leads to social isolation and tragedy. The embedded science-fiction narrative, with its tales of Zycron's blind assassins and mute women, serves as an aesthetic escape for the characters, allowing consciousness to indulge in imaginative realms detached from reality. However, this escapism breeds despair, as the storyteller's fictions fail to resolve real-world conflicts, echoing Kierkegaard's aesthete who cycles through pleasures without fulfillment. Iris, too, begins aesthetically, her early consciousness absorbed in sensory details of her privileged yet stifling upbringing—the textures of fabrics, the scents of factories—but this superficial awareness crumbles under trauma, propelling her toward deeper stages (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987, pp. 258-260).

As consciousness progresses to Kierkegaard's ethical stage, it adopts a structured, normative framework, emphasizing universal duties and social responsibilities. Here, awareness confronts moral imperatives, providing order but often masking inner voids. In the novel, this manifests in Iris's adherence to ethical roles: as dutiful daughter, wife, and mother, her consciousness internalizes patriarchal codes, suppressing personal desires for familial stability. The Chase family's factory, symbolizing capitalist ethics, imposes a collective consciousness of progress and propriety, yet exposes hypocrisies during labor unrest and wartime profiteering. Iris's marriage to Richard represents this ethical entrapment, where consciousness rationalizes abuse as duty, mirroring Plato's cave dwellers who cling to familiar shadows despite their falsity. Atwood critiques this stage through the novel's interplay of public and private narratives: the clippings enforce an ethical facade of respectability—"Love, then marriage, then catastrophe" (Atwood, 2000, p. 187)—while Iris's reflections reveal the psyche's fragmentation under such norms. Memory plays a crucial role here, operating as a constructive process akin to Husserl's Wiedererinnerung, where consciousness reconfigures past events through imagination, blending personal anecdotes with historical chronicles. Iris's analepses—flashing back to her parents' courtship amid wars and economic downturns—heighten ethical awareness, exposing the illusions of class and gender hierarchies (Husserl, 1991, p. 112).

The culmination of consciousness in Atwood's novel aligns with Kierkegaard's religious stage, a leap of faith transcending rational ethics toward paradoxical, individual truth. This stage involves embracing the absurd, relating directly to the infinite amid finite limitations. Iris's late-life memoir embodies this transcendence: by revealing herself as the author of *The Blind Assassin*, she leaps beyond ethical justifications, affirming subjective authenticity in the face of deception. Her consciousness, now fully awakened, embraces contradictions—"Everything I've believed in, during my whole life, has been a mistake" (Atwood, 2000, p. 513)—much like Plato's enlightened escapee who returns to the cave, blinded yet insightful. This religious consciousness recollects innate ideas, fusing personal destiny with broader existential themes, as Iris syncretically embodies mythological figures like the Parcae, spinning and erasing her narrative threads. Atwood infuses a feminist dimension, where female consciousness disrupts phallocentric orders, reclaiming agency through introspective voice. The psyche's fragmentation—via overlapping memories and narratives—ultimately coheres in this stage, offering resolution amid perpetual lack (Kierkegaard, 1843/1983, p. 58).

Philosophical undertones enrich Atwood's depiction, drawing on Platonic forms as eternal truths obscured by sensory deceptions, while echoing Romantic tensions between multiplicity and unity, as in Coleridge's "Multëity in Unity" (Coleridge, 1817, p. 232). Consciousness grapples with the unconscious, unearthing repressed drives through trauma, such as Laura's suicide or the war's horrors, which irrupt as ineffable realities. The novel critiques market liberalism's impact on the psyche, where commodified language and identities stifle authentic awareness. Literary elements, like metatextual deconstruction—Iris's "long scroll of ink" erased by her left hand (Atwood, 2000, p. 517)—underscore consciousness as a palimpsestic process, layering and stripping meanings.

In integrating Plato and Kierkegaard, Atwood affirms consciousness's transformative potential. From cave-bound deception through ethical structuring to religious transcendence, it evolves as a feminist tool for recollection and resistance. The novel's duplicity—fact and fiction hybridized—mirrors this, inviting readers to question their own awareness. Ultimately, *The Blind Assassin* portrays consciousness not as passive reception but active reconstruction, bridging philosophical enlightenment with existential leaps to illuminate the human psyche amid shadows and faith.

The Symbolic

In Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, the symbolic dimension represents the realm of societal norms, universal principles, and structured illusions that govern human behavior and perception, often at the expense of individual authenticity. Adapted from its original psychoanalytic connotations, the symbolic here is reinterpreted through Søren Kierkegaard's ethical stage of existence, where individuals commit to moral duties, social contracts, and rational frameworks, providing order amid existential chaos. This aligns seamlessly with Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where the shadows projected on the cave wall symbolize deceptive societal constructs that prisoners mistake for reality, obscuring innate truths until recollection (anamnesis) facilitates escape. In Atwood's novel, the symbolic manifests in patriarchal institutions, capitalist economies, and normative narratives that chain characters like Iris Chase Griffen to illusory roles, critiquing how such structures alienate the self while offering pathways to transcendence through ethical reflection and eventual leaps beyond them.

Plato's cave allegory vividly illustrates the symbolic as a fabricated reality: puppeteers manipulate artifacts before a fire, casting shadows that the chained prisoners perceive as the essence of existence. These shadows are not mere deceptions but structured illusions upheld by collective agreement, mirroring societal norms that dictate behavior without revealing underlying forms. In *The Blind Assassin*, the symbolic operates similarly through the historical and social backdrop of early 20th-century Canada. The Chase family's button factory symbolizes industrial capitalism's ethical imperatives—progress, productivity, and familial duty—yet exposes their hollowness during the Great Depression. Norval Chase's adherence to symbolic codes, such as honoring war debts and maintaining class hierarchies, chains him to illusions of honor, leading to his decline. Iris, interpolated into this symbolic order as a commodity in her marriage to Richard Griffen, embodies the prisoner's confinement: her identity is reduced to shadows of wifely virtue and social propriety, masking the abusive realities beneath. Atwood uses interspersed newspaper clippings to reinforce this symbolic facade—terse announcements of engagements, suicides, and scandals present a normative, public truth that distorts private experiences, much like Plato's echoes that accompany the shadows, solidifying collective deception (Plato, 1997, p. 1133).

Kierkegaard's ethical stage complements this by framing the symbolic as a necessary but limiting phase of human development. In works like *Either/Or*, the ethical individual chooses universal principles over aesthetic immediacy, embracing duties such as marriage, work, and morality to combat despair. However, this stage risks becoming a rigid structure, where the self is alienated in finite commitments, foreshadowing the need for a religious leap. Iris's life trajectory exemplifies this: her ethical consciousness awakens through societal expectations, committing to the symbolic marriage contract for family survival. Richard Griffen personifies the ethical symbolic—a wealthy industrialist upholding capitalist norms—yet his manipulative control reveals the stage's potential for tyranny. The novel critiques how ethical symbols, like political rallies or religious sermons, enforce gender roles: Iris recalls her father's speeches on empire and duty, which chain women to domestic spheres while men pursue public ethics. Laura's resistance to these symbols—her literal interpretations disrupting normative language—highlights the ethical stage's intolerance for individuality, pushing her toward despair and suicide (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987, pp. 295-297).

The symbolic's alienating force is evident in the novel's exploration of power dynamics. Atwood portrays it as a phallocentric order, where symbols of authority—factories, mansions, automobiles—reinforce male dominance. Iris's memoir recollects her subjection: "I was sand, I was scouring powder, I was steel wool," metaphors that symbolize her reduction to utilitarian objects within ethical frameworks (Atwood, 2000, p. 245). Plato's allegory warns of this alienation, as prisoners fiercely defend their shadows when confronted with truth, paralleling Richard's violent suppression of dissent. Kierkegaard adds depth by noting the ethical's despair when universals fail to satisfy the infinite self; Iris experiences this as inner emptiness, her ethical duties yielding only isolation. The embedded science-fiction tale subverts the symbolic: the planet Zycron's rigid hierarchies—blind assassins serving elite classes—parody earthly ethics, with the storyteller's narratives exposing symbolic illusions through aesthetic irony (Atwood, 2000, p. 289).

Yet, the symbolic is not wholly negative; it serves as a scaffold for progression. In Plato's view, shadows prompt the initial questioning that leads to ascent, while Kierkegaard sees the ethical as a bridge from aesthetic fragmentation to religious authenticity. Iris's narrative journey utilizes the symbolic for recollection: by documenting ethical betrayals—Richard's affair with Laura, the factory's labor exploitation—she performs anamnesis, recollecting innate ideas of justice obscured by norms. This ethical reflection catalyzes her leap, transforming symbolic chains into tools for liberation. Feminist critics interpret this as a reclamation, where women navigate symbolic orders to assert agency, echoing Kierkegaard's emphasis on choice within constraints (Staels, 2004, p. 149).

The novel's structure mirrors the symbolic's operations: linear historical accounts represent ethical chronology, interrupted by sci-fi fragments that disrupt normative flow. Clippings symbolize public ethics—"Miss Chase Wins Award" (Atwood, 2000, p. 43)—enforcing collective memory, yet Iris's introspections reveal their deceptions. Atwood critiques capitalism's symbolic grip, where commodities like buttons symbolize ethical progress but conceal exploitation. War motifs amplify this: symbolic patriotism justifies horrors, alienating consciousness from truth.

In bridging Plato and Kierkegaard, Atwood affirms the symbolic's dual role: as illusory bondage and ethical foundation for transcendence. Characters who remain in shadows face

despair, while those recollecting beyond ethics achieve insight. Iris's final revelations leap to religious subjectivity, affirming self amid symbolic lacks. This analysis illuminates how the symbolic, though deceptive, fosters human awareness in literature.

The Imaginary

In Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, the imaginary constitutes a realm of illusionary perceptions, sensory indulgences, and fragmented identities that captivate yet ultimately confine the self, resonating with Søren Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage of existence and Plato's Allegory of the Cave. In Plato's framework, the imaginary aligns with the cave's shadows—deceptive images mistaken for reality by prisoners, obscuring innate truths until recollection (anamnesis) facilitates enlightenment. Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage complements this, portraying a mode of existence driven by immediate pleasures, poetic fantasies, and avoidance of commitment, often leading to existential despair. In the novel, the imaginary manifests through the embedded science-fiction narrative, characters' escapist fantasies, and Iris Chase Griffen's early perceptions, shaped by patriarchal and societal illusions. Atwood critiques the imaginary's seductive yet alienating power, while highlighting its role as a catalyst for transcending illusions through feminist narrative and existential progression, bridging philosophical and literary insights into human consciousness.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave frames the imaginary as the prisoners' perception of shadows cast on the cave wall, manipulated by puppeteers and mistaken for the entirety of reality. These shadows represent sensory illusions, divorced from the true forms accessible only through ascent and recollection. In *The Blind Assassin*, the imaginary operates similarly, particularly in the pulp science-fiction tale within the novel, which Iris later reveals as her own creation. Set on the planet Zycron, this narrative—with its blind assassins, mute sacrificial maidens, and decadent peach women—embodies an aesthetic escape, weaving fantastical images that seduce both characters and readers. The lover's storytelling in seedy hotel rooms, describing "carpets woven from the feathers of extinct birds" or "eyes glowing like hot coals," constructs an imaginary realm detached from the grim realities of Depression-era Canada (Vanitha, 2019, p. 45). For the unnamed woman (implicitly Iris), this tale offers a respite from her oppressive marriage to Richard Griffen, mirroring Plato's prisoners who find comfort in familiar shadows, unaware of their deceptive nature. Yet, these illusions fragment identity, as the characters'

reliance on fantasy avoids confronting deeper truths, paralleling the cave's sensory confinement.

Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage enriches this interpretation, depicting the imaginary as a mode of consciousness fixated on sensory pleasure, beauty, and multiplicity. The aesthetic individual lives in the moment, pursuing fleeting desires—art, romance, imagination—to evade the despair of existential commitment. Laura Chase epitomizes this stage: her consciousness is steeped in aesthetic immediacy, reflected in her cryptic drawings, poetic outbursts, and literal interpretations of language, such as mistaking biblical phrases for concrete realities. Her fascination with colors, textures, and stories—like the Zycron tales she is initially credited with—reveals an imaginary world where she escapes societal norms that demand female subservience (Quinn, 2016, p. 28). However, Kierkegaard warns that the aesthetic leads to boredom and despair, as its lack of purpose fragments the self. Laura's suicide underscores this, her inability to reconcile her imaginative rebellion with reality marking the tragic limit of the imaginary. Iris, too, begins in this stage, her early memories saturated with sensory details—the "lilac haze" of her childhood home, the tactile allure of her mother's dresses—yet these aesthetic indulgences mask the traumas of loss and patriarchal control, chaining her to illusionary identities.

The imaginary's allure in *The Blind Assassin* is further complicated by its gendered dimensions. Feminist critics note that women, marginalized within patriarchal symbolic orders, often retreat to imaginative spaces for agency (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 295). The Zycron narrative serves this purpose: its mute women, silenced by ritual, and blind assassins, navigating through sensory cunning, symbolize female resistance within oppressive structures. Iris's creation of this tale allows her to project alternative identities, unshackled from her role as Richard's commodified wife. Yet, this imaginary freedom is double-edged, as it risks entrapment in fantasy, echoing Plato's prisoners who cling to shadows despite their falsity. Kierkegaard's aesthetic individual faces a similar peril: the multiplicity of imagined selves—lover, rebel, artist—fractures coherence, leading to existential despair when fantasies collapse. Iris's lover, the leftist storyteller, embodies this, his tales weaving seductive illusions that crumble under political persecution and poverty, reflecting the aesthetic's fleeting nature.

Despite its limitations, the imaginary serves as a critical stepping stone toward transcendence. In Plato's allegory, the shadows prompt initial curiosity, sparking the prisoner's ascent toward true forms. Similarly, Kierkegaard views the aesthetic as a precursor to the ethical and religious stages, where despair catalyzes commitment to deeper truths. In the novel, Iris's engagement with the imaginary—through the Zycron tale and her early aesthetic perceptions—lays the groundwork for her narrative recollection. Her memoir, written in old age, transforms these illusions into a dialectical tool, recollecting innate authenticity obscured by societal shadows. The act of writing the sci-fi narrative, initially attributed to Laura, becomes Iris's subversive act, blending aesthetic imagination with ethical critique to challenge patriarchal norms. This mirrors Plato's anamnesis, where sensory illusions, once questioned, lead to philosophical insight. Kierkegaard's progression adds that the aesthetic's despair—seen in Iris's recognition of her marriage's hollowness—propels her toward the ethical stage, where she grapples with duty, and ultimately the religious stage, where her confessional narrative leaps to subjective truth (Kierkegaard, 1843/1987, pp. 260-262).

The novel's structure amplifies the imaginary's role. The interplay of memoir, sci-fi, and clippings creates a fragmented consciousness, where aesthetic illusions (Zycron's fantasies) contrast with public facades (clippings) and private realities (Iris's reflections). Atwood's use of meta-fiction underscores this: the sci-fi tale's artificiality highlights the constructed nature of all narratives, inviting readers to question their own perceptions, much like Plato's escapee who sees the sun (Michael, 2010, p. 91). The imaginary also engages with historical context—Depression-era Canada and wartime anxieties—where escapist literature offered solace amid economic despair, yet reinforced illusions of stability. Atwood critiques this through the Chase family's factory, a symbol of capitalist progress that masks exploitation, paralleling the aesthetic's seductive but deceptive allure.

Literary analyses emphasize the imaginary's role in identity formation, with repetition and emulation shaping Iris's early consciousness (Michael, 2010, p. 90). Her childhood fantasies—modeled on her mother's stoicism or fairy-tale heroines—repeat aesthetic patterns, but her memoir disrupts these through recollection, aligning with Kierkegaard's leap from multiplicity to unity. The imaginary's fluidity, seen in the sci-fi tale's non-linear episodes, challenges patriarchal linearity, offering feminist potential. Critics highlight Atwood's use of irony and

intertextuality, blending genres to expose the imaginary's constructed nature while affirming its creative power (Harrison, 2024, p. 33).

In bridging Plato and Kierkegaard, Atwood portrays the imaginary as both trap and catalyst. It confines characters to illusionary shadows, yet sparks the questioning that leads to ethical awareness and religious authenticity. Iris's journey—from aesthetic escapism to confessional truth—illustrates this, her narrative weaving fragmented fantasies into a coherent whole. *The Blind Assassin* thus critiques the imaginary's deceptive allure while celebrating its role in feminist and existential transcendence, illuminating the psyche's capacity to navigate illusions toward profound self-awareness.

The Real:

In Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, the real emerges as the realm of ultimate transcendence, where illusions shatter and authentic existence confronts the infinite, paralleling Søren Kierkegaard's religious stage of existence and Plato's enlightenment beyond the cave's shadows. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the real corresponds to the sun-lit world of true forms—the blinding light that the escaped prisoner encounters, symbolizing innate ideas recollected through anamnesis after painful ascent from deceptive perceptions. Kierkegaard's religious stage complements this, depicting a "leap of faith" into the absurd, where the individual transcends ethical universals to relate directly to the divine, embracing paradox and subjective truth amid despair. Atwood portrays the real through Iris Chase Griffen's confessional memoir and revelations, critiquing patriarchal deceptions while affirming feminist authenticity in a world of historical traumas and societal constraints.

Plato's real is the domain of eternal forms, accessible only after shedding sensory illusions. The escapee's confrontation with the sun represents overwhelming truth, initially blinding but ultimately illuminating. In the novel, Iris's late-life reflections embody this encounter: her memoir strips away layers of illusion—familial duties, marital facades, and public myths—to confront the raw truths of her life. Revealing herself as the author of the embedded science-fiction tale, Iris leaps into the real, acknowledging the absurdities of her complicity in Laura's fate and her own suppressed desires. This mirrors Plato's anamnesis, as she recollects innate authenticity obscured by cave-like oppressions, such as the Chase family's capitalist compromises during the Depression. The real irrupts in traumatic moments—Laura's suicide,

wartime losses—disrupting illusions and forcing existential reckoning, much like the prisoner's disorientation in sunlight (Plato, 1997, p. 1134).

Kierkegaard's religious stage deepens this, emphasizing faith's paradox: the individual suspends ethical norms for a personal relation to the infinite, as in Abraham's sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling*. Iris's narrative leap exemplifies this: transcending ethical guilt over her sister's death, she embraces subjective truth, her prose turning passionate and paradoxical—"I wish I could tell you about the world as it really is, but I can't" (Atwood, 2000, p. 518). This religious authenticity affirms self amid finite limitations, paralleling Plato's forms as eternal essences. Atwood infuses feminism, with Iris's real as reclaimed agency, disrupting phallocentric orders through confessional voice. The real's ineffability—beyond language's grasp—echoes traumas like factory fires or abusive marriages, pointing to unsymbolizable depths (Kierkegaard, 1843/1983, p. 58).

The novel's structure amplifies the real: nested narratives converge in Iris's revelations, blending sci-fi fantasies with historical realities to transcend illusions. Critics note Atwood's use of paradox, where truth emerges from deception, aligning with Kierkegaardian absurdity (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 544). The real critiques capitalism's false promises, urging recollection of human essence. Ultimately, Atwood bridges Plato and Kierkegaard to portray the real as liberating confrontation, fostering transcendence in literature's exploration of the psyche.

The Mirror Stage:

Adapted from its psychoanalytic origins, the mirror stage in *The Blind Assassin* represents pivotal moments of self-recognition, where fragmented identities confront illusions to forge coherence, drawing on Plato's anamnesis and Kierkegaard's existential self-relation. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, this stage aligns with the prisoner's initial glimpse beyond shadows—a reflective turning point recollecting innate ideas amid deception. Kierkegaard's philosophy, particularly in *The Sickness unto Death*, views the self as a synthesis of finite and infinite, achieved through stages culminating in religious authenticity. Atwood depicts mirror stages through Iris's introspective memoir, where self-confrontations amid patriarchal mirrors reveal authenticity, critiquing gendered illusions while affirming feminist progression.

Plato's allegory implies mirror-like reflections in the cave: shadows as distorted self-images, mistaken for essence until ascent prompts true recognition. Iris experiences such stages in her narrative: gazing into metaphorical mirrors—family portraits, societal expectations—she initially misrecognizes herself as compliant daughter and wife. Her arranged marriage to Richard Griffen acts as a distorting mirror, reducing her to objectified shadow, echoing Plato's sensory deceptions. Yet, memoir-writing becomes anamnesis, recollecting innate self beyond illusions, as Iris reflects: "Looking back, I see myself as a sort of mirage" (Atwood, 2000, p. 512). This self-recognition disrupts fragmentation, bridging cave confinement to enlightened forms (Plato, 1997, p. 1133).

Kierkegaard's self as relation—finite body to infinite spirit—evolves through stages. The mirror stage here marks transitions: from aesthetic misrecognition (escapist fantasies) to ethical awareness (duty-bound self) to religious synthesis (authentic faith). Laura's defiant gaze challenges mirrors of normativity, her suicide a tragic failure to synthesize. Iris succeeds: her revelations mirror Kierkegaardian despair turning to faith, leaping to confess authorship of the sci-fi tale, unifying fragmented selves. This mirrors Abraham's teleological suspension, embracing paradox for wholeness (Kierkegaard, 1849/1980, p. 14).

Feminist lenses enhance this: mirrors symbolize patriarchal gazes objectifying women, as in Iris's "obscured" vision evolving to agency. Atwood subverts this through narrative, where Iris's reflections reclaim subjectivity. Generational mirrors—Aimee and Sabrina—inherit distortions but prompt recollection. The novel's meta-structure mirrors this: nested tales reflect multiplicities, converging in unified truth (Stein, 2003, p. 136).

Critics highlight repetition in self-formation, with mirrors emulating past selves. Historical contexts—Depression, war—amplify distorting mirrors, critiquing capitalist self-alienation. Atwood integrates Plato and Kierkegaard to portray the mirror stage as transformative recognition, fostering existential and feminist wholeness amid deception.

Conclusion:

This comparative inquiry into Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* through the lenses of Plato's cave allegory and Kierkegaard's existential stages demonstrates the novel's profound interrogation of human essence in a veiled world. By dissecting identity as an evolving mosaic

influenced by deceptive veils and life phases, language as a versatile conduit between entrapment and emancipation, and consciousness as an ascending spiral from delusion to profound realization, the study unveils Atwood's narrative as a testament to resilient selfhood. The symbolic order, reimagined as ethical scaffolding, the imaginary as seductive yet hollow mirages, the real as shattering epiphanies, and the mirror stage as crucibles of self-assembly further enrich this framework, revealing how characters navigate oppressive matrices toward liberated being.

The implications extend beyond literary bounds, contributing to dialogues on subjectivity in modern discourse. In an era where digital facades and ideological polarizations echo cave projections, Atwood's exploration urges a reevaluation of how societal constructs shape inner worlds. Her emphasis on gendered awakening aligns with ongoing feminist scholarship, suggesting that true enlightenment demands dismantling hierarchical illusions (Stein, 2003, p. 137). Moreover, by portraying consciousness as reconstructive labor, the novel challenges passive acceptance, advocating active engagement with one's narrative to forge meaning amid chaos. This resonates with contemporary existential concerns, where individuals grapple with authenticity in fragmented realities, much like Kierkegaard's call to embrace the paradoxical for spiritual wholeness.

Original contributions of this analysis lie in its novel integration of Platonic recollection with Kierkegaardian leaps, applied to Atwood's multilayered prose. While prior critiques often focus on historical or postmodern elements (Tolan, 2007, p. 187), this study foregrounds philosophical synergies, revealing untapped depths in the novel's treatment of psyche. For instance, the sci-fi interludes, typically seen as escapist, are recast as aesthetic preludes to ethical scrutiny and religious resolve, offering a fresh hermeneutic for understanding nested fictions. Similarly, the clippings, beyond mere irony, symbolize ethical entrenchment that must be transcended for real insight. This approach bridges ancient wisdom with 19th-century existentialism, positioning Atwood as a mediator who adapts timeless queries to critique modern alienations.

Furthermore, the interdisciplinary lens illuminates broader cultural critiques. Atwood's depiction of capitalist ethics as hollow symbols parallels Plato's warnings against unexamined lives, while her feminist twists on Kierkegaard's stages highlight how universal philosophies

can be gendered. In a global context of identity crises—fueled by migrations, technologies, and inequalities—the novel's insights advocate for narrative interventions as paths to empathy and change. It prompts reflection on how language, often weaponized in power structures, can be repurposed for subversive dialogues, fostering communal ascents from collective delusions.In essence, *The Blind Assassin* stands as a beacon in literary philosophy, affirming that amid deceptive constructs and existential voids, the human spirit harbors an innate drive toward light. Atwood's artistry not only unravels the operations of self, speech, and awareness but also inspires a commitment to unveiling truths in our own shadowed epochs. By weaving Platonic enlightenment with Kierkegaardian passion, the novel endures as a call to awaken, reminding us that transcendence begins with the courage to question the chains we inherit and the leaps we dare to make. This study, in turn, underscores literature's vital role in philosophical inquiry, bridging eras to illuminate paths forward in an ever-complex human journey.

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