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The Politics of Survival in the Novels of Margaret Atwood

A Doctoral Dissertation

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The Politics of Survival in the Novels of Margaret Atwood

Thesis Submitted to the Bharathiar University
for the Award of the Degree Of
Doctor Of Philosophy In English

By

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis, entitled **THE POLITICS OF SURVIVAL IN THE NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD** is a record of original research work done by **PAULINE DAS** in the Department of ENGLISH, Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, as a PART-TIME Research Scholar during the period of study 2000-2004 under my guidance and supervision for the award of the **Doctor of Philosophy in ENGLISH.** I further certify that this research work has not previously formed the basis for the award of any other Degree, Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship or other similar title to any candidate of this or any other University.

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Date :

Countersigned
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DECLARATION

I do hereby declare that the thesis entitled **The Politics of Survival in the Novels Of Margaret Atwood** submitted to the Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, for the award of the Degree of Doctor Of Philosophy in ENGLISH is a record of original and independent research work done by me during 2000 – 2004 under the supervision and guidance of **Dr. DIWAKAR THOMAS, M.A., M.Phil, M.A., M.Ed., M.A., Ph.D.** Reader and Head, Department of English, Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, and it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship or other similar title to any candidate of this or any other University.

Station: Coimbatore **Pauline Das**
Date : June 2004

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Head of the Dept.

ABSTRACT

Canadian Literature is a literary output arising out of a confluence of the two main streams in the English language – British and American. It soon asserted its nationalism and developed an independent tradition. It gained, down the years, a unique identity of its own, transcending cultural and racial barriers. The twentieth century has seen Canada's plenty in fiction writing, and it is remarkable that women writers outnumber the male writers in Canada. In keeping with the sweeping changes taking place on a global footing in relation to the woman's self, position, power and politics, women writers of Canada took up the rights, responsibilities, prospects and

problems of women as the prime motif. It is the selfsame theme that captured the imagination of Margaret Atwood.

Margaret Atwood is the most prominent figure in contemporary Canadian Literature as a poet, novelist, critic, short story writer and winner of more than fifty literary awards including the prestigious Booker Prize for Literature. Although a great deal of attention has been given to some of the major aspects of Margaret Atwood's novels such as images, visions, language, narrative designs, duality, alienation, subjectivity, psycho analysis, feminist poetics and sexual politics, certain themes have not been fully explored. While Atwood has explored the survival theme in Canadian Literature as such, the same theme in her novels has not been given due attention. This study critically examines the politics adopted by Atwood's women protagonists to survive.

The object of this thesis is to highlight the main aspects of the survival of women in the novels of Margaret Atwood and to establish the thesis that Atwood's women are different in that they refuse to be victims and thus survive their predicament. An interpretation of the strategies adopted by the protagonists to survive has been made. Within the limited canvas available for expounding the thesis, the study confines itself to five of her major novels.

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter begins with an introduction to the intellectual atmosphere of her age. It gives a brief sketch of Margaret Atwood's life and achievements. The term "survival" is defined and the

treatment of the same theme by novelists other than Canadian is touched upon. It also brings into focus how women use their language in voicing their sufferings.

Chapter Two entitled "Surviving Consumerism" analyses the politics of female survival in The Edible Woman. The novel is an indictment of what can be regarded as the "male consumption" of women in a patriarchal, capitalistic and consumerist society. It exposes how even an economically independent woman takes a long time to be conscious of her marginalization as the 'second sex'. It asks the question : "What is a woman in a consumer society?" The novel's ending denies the answer that she is a seductively packaged female, both hunting for and hunted by the hungry male. Life itself is a consumer / consumed process; we may not live to eat but we must certainly eat to live.

Chapter Three, which has the title "Surviving Duplicity," is a brief survey of the politics of female survival in Lady Oracle. Through this novel, Atwood seems to comment on the pretences of women, who sacrifice themselves to please others. The novel calls upon women to be pragmatic and face life head on. To survive in this society you need to contribute to your life in your own way, not in the way someone else decides. For women to survive, their co-dependent behaviour should be weakened, and their own inner directives should be strengthened. Lady Oracle exhorts women not to barter reality any longer for a pseudo security promised by males. It encourages women to exercise their autonomy and be free to pursue interesting and challenging careers.

The Fourth chapter, bearing the title "Political Survival", elucidates Bodily Harm as a travelogue that addresses itself to the nature and violence of the victimization of women. It exposes the wickedness of men on the one hand and the brutality of the state on the other. The novelist advocates the need for a jail break and re-creation. In this way, a possible resistance can be made in order to turn the individual and national dreams into realities.

Chapter Five, headed "Surviving Theocracy" is devoted to the women's struggle for survival in The Handmaid's Tale. It is a "dystopian", cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society based on theocracy where women are denied the basic rights. It also recognizes that the structures that cause and perpetuate woman's oppression are arbitrary. In this way, Atwood tells us in her cautionary tale something that we need to know about the human capacity for survival, so that the novel becomes a canonization of feminism.

The penultimate chapter, bearing the heading "Surviving Childhood Victimization" highlights how Atwood explodes the myth of childhood innocence in the novel Cat's Eye. The novel is unusual as it builds upon the most detailed and perceptive exploration of young girlhood. It is the story of how the little girl who got bullied by her girl friends was able to respond to other people when she grew up. The journey of her life helps her see the negative effects of being overwhelmed by others.

The concluding chapter, in addition to being a summing up, attempts to focus on the new woman. The new woman portrayed by Atwood is thus in the process of emerging. What's new is the essential awareness that women have long been

exploited and the feeling that it is time to become human. Atwood's female protagonists in all these five novels are identical in refusing to be victims and survive their predicament. Survival for them means that there is no dominance or submission, but that all individuals are free to determine their own lives as equals.

Twentieth century writers have produced more "dystopias" than utopias. Atwood, true to the spirit of the age and the reality around her, portrays a post – traumatic stress disorder, common to so many people in today's society. Nevertheless, these stresses in the life of the women characters in her novels have turned out to be lessons to be learned by them in order for them to realize the strength they never knew they had. Their victimization has become their empowering gifts of life. Through the horror of their lives, they have found the honour of their lives and have learned the all important lesson -– the first person you need to love is yourself.

Margaret Atwood has always believed that the artist is a responsible citizen and not a passive victim. She has shaped her characters with a formidable drive and determination to survive. This thematic study establishes the thesis, that though the protagonists of Atwood experience outward defeats, they gain inward victories.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The investigator has made extensive use of the following texts and quoted passages from the five major novels of Margaret Atwood in Chapters II, III, IV, V and VI respectively.

THE EDIBLE WOMAN
By
Margaret Atwood
(Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, 1969)

LADY ORACLE
By
Margaret Atwood
(Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, 1976)

BODILY HARM
By
Margaret Atwood
(Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, 1981)

THE HANDMAID'S TALE
By
Margaret Atwood
(Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986)

CAT'S EYE
By
Margaret Atwood
(Toronto: Mc Clelland and Stewart, 1988)

The novels The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle, Bodily Harm, The Handmaid's Tale and Cat's Eye are referred to by the abbreviations **EW**, **LO**, **BH**, **HT** and **CE** respectively.

DEDICATED

TO

MY BELOVED PARENTS

Late Major C.M. DAS & Mrs. DAS

Table of Contents

Chapter I
Introduction

We have not faded into the earth like snow before the summer sun of 'progress' nor have we stagnated in some sort of retrograde time capsule. We have survived and will continue to survive.[1]

General Perspectives:

Canadian Literature is a literary output arising out of a confluence of the two main streams in the English language – British and American. It soon asserted its nationalism and developed an independent tradition. "It gained down the years a unique identity of its own, transcending cultural and racial barriers".[2] The twentieth century has seen Canada's plenty in fiction writing and it is remarkable that women writers outnumber the male writers in Canada. In keeping with the sweeping changes taking place on a global footing in relation to the women's self, position, power and politics, women writers of Canada took up the rights, responsibilities, prospects and problems of women as the prime motif.

Women's Issues:

Although these sweeping changes have promoted the status of woman, her condition has not improved much. Woman and her images are still moulded, reshaped and reoriented by man and for man. It is the awareness of her condition and the treatment meted out to her that made women writers take up the question of female identity in a male - dominated society. The woman's role as a writer has helped in breaking the

cocoons of subordination and emerging with the knowledge of the female power. The feminist consciousness has prompted her to reflect on her 'self' and assert her individuality. Her crucial questions are: who am I? where am I, a woman getting to? how does society see me, a woman? how do I see myself and how should I direct my life and thoughts? These survival problems of a woman have captured the imagination of Margaret Atwood too.

Margaret Atwood – Presiding Genius of Canadian Letters:

Margaret Atwood is the most prominent figure in contemporary Canadian Literature as a poet, novelist, critic, short story writer and winner of more than fifty literary awards, including the prestigious Booker Prize for Literature. The publication of Atwood's book, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, helped to put Canada on the literary world map. In that work she explores and names her own tradition and national identity through a study of Canadian literature. She discovers a tradition replete with images of victimization. Thus according to her, 'survival ' has been the focus of the energies of the Canadian women in the spectrum of their literature.

What is Survival?

The term 'survival' seems self explanatory. The dictionary explains the term as 'outliving' or 'to come alive through'.[3] It stands for continuing to live or exist. A survivalist is a person who believes in ensuring personal survival of a catastrophic event by arming himself and by often living in the wild. According to Northrop Frye, the word 'survival' implies living through a series of crises, each one unexpected and different from the others, each one to be met on its own terms. In the present work, however, the term refers to the survival of the spirit and not to bare physical survival. Margaret Laurence expresses it in terms of "an inner freedom"[4] and says that it includes "the survival of human dignity and in the end the survival of some human warmth and the ability to reach out and touch others".[5] The strategies adopted in Atwood's novels by the women characters to

survive, has been examined by the researcher in an attempt to interpret these valid problems.

Life and Career:

A brief account of Atwood's life and career may help in understanding her novels better. Atwood, the daughter of Carl and Margaret Killam Atwood, was born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa. She is the second of three children in a family with strong cultural roots in Nova Scotia, Sault Ste Maria, and in Toronto. As a result of her father's entomological research, she spent extended periods of her childhood with her family in northern Ontario and in the Quebec bush, and did not attend a full year of formal school until grade eight. Settling in Toronto in 1946, her parents continued to take the children into the northern woods in the summer. This childhood experience prepared and provided the background for her later novels and also for much of the thematic material in her 'nature' verse.

Atwood's writing career has fetched a number of awards and honours, including the prestigious Canadian literary prize – The Governor General's Award. The honorary degrees were from Trent University (Litt.D.), Queens University (LL.D), and Concordia University of Toronto (Litt.D.). She was hailed by the 'Malahat Review' as the presiding genius of Canadian letters. Since winning the Governor General's Award at 27 for the Circle Game, her full length book, Atwood has created a substantial body of writing – poetry, fiction, and criticism. A prolific writer, versatile social critic and a keen and perceptive observer of life, she has produced eleven novels, fifteen books of poetry, five short story collections and four books of literary criticism . She has also written four children's books.

Her first novel The Edible Woman (1969) has been hailed as the intelligent woman's guide to survival in the contemporary world. It celebrates "the spirit of those who dare to resist the anesthesia administered by consumer society and survive spiritually in Crazyland".[6] Her second novel Surfacing (1972) is a successful psychological exploration. In this novel Atwood narrates the experiences of

archetypal figures in the collective unconscious which helps the narrator to move from a state of fragmentation to that of psychic wholeness. In Lady Oracle (1976), Atwood seems to say that even those who often fail and are unable to ascend, continue to survive with a tremendous zest for life.

Life Before Man (1979) talks of the gradual disintegration of family relationships. Bodily Harm (1985) makes us realize that negative innocence is the most appalling characteristic of evil when it appears in the actual world of political atrocities. It challenges us to become human. The Handmaid's Tale (1985) is a futuristic fantasy. Oppression in all manifestations, both physical and psychological, is Atwood's subject in this novel; Language in itself is the ultimate affirmation and the greatest revolution against a world of fanaticism where freedom of speech is a capital offence.

Atwood's Cat's Eye (1988) is an emotionally engaging fiction. It records the heroine's alienation and survival from childhood to middle age. Atwood's suggestions here stress that feminism must expand if it is to achieve broader relevance and create solidarity among women. The Robber Bride (1993) and Alias Grace (1996), also re-establish her as one of the world's leading women novelists writing in English today. In The Robber Bride, "Atwood is concerned not only with female romance fantasies and male fantasies about the feminine, but also with the ways such fantasizing affects women's concepts of themselves and their relations with other women".[7]

Booker Prize, 2000:

The Blind Assassin (2000) has won the greatest of honours – the Booker Award. It is an extraordinarily accomplished novel, deserving the highest merit, and is clearly a work of superb artistry. The extent of Atwood's international recognition is realized by the fact that within a month after publication, The Blind Assassin sold 185,000 copies. It is a story of duplicities and betrayals, in the glossy pretentious world of the fashionable and the ambitious.

Oryx and Crake (2003), Atwood's latest novel, is a dazzling book of her vision of the future, based on the notion of a single human survivor after a global outbreak of disease. But it is also a fable for our times. It chills us with presentiments of what genetic research may bring. "The novel plays with the major themes of modern culture: GM foods, cloning, cryogenics, AIDS, Viagra, species death, organ (not organic) farming".[8] At the same time, it recalls, with humour and intelligence, a number of literary and social ideals: the ideal human community, the conception of God, perfect love, equality, innocence, and the last man.

Her works have been translated into more than twenty languages and published in twenty five countries. More than any other Canadian writer, Atwood has attracted maximum critical attention from various parts of the world. Atwood's most influential and controversial book is Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, was published in 1972. Even before the book was released, 'The Toronto Star' reported its "staggering first printing of 20,000, with college-course outlines snapping it up sight unseen".[9] Nearly twelve years later, it is evident that Survival itself, and the excitement created by it, were more manifestations of an intensely

nationalistic period in Canadian history than permanent alterations to the national literature. The book provided a readable and witty access to Canadian literature at a time of great public desire for such access. It was openly sociological rather than literary in its approach, seeking to use literature to define "a national habit of mind". It provided "an illuminating approach to the kinds of poetry and fiction that Margaret Atwood and many of her contemporaries are writing and are most interested in reading".[10]

Factors Contributing to Survival Problems:

Where is Here?

A brief outline of the geographical, historical and socio- economic facts which contribute to the Canadian experience of survival is appropriate at this juncture. In his 1965 "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada", Northrop Frye observes that Canadians have an identity crisis with a difference for they are less perplexed by the existential question "Who am I?" than by some riddle such as "Where is here?"[11] In her thematic guide, Atwood perceptively remarks:

> "Who am I ?" is a question appropriate in countries where the environment , the "here" is already well- defined, so well – defined in fact that it may threaten to overwhelm the individual. In societies where everyone and everything has its place a person may have to struggle to separate himself from his social background, in order to keep from being just a function of the structure. "Where is here?" is a different kind of question. It is what a man asks when he finds himself

> in unknown territory, and it implies several other questions. Where is the place in relation to other places? How do I find my way around it? [12]

Canada, with its vast empty spaces and its largely unknown lakes, rivers and islands seems a strange land even to Canadians. Thus, Canadian writers "in their search for a usable Canadian tradition, centre their discussions around two themes: history and geography. Their desire to define a distinctive Canadian tradition expresses itself as nostalgia for history and for a unique sense of place". [13]

Canadian writing has always been pervaded by an awareness of the wilderness:

> … those vast areas of dark forests, endless prairies or trackless wastes of snow which are geographical facts and written into the History of Canada's exploration and settlement. Throughout the Canadian literary tradition wilderness has been and continues to be the dominant cultural myth, encoding Canadians' imaginative responses to their landscapes and history as an image of national distinctiveness. [14]

So deep is the effect of the landscape on, what John Moss calls, the "geographical imagination" of its inhabitants that it emerges as the prime determiner of Canadian identity.

Landscapes described in poems, novels or short stories are seldom just about nature. They are, "usually about the poet's attitude towards the external natural universe. That is, landscapes […] are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a

state of mind".[15] That the land symbolizes elements of the inner lives of its inhabitants is evident from the manner in which the Canadian psyche responds to the vast and empty northern wilderness. In her article "True North", Atwood says that the North is always at the back of the minds of the Canadians and adds: "The north focuses our anxieties. Turning to face north […] we enter our own unconscious. Always in retrospect the journey north has the quality of dream".[16] Like the unconscious parts of our inner selves, the wilderness both attracts and terrifies those who dare to enter it.

People of Canada:

Besides being obsessed by the landscape, the Canadians are also puzzled by its diversity. The confusion experienced by them can only be understood in the light of the political and cultural history of their country. Except for its aboriginal populations, Canada is peopled wholly by immigrants and/or their descendants from across the globe. Hence, to speak of Canada is to speak of a nation made up of many nations. Historically, too, Canada has always been so, having as it does three founding fathers viz. the Natives, the English and the French who differed from one another racially as well as culturally.

Economic Colony of US:

Before Canada was colonized, the French, the English and the Americans periodically carried away furs, minerals and pulpwood from it. Unlike most colonial nations which have known subordination under one 'mother' country, Canada has been a colony paying allegiance to several mother countries. It was originally a colony of France and

England. The French surrendered New France to the English after their defeat in the Battle of Plains of Abraham in 1759.

After the French English war of 1812, a sense of national consciousness may be said to have emerged in Canada even as the country itself acquired the status of a nation at the end of the Second World War. In 1867, the British North American Act established the Dominion of Canada with two official languages (English and French) and two religions (Protestantism and Roman Catholicism).Since then, Canada has slowly but surely become an economic colony of the United States of America.

Diversity:

Unlike the United States however, Canada did not feel the need to assert its nationhood in any significant way. As a result, people belonging to various ethnic groups attempted to preserve their respective cultures and failed to respond to the idea of Canada as a whole. In more recent years, however, it has become difficult to either perceive or project Canada in such terms. As Mordecai Richler caustically puts it: "This is a country made up of many people, thirty percent of whom are neither English nor French. And within twenty years the majority will not be English or French".[17] Thus "Canada is both young and old."[18] It is young as a nation, for it is only a little more than one hundred years old but it is old as a place of settlement for immigrants from various countries. This has led to the growth of the country's awareness as a nation with an independent existence, having a distinctive place at the same time in the international arena.

The status of women in a country is closely linked to its socio economic development. The status of the Canadian women was not very different from that of the Natives until the early twentieth century. They were disadvantaged both economically and legally, and were under male control. They were not allowed to keep their own earnings. Educational opportunities were also limited. Women were considered to be unsuitable to work on machines.

Domination versus Suppression:

Both patriarchy and colonialism involve relationships of domination and suppression, assumed superiority and imposed inferiority, where the dominated is forced to take up the oppressed, exploited victim position. The dominant party makes the laws for its own benefit and advantage, to be conformed to by the dominated group, offering reward for conformity and punishment for non-conformity. Just as colonialism maintains, underlines and emphasizes the difference between the colonizer and the native, patriarchy promotes and stresses the difference between men and women.

Situations started changing after World War I. In the 1930s, women gained homesteading rights on par with men in some provinces. An increasing number of women, both single and married, started taking up paid employment. The Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s brought about tremendous changes in the lives of Canadian women. The Movement introduced equal pay and work legislations. Property laws changed so that women were entitled to property almost on equal terms as for men.

Victims:

Climate, geography, history and economics have thus caused the Canadian imagination to be "obsessed with the limitations rather than the possibilities of human experience"[19] and have made "survival" the great fact of Canadian life. A preoccupation with survival is "necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival".[20] Seeing the Canadians willfully casting themselves in the role of victims in fact and fiction, Atwood remarks: "Stick a pin in Canadian literature at random and nine times out of ten you'll hit a victim".[21] Modern Canadian writers and critics attempt to help the Canadians create a more positive identity, for they strongly disapprove of the negative identity which ensures from the self-destructive survival myth. The survival mentality prevents the Canadians from respecting themselves for it is "a colonial mentality – the nation cannot act because it sees itself as acted upon, it accepts a passive role and, with perverse narcissism, perpetuates it".[22] The protagonists of mainstream writers like Atwood, Laurence, Kroestsch and Hodgins for instance, and those created by writers from the First Nations writers as well as those from racial and ethnic minorities, struggle to transcend their victim state.

Canadian Fiction:

The development of fiction in Canada itself had been a long drawn out process of struggle. As has already been pointed out, Canadian Literature is "the fruit of the British seed planted in American soil".[23] When Canada emerged as a single nation, its literature achieved a new identity. The earliest growth of Canadian Literature can be traced to the oral voices of the original people, the Native tribes spread out in the temperate regions. Theirs was an oral tradition; their songs and stories were handed down from one generation to another. The aboriginal people, in their songs and stories talked about the world around them, for "Canada has had no heroic issues, no gigantic war or adventurous event".[24] So Canadian writing began with the usual early literature of exploring, pioneer settlements, collections of folk tales, and poems on Canadian landscapes, stories of immigrant life, local colour sketches and historical romance. "Thus it can be said that Canadian Literature, to start with, had only new

content, but no form which is autonomous and no myth either".[25] In such a situation, writing started as reportage. Such writing consisting of reports and explorations led to romances.

"The mist of romantic euphoria began to be dismissed from Canadian fiction when a new effort at realism appeared in the twenties".[26] The animal stories of Charles G.D.Roberts - Kindred of the Wild (1902), and The Hunters of the Silences (1907) are calm, imaginative, as well as sympathetic and detached. R.J.C .Stead in his three novels – Neighbours (1922), The Smoking Flax (1924), and Grain (1926), succeeded in giving some density to the theme of human work performed against the background of the prairies. A more compelling realistic novel is Wild Geese (1925) by the Norwegian, Martha Ostenso, which pictures with a harsh truth the turbulent life of the members of a family on a flax farm. The emphasis on small town life produced Stephen Leacock's nostalgic comedies, Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town (1912). Another prose writer of the period is Sara Jeannette Duncan, best known for the novel The Imperialist (1904). The two authors might be considered "the polarities between which the best Canadian writing has often moved".[27]

Leacock, influenced by Dickens and Twain, wrote in the North American humourist tradition which pricked the pretences of the sophisticated and the general. Using the persona of an innocent observer he wrote humorous vignettes of provincial life. Sara Duncan wrote cosmopolitan novels making use of the distinctions between the Canadians, the Americans and the English. She had a strong eye for the structure of society, how the various English-speaking groups formed close-knit communities

according to religion and ethnic stock, and how this influenced personal relations and politics. The young imperialist of her novel warns the Canadians of the need for closer ties throughout the empire to meet the challenge of the American economic expansion..

In the first half of the twentieth century, Canadian literary writing did make a mark but it was not known to the outside world and thus failed content. The beginnings were marked by the voluminous writings of poetry and a few remarkable novels. If F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith established themselves as Canadian poets, it was Hugh MacLenan and Sinclair Ross, who as novelists changed the course of the Canadian fiction. One finds the spirit of an emerging national culture in Smith's poetry and the same consciousness can be seen in the novels of MacLenan also.

Main Canadian Novelists:

The main Canadian novelists of the first half of the twentieth century are G. Frederick Philip Grove, Mazo de la Roche, Morley Collaghan and Hugh MacLenan. Frederick Grove brought the nineteenth century European nationalism to Canada. When others wrote idylls, his books about the prairies shifted the regional literature from romance to realism. His titles are indicative: Settlers of the Marsh (1925), Our Daily Bread (1928), The Yoke of Life (1930). He portrays the poor immigrants, settlers and farmers, struggling with fate "in the form of sexual desire, innocence, and their swampy marginal farmland".[28] These are agrarian patriarchs, tragic in their isolation; even their economic success is ironic because they are left only with their autocratic wills to sustain them. Mazo de la Roche is much more romantic in her

treatment of rural Ontario than is Grove with the prairies. The Jalna series, beginning from 1927, is an instance of the family saga covering several generations often found in the colonies.

It was with Morley Collaghan that the Canadian novel moved towards urban realism. He is skilled in using symbols to convey a complex Catholic humanism. Collaghan's The Loved and the Lost (1951) is a landmark of Canadian fiction in portraying Montreal as a real city which, like New York or Paris in the work of other writers, epitomises man's spiritual dilemma. The world evoked in Morley Collaghan's works is a bleak, industrial one, and "its smoky presence rubs off even on the country side".[29] His Barometer Rising (1941) gives clear expression to the new nationalism that had been implicit in some of the protest writers of the 1930s such as Dorothy Livesay and Leo Kennedy and had become explicit during the war years. The end of colonialism is clearly expressed through the symbolic allegory of the novel's plot which projects Canada in bondage to serve England during wars, and as neglected during peace.

Hugh MacLenan's novels like Two Solitudes (1945) and The Precipice (1948) gave expression to an emerging national and nationalist consciousness. Two Solitudes analyses the French-English conflict; The Precipice analyses the difference between Canada and the United States, and The Watch that Ends in the Night (1959) analyses the rise of national consciousness during the Second World War.

Thus, one finds that Canadian fiction follows approximately the same development as other new nations since the late nineteenth century. It evolves

from local humour through an early internationalism, historical romanticism, provincialism and realism, into a new nationalism of the early 1940s. The Canadian novel, however, begins to 'take off' in the 1950s with Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, Mavis Gallent and Sheila Watson.

There emerged a contrast between the romantic and the realistic, as well as between conscious mythology and social mythology. "The romances consolidated social mythology and Robertson Davies' Tempest Tost is a sardonic study of the triumph of a social mythology over the imaginative one symbolized by Shakespeare's play".[30] Davies' novels examine what Canadians are and how they became that way. Davies is aware that the real history of the country is that of the small-town Protestants. Raised in poverty they have made their cruel Puritanism a part of the national character. His triology - Fifth Business (1970), The Manticore (1972) and World of Wonders (1975) – became international successes. They trace the history of several Canadian families from the early twentieth century to the seventies. As against literary works whose primal focus was on landscape, Davies' works present the immigrant world of thoughts, dreams and emotional responses. As R.K. Dhawan puts it : "The struggle to come to terms with a landscape, a people, and more than that to aspire for a psychological identification and imaginative oneness with their physical environment – These were Robertson's primal concerns in his dramatic works".[31] Davies also talks about the immigrant race's intellectual pioneers and their struggle to find an artistic atmosphere.

Jewishness is the subject and the tone of all Richler's works. His best novels Cocksure (1968) and St. Urbain's Horseman (1971) portray the tensions of growing up in Canada's urban immigrant communities, especially in relation to becoming an individual. Richler is preoccupied with the problem of relationship with the Jew and the Gentile, the question of freedom and survival in an indifferent world, the discrepancy between love and the power struggle and the loss of values in the modern age.

Sinclair Ross has written chiefly about the harshness of life on the Canadian prairies. His first novel, As for me and My House (1941), set against the draught and depression of the 1930's is an established classic of the Canadian Literature. Ross describes the efforts of the farmers and the people of the small prairie towns to wrest a living from their bleak environment, and in his style "there is a taut, sparse quality"[32] which is a perfect measure of man's struggle to endure. His other works The Well (1958), Whir of Gold (1970) and Sawbones Memorial (1974) serve once again to chronicle man's struggle to survive, and his inclination to dream of a better life.

In the 1960s, there was a rapid growth in the Canadian literature which paralleled Canada's political growth. The official adoption of the maple leaf flag showed again Canada's eagerness for recognition and self-definition and since 1960 the best Canadian writing moved gradually "away from the local and parochial".[33] Artists working with their own familiar regions within Canada began exploring the universal truths of life. The regional consciousness in Canada transformed itself into a national consciousness which further broadened into an international and universal

consciousness. This awakened consciousness led the writers to themes such as quest, identity crisis and self -definition.

Major Women Writers in Canada:

An altogether new turn was effected with the appearance of women novelists like Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munroe, Shiela Watson, M.G. Vassanji, Marian Engel, Gabrielle Roy, Anne Hebert, Adle Wiseman, Aritha Van Herk, Jeannette Armstrong and Rudy Wiebe. The women's movement provided many of these novelists with the courage and motivation to break out of traditional patriarchal forms to depict how women have been abused, exploited and oppressed.

Margaret Laurence is one of the most impressive and outstanding figures during the sixties and seventies. Her writings are characterised by a breath of vision, "a historical sense in the Eliotean sense and a largeness of texture that are unique and distinct in Canadian fiction".[34]

Alice Munro's writings are concerned with the adolescence and growing up of complex, young girls. Her stories deal in some detail with ruinous marriage and question the very rightness of marriage itself. Collectively, they offer exhaustive and intense explorations of the progress of women towards selfhood. The emphasis on women which we find in Munro's novels appears to be symptomatic of an urge to describe the female side of the human condition, a synthesis of women's insights gained from their own femininity. She believes as she puts it that "there's a change coming in the lives of girls and women".[35]

Today, Canada's writers are significant actors on the international stage: Mordecai Richler, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munroe, Timothy Findley, Rohinton Mistry, M.G.Vassanji are also world-renowned. Many of the South Asian immigrant writers have greatly contributed to the growth of the Canadian literature, without the burden of either assimilating or opposing the Canadian mainstream culture. For instance, Rohinton Mistry does not talk about his Canadian experience at all in his Such a Long Journey, and still he has established himself as a Canadian writer. Set against the background of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, the novel examines the existential predicament of the central character Gustad Noble, a tragic hero who is pitted against heavy odds. Slowly, the story of Gustad Noble develops into a tale of a minority community and its sense of powerlessness.

M.G.Vassanji too explores the social, cultural, racial and political issues that the white experienced when they ruled India, though Vassanji's main concern is not political but racial and cultural. In Findley's The Wars (1977) – a First World War story of a young man's travails - readers witness the ways in which family pride, social status, sexual assault, moral passivity and political inertia, all destroy him. "What is it", Findley asks, "that separates people from each other – separates them from nature – induces them to violence?"[36] This question which haunts his earlier fiction, centrally occupies his next three novels – Famous Last Words (1981) which tells of the rise of fascism, The Telling of Lies (1986) which probes the meaning of 'complicity' and Not Wanted on the Voyage (1984) which elaborates the narrative of the Flood.

Ondaatje focuses his own attention on historical figures, or on the act of recording history itself, in an attempt to question the very feasibility of historical verisimilitude. He strongly rejects the mechanistic, materialistic existence, literal mindedness and brash optimism of the Americans. Thus there are two sides to his writing –one gathers information (dates, times, places etc); the other gathers the secrets of the human heart.

Margaret Atwood's stories deal with the women's encounter with the world. They are concerned with the woman's struggle to discover her self and find self-fulfillment. Atwood has played a key role in setting in motion, many radical ideas in terms of women's individuality and autonomy, power and politics "through their own strategies of rebellion through tropes of madness, silence, illness and guile".[37] The aim of her fiction is to make women "critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structures".[38]

Significance of the study:

The major theme of her novels is the relationship between man and woman, and the distinctive relationship between man and nature. In both the cases, one tries to dominate the other, may be because of the fact that she writes from a woman's point of view. She identifies women with nature and men with the technical assault on nature. Nature is very often the victim. Man is pictured as the manipulating oppressor. She presents a number of types to illustrate this hunter-hunted image in her works. The hunted animal is often a symbol of the unconscious in Atwood's

works. At crucial moments, there is a tendency to conquer the unconscious and the hunter is identified with the hunted.

Almost all the stories of Margaret Atwood are about the lives of girls and women between the 1950s and the 1980s. They are concerned with exploration and survival, crossing boundaries, challenging cultural and psychological limits and glimpsing new prospects. One may say that Margaret Atwood has aimed at restructuring social and economic relations in the light of gender equality in Canadian society.

According to Atwood, society limits the choices of women, and she prefers to portray women who make clear-cut dramatic choices. They are in this sense constantly engaged in the politics of survival. It is essential for them to redefine the term survival, which is not a mere continuance of life in the same old traditional fashion. Rather, 'survival' is a challenge to better their own personal existence.

Thus, the theme of survival is central to the works of Margaret Atwood. She repudiates the fragmentation and alienation afflicting her society and feels that the quest for spiritual survival is a necessary antidote to it. The characters in her novels struggle to overcome alienation and achieve personal and social integration "which is imagined as a freedom to love, to share, to meet, to touch".[39]

Since feminist challenges have been written into women's texts in her novels, Atwood's writing is characterized by the urge to "throw the story line (of traditional power structures) open to question and to implement disarrangements which demand new judgements and solutions".[40]

In the Canadian context, one comes across mainstream Canadian writers challenging the dominant British American tradition, thus paving a way for establishing their true Canadian literary ethos. In the same way women writers too have challenged the male power or patriarchal control in their effort to achieve a woman centered writing.

> Atwood has been urging women writers to discard the language that perpetuates male superiority and to forge for them a transparent one which would represent and transpose a pre-existing reality. She ridicules Quiller-Couch's distinction between what he terms 'Masculine' and 'Feminine' prose styles and has been successful in her attempt at commanding a 'nonsexist' language.

Review of Related Works:

Is survival a theme resplendent in Canadian Literature alone? No. The theme of survival is not restricted to one nation. It is a universal theme. Nor is it confined to literature written only in the twentieth century. In the twentieth century however, we encounter diverse experiences of alienation and survival, as the central characters are drawn not only from the ruling or upper classes but also from various classes, occupations and races. According to Coomi S. Vevaina, in some literary works, "the characters seem resigned to the fact of being inexorably trapped and overpowered by the world, while in others, they rebel against it and seek ways of transcending their alienation". [41] The mental anguish of man as depicted in modern literary works, mirrors reality.

In Dairy Down Under (1978), Atwood records her impressions of Australia as a country that seems to her to be even more oppressed than Canada. In Second Words, Atwood speaks very pointedly of her role as a Canadian, as a woman, and, most importantly, as a critic and a writer of Canadian Literature, and then she moves forward into expanding this theme to the suppressed all over the world. She says:

> I have always seen Canadian nationalism and the concern for women's rights as part of a larger, non - exclusive picture. Looking back over this period, I see that I was writing and talking a little less about the Canadian scene and a little more about the global one.[42]

Thus, it is clear that she herself acknowledges the universality of her theme 'survival'.

The same theme has been dealt with by the Indian writer, Anita Desai in her novels. In Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1982), after living for twenty years with her husband, it becomes clear to Sita that she cannot take life as it was:

> She could not inwardly accept that this was all there was to life, that life would continue thus inside this small, enclosed area, with these few characters churning around and then part her, leaving her always in this grey, dull-lit empty shell.[43]

Anita Desai's protagonists might very often fail, but the failure is more a social failure than an individual failure. She values the contemplative, critical and questioning aspect of her protagonists. Her characters – whether it is Bimala of Voices in the City, or Sita of Where shall We Go this Summer? - are not content to take their lot as

'karma' and do not believe in shedding a few, self-pitying tears in a dark corner. They are consistently, persistently struggling with their situations for survival.

Toni Morrison, a black-American woman writer, displays a great concern for survival in her novels. In an interview with Chloe, Morrison said: "But the risk of being your own person or trying to have something to do with your destiny, is one of the major battles in life".[44] Morrison is alive to the twin edged sword of racism and sexism, but she has learned to battle the cruelties of both with her wit. A writer with a mission, she has brought several African-American voices into the mainstream of American literature, and her works define the search for identity and the need to preserve cultural roots to avoid a perversion of the human spirit.

The conflict between the past and the future, between ethnicity and progress, is one of Morrison's obsessive concerns. Son, the hero of Tar Baby (1981), cannot break free from his cultural roots, and has adopted an uncompromising stand, refusing to be cowed down by the dictates to which other African-American men had long since surrendered. He chooses loneliness and defeat rather than spiritual and psychic death. His regressive philosophy of life comes into conflict with that of the aggressive survivalist, Jadine Childs. "One had a past, the other a future and both bore the culture to save the race in his hands".[45] In her probing analysis of who survives and why, the Morrisonian message is clear: through the power of the human spirit one can wean the best out of bleakness, doubt, horror, poverty, and violence and emerge newer and more whole.

The Australian born Patrick White's novel The Tree of Man is a tribute to the ability of ordinary men and women to survive against the elemental and inhuman forces of nature in Australia. The action takes place on the outskirts of Sydney. Another of White's novel, Voss, is a novel about a German explorer in New South Wales, Queensland, and the Northern Territory. In this novel, the author takes an extraordinary hero into an extraordinary country, with the aborigines leading Voss on to further mysteries of magic and death. But the explorer's real journey is towards the purification of his soul through torments of both agony and joy.

Margaret Atwood once observed:

> Canada shares with all of the New World ex-colonies and with others such as Australia and New Zealand, the historically recent experience of a collision between landscape and a language and social history not first indigenous to it, with each side alluring the other.[46]

Thematically, early Canadian Literature deals with the struggle of the settlers with a harsh environment. In contrast, Atwood gives a nightmarish picture of contemporary life around her, presenting the dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities of late twentieth century urban living. Her vision of life is cast in various forms.

Margaret Atwood shares with her teacher, Northrop Frye, the view that criticism does not reveal the meaning of texts, but the conditions of meaning which are provided by universal myths, modes, genres and images. During her college life, Northrop Frye introduced Margaret Atwood to William Blake. It was the influence of

Blake's works that made Atwood see the roots of literature not only in myth but also in nature.

Even more important to Atwood's development, perhaps, was her friendship with teacher and poet Jay Macphersen, whose irony and fine sense of form suggest a literary kinship between the two women. Other female writers too, Atwood claims, have influenced her poetic development over the years: Anne Hebert, P.K. Page, and her contemporaries, Phyllis Webb and Gwendolyn MacEwen. The writers that Atwood most admires are Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Kafka and Ionesco.

Just as Atwood was influenced by other writers, her works have also had a great bearing on other writers, especially Canadian women writers. Certainly Survival appeared to stimulate the writing of other thematic surveys-Elizabeth Waterston's Survey (1973), Laurence Ricou's Vertical Man, Horizontal World (1973), John Moss's Patterns of Isolation (1974) and Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel (1978).

It is only recently that critics and scholars have succeeded in establishing the distinctiveness of Canadian literature. While critics like Northrop Frye and George Woodcock promoted an awareness of the existence of a distinct literature called Canadian literature, it was Atwood's well-known book Survival which shocked the people into a realization of the existence of Canadian literature as a distinct entity. According to Atwood, the central image of Canadian culture is that of "a collective victim struggling for survival".[47] She also asserts that Canadians have a will to lose,

merely because one chooses to be a victim to avoid the responsibility of self-definition.

Four Kinds of Victims:

In her Survival, Atwood defines the four basic victim positions. They are as follows:

> to deny the fact that you are a victim; to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of fate, the dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the unconscious, or any other large general power or idea; To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable; to be a creative non-victim.[48]

Strategies for Creative Non-Victim:

Out of the four victim positions, Position Four is not a position for victims in Atwood's writing. According to her, creative activity of any kind gives a sense of control over one's own life, validates one's existence and enables one to come out of the situation of victimisation and become a non-victim. Sustaining this position is difficult for an individual, but this position holds out the hope and possibility of liberating oneself from the gender power-struggle through creative activity.

Consequently, 'Victimisation' and 'Survival' are twin themes explored by Atwood in her criticism, fiction and poetry. As a Canadian woman writer, she deals with issues of victimisation and survival as conditions of both the Canadian experience and female experience. At the thematic level, her novels examine themes

related to the politics of gender, such as the enforced alienation of women under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of women as functional beings, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women, the gradual carving out of female space by women through various strategies and woman's quest for identity, self-definition and autonomy.

Therefore, Atwood calls for self-awareness, self-determination and self-affirmation in women rather than letting themselves to live in an unknown territory, as exiles in their own country. Atwood thus advocates patriotism and diagnosis as the first step towards change. This individual and collective awareness of patriotism and diagnosis of society's need for change, could bring about a national unity among women and foster the realization of a national dream of equality of the sexes. Hence, the portrayal of women in search of an identity for their own selves as well as of their country's cultural identity is an important phenomenon in Atwood's recent fiction.

The women portrayed by Atwood suffer from personal victimization which has its roots in the colonial pattern of domination and destruction. The women feel inferior to men and suffer psychological tension, which supports the view that "women's lives constitute an experience of colonialism".[49] This is evident in Atwood's novels, which depict individual women's place in a male-dominated society. Remaining in this colonised state, they feel oppressed and find it difficult to communicate with others and see others as strangers. Atwood's portrayal of women's place in society, their search for identity and their struggle to come to terms with

existence, the self and the land, gives a new dimension to the Canadian landscape and portrays the changing character of Canada.

Hypothesis:s

Although a great deal of attention has been given to some of the major aspects of Margaret Atwood's novels such as images, visions, language, narrative designs, duality, alienation, subjectivity, psycho analysis, feminist poetics, and sexual politics, the much talked about survival theme in Margaret Atwood's novels has not been traced and examined. Consequently, this study critically examines the politics adopted by the women protagonists of her novels to survive.

Aims and Method:

The object of this thesis is to highlight the main aspects of the survival of women in Atwood's novels, and to establish the thesis that Atwood's women are unique in that they refuse to be victims and survive their predicaments. The thesis also attempts an interpretation of the strategies adopted by the protagonists to survive has been made. Within the limited canvas available for expounding the thesis, this thematic study confines itself to five of her major novels.

Novels for Study:

Chapter Two entitled "Surviving Consumerism" analyses the politics of female survival in The Edible Woman. The novel is an indictment of the "male consumption" of women in a patriarchal, capitalistic, consumerist society. It exposes how even an economically independent woman takes a long time to be conscious of her marginalization as the 'second sex'. It asks the question, "What is a woman in a

consumer society?" The novel's ending denies the answer that she is a seductively packaged female, both hunting for and hunted by the hungry male. Life itself is a consumer / consumed process; we may not live to eat but we must certainly eat to live.

Chapter Three, which has the title "Surviving Duplicity", is a brief survey of the politics of female survival in Lady Oracle. Through this novel Atwood seems to comment on the pretences of women who sacrifice to please others. The novel calls women to be pragmatic and face life head on. To survive a modern society, you need to contribute to your life in your own way, not in the way someone else decides. For women to survive, their co-dependent behaviour should be weakened, and their own inner directives should be strengthened. Lady Oracle exhorts women to no longer barter reality for a pseudo-security promised by the male. It encourages them to exercise their autonomy and to be free to pursue interesting and challenging careers.

Chapter Four, bearing the title "Political Survival", elucidates Bodily Harm as a travelogue that addresses itself to the nature and violence of the victimization of women. It exposes the wickedness of men on the one hand and the brutality of the state on the other. The novelist advocates the need for a jail break and re-creation. In this way a possible resistance can be made in order to turn the individual and national dreams of women into realities.

Chapter Five, headed "Surviving Theocracy" is devoted to the struggle for survival in The Handmaid's Tale. It is a 'dystopian', cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society based on theocracy where women

are denied the basic rights. It also recognizes that the structures that cause and perpetuate woman's oppression are arbitrary. In this way Atwood tells us in her cautionary tale something we need to know about the human capacity for survival which serves a canonization of feminism.

The penultimate chapter bearing the heading "Surviving Childhood Victimization" highlights how Atwood explodes the myth of childhood innocence in the novel Cat's Eye. The novel is unusual as it builds upon the most detailed and perceptive exploration of young girlhood. It is the story of how the little girl who got bullied by her girl friends was unable to respond to other people when she grew up. The journey of her life helps her see the negative effects of being overwhelmed by others.

The concluding chapter, in addition to being a summing up, attempts to focus on the new woman. The new woman portrayed by Atwood is in the process of emerging. What is new is the essential awareness that women have long been exploited and the feeling that it is time for each and everyone of them to become human. Atwood's female protagonists in all these five novels are identical in refusing to be victims and surviving their predicaments. Survival for them means that there is no dominance or submission, that all individuals are free to determine their own lives as equals. While the protagonist of the first novel survives the constraints of marriage, the protagonist of the second novel survives a duplicitous appearance that she has to put up in order to face the world. Atwood broadens the scope of survival to a political atmosphere in her third novel and the next novel actualizes it. The last

novel portrays a successful woman. So, a progressive pattern is seen in all these five novels.

Chapter II

Surviving Consumerism: *The Edible Woman*

> The strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the control of men has resulted in the general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents, associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited their achievements in many fields but also has given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women.
>
> - Simone de Beauvoir [1]

The Edible Woman (1969) is the first Canadian novel that anticipates the trends of feminism found in the later women novelists such as Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and Toni Morrison. It is a highly complex piece of realistic fiction. It has been read and interpreted variously by several scholars and critics.Though the novel was written in 1965, at the very beginning of the Women's Liberation, it appeared only in 1969 at the beginning of the "Second wave" feminism. The Edible Woman is Margaret Atwood's maiden attempt at fiction writing. As the novel predates the Women's Liberation movement, Atwood rightly describes The Edible Woman as a "protofeminist"[2] novel. It exposes how even an economically independent woman takes a long time to be conscious of her marginalization as the "second sex". It is an indictment of "male consumption" of women in a patriarchal,

capitalistic, consumer society. Thus, Atwood is chiefly concerned with "de-constructing" gender politics as her strategy of survival in The Edible Woman as in her other novels.

Male Consumption of Woman in a Consumer Society:

The title of the novel suggests that the food metaphor plays a dominant part in the evocation of the meaning of the novel. As Rama Devi succinctly puts it ,

> more than food gets eaten in a capitalist and patriarchal society dominated by conspicuous consumption, rationality and industrialism, where there is no place for the attitudes, desires, beliefs and opinions expressed by the females, the central figures of Margaret Atwood's fiction. [3]

The Edible Woman is structured like a journey, the journey of a woman called Marian. During her journey in life through her association with several male and female acquaintances, the role models and friends, she realizes and assesses different male strategies of exploitation and the causes of women's oppression. Her interaction with them brings in its wake a series of experiences, mostly unpleasant. Eventually, she picks up enough courage to turn the tables against men like Peter and Duncan, who are out to exploit and humiliate her. Thus, she refuses to be the "edible woman" trapped in domesticity. She endeavours to attain humanity and a human identity. It would be instructive to try and explicate the progression of Marian from a meek, docile and non-descript woman to a strong individualistic and active feminist.

Before examining Marian's success, it is quite interesting to hear of what prompted Atwood to write this novel:

> I used to be a very good cake decorator and was often asked to reproduce various objects in pastry and icing. Also, in my walks past pastry stores, I always wondered why people make replicas of things – brides and grooms, for instance, of Mickey mice and then ate them. It seems a mysterious thing to do. But for my heroine to make a false image of herself and then consume it was entirely appropriate, given the story – don't your think? [4]

Even after the decision was taken to write this novel, Atwood found the elaborations difficult. She talks of her experience thus:

> I wrote it on University of British Columbia exam booklets. There was going to be one booklet per chapter […]. I wrote that novel in four months, I find with horror in looking back [...]. Every day I would ask myself, what is going to happen today to these people? In the place where you plot out your exam questions on the left hand side, I'd make a list, a few notes on what she does today. Then I would write the chapter.[5]

However, Atwood has made a beautiful artistic work in The Edible Woman. In her 1979 introduction to the novel, Atwood says that the tone of the book seems more contemporary now than it did in, say, 1971 when it was believed that society could change itself a good deal faster than it seems likely at present.

The Plot:

The central character, Marian, is a young woman just graduated from University and working for a market - research company. Her spinster colleagues are Lucy, Emmie and Millie, nicknamed as "the office virgins". Marian shares a room with Ainsley - a parody of extreme feminism - and the relationship between them is purely non - obligatory. Clara and Len are Marian's former classmates. Clara is married to Joe and has three children.

On weekends, Marian occupies herself with Peter Wollander, a lawyer. They are initially happy with neither trying to dominate the other nor believing in marriage. Thus, their relationship is a non- interfering one, based on non- expectations for the future. But as the story progresses we start to question whether or not her life really is acceptable and worthwhile. Possessing a job, an apartment, and a lover, Marian seems to be the fully emancipated modern woman, but, in fact, she's adrift; she has no tradition, no freedom, and no future. There is no moral or social authority she can accept. There is not even a suitable role model.

Utterly normal both to outward appearances and in her own self- estimation, Marian seems to accept the conditions of her life and to pride herself in her ability to cope. It is Peter's hunting story that initiates Marian's collapse. "So I whipped out my knife […] and gave her one hell of a crack […] there was blood and guts all over the place" (**EW** 69). When Marian introduces Peter to Len, from their conversation Marian comes to know Peter's hobbies as a hunter and a photographer. When Peter talks of a released rabbit as a hunter's target, she begins to feel herself as his potential prey. She realizes that Peter, the hunter, armed with his camera, the gun

substitute, wants to forever fix her in an image of what she should be. She decides to do something about it. Her decision takes the form of a flight.

Peter is perplexed and follows her. At the end of the flight, Peter proposes and Marian accepts, accepting the sanctioned pattern "to marry someone eventually and have children, every one does" (**EW** 111). But to her surprise, as the marriage approaches, Marian suffers from apprehensions. Marian's visualization of her as a victim in Peter's hands stretches further and further to a point when she watches Peter eating. It strikes her that Peter is treating her in as civilized a way as his handling of the steak on his plate, devouring it with relish and style. Watching him eat reminds her of the picture of the cow on her cook book. The cow stands undisturbed because it doesn't know its fate. So long as Marian does not realize that she is exploited, life is blissful and carefree. But the realization has come. It gives her a rude shock. She reacts to it by refusing to eat.

Marian's system rebels against non-vegetarian food. She is, however, unable to understand her body's sudden rebellious reflexes. She goes about asking her friends, and even Peter, whether she is normal. Their affirmative answers do not in any way dispel her fears. Shunning non-vegetarian food and later even salads and vegetables, she exists on canned rice pudding, but to her dismay, her mind recoils at the thought of even this kind of food.

As the employee of a market research company she tries to interview Duncan, "a young boy" who looks "about" fifteen" (**EW** 48) but who turns out to be a twenty six year old graduate student in English. She begins to go around with him without

Peter's knowledge. It is on the day of the grand party that Peter arranges that Marian realizes the consequences of her marriage with him. Once again she realizes instinctively that she must run for her life. She realizes that she must get out of the party before it is too late, and reach Duncan. He would know what to do.

Marian learns her final and decisive lesson from Duncan. His guidance is honest and trustworthy, but he refuses to offer advice. "Don't ask me, that's' your problem […]. You'll have to think of your own way out" (**EW** 293).That's the lesson she learns from him, to face, tackle and survive. Having learnt the lesson, she decides to counter Peter. In a rebellious mood she sets out to bake a cake in the shape of a pretty, innocent woman. She invites Peter to have the cake, and at the right moment she chooses to attack. "You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. That's what you really wanted all along, isn't it?"(**EW** 301). Peter is flabbergasted. He is shocked at being cornered, and "apparently he didn't find her silly" (**EW** 301). As soon as she has broken off her engagement with him, her body reverts to normal responses. "Suddenly she was hungry" (**EW** 271).

Convincing Narrative of Personal Growth:

The Edible Woman portrays how the protagonist has come a full "circle".[6] As a woman, Marian has definitely changed from the meek traditional woman into the bold, conscious woman. The self-discovery helps her to reject her passivity and to refuse to be a victim. Atwood does not adopt an extremist stance as a feminist and hold men alone responsible for the subjugation and inferiorization of women. In

Atwood's view, women like Marian, in allowing them to be colonized and exploited, are equally responsible for perpetuating gender - related inequality. As Linda Hutcheon remarks : "As both a Canadian and a woman, she [Atwood] protests any tendency toward easy passivity and naivety; she refuses to allow either the Canadians or the women to deny their complicity in the power structures that may subject them".[7]

Marian reveals, what Atwood in Survival calls, "the Rapunzel syndrome". In Canada, she says, Rapunzel and the tower are the same. The heroine has internalized the values of her culture to such an extent that she has become her own prison. Marian needs to break the dragon cage of self and live her life as a whole human being. Joseph Campbell believes : "If a person doesn't listen to the demands of his own spiritual and heart life and insists on a certain programme, he is going to have a schizophrenic crack-up. The person has put himself off-centre".[8] True to what he says, Marian has stopped listening to herself and consequently, there is a rift between her social and inner selves. Having yielded to the demands of her society, her words often do not reflect her innermost thoughts and feelings.

Though Marian has physically escaped from her hometown, she unconsciously identifies with her town. The following quotation from Wallace Stagner's Wolf Willow applies to her. She could well repeat what Stagner's protagonist says:

> I may not know who I am, but I know where I am from. I can say to myself that a good part of my private and social character, the kinds of scenery and weather and people and humour I respond to, the

> prejudices I wear like dishonourable scars, the affections that sometimes waken me from […] sleep with a rush of undiminished love, the virtues I respect and the weaknesses I condemn, the code I try to live by, the special ways I fail at it and the kinds of shame I feel when I do, the models and heroes I follow, the colours and shapes that evoke my deepest pleasure, the way I adjudicate between personal desire and personal responsibility, have been in good part scored into me by that little womb (town). [9]

Marian's unnamed small town inhibits her because she spends a lot of time and energy trying to maintain her social mask. Marian struggles to appear sensible, mature and helpful at all times.

At the beginning of the novel, one finds Marian vaguely accepting the victim's role. She says : "Ainsley says I choose clothes as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration, though I can't see anything wrong with that" (**EW** 12). The imagery used is significant. Only a victim of animals of prey needs camouflage or protective colouration. Ainsley sees Marian as a victim and Marian accepts this image of herself because she sees nothing wrong with that. In the words of Shiela Page :

> Her acceptance of the consumer – consumed syndrome as the basis of society seems to stem from her own distance from it, and from a feeling of ineffectuality on her own part […]. Marian is an instinctive victim never naming her hunters, but knowing who and what they are just the same.[10]

Her feeling of ineffectiveness makes her think that she has no power to confront and overcome the sources of her oppression, whether they are people like Peter or institutions.

Secondary Position:

Marian works for 'Seymour Surveys', a market research company. It seems a good enough job to her at the time she takes the job, but, as Marian says : "After four months its limits are still vaguely defined" (**EW** 18). Seymour Surveys, it becomes clear, is projected metaphorically as a trap and Marian soon realizes that she is literally and figuratively trapped. She remarks : "The company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors; the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle" (**EW** 18). Marian's department is of all women ; above her are all men and below her are the machines. "What, then, could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys?" (**EW** 19) is what intrigues Marian.

Through the imagery of the three layers, Atwood posits a metaphorical parallel for a woman's place / space in society. The three layers represent three planes of reality – mind, body and matter. The men are minds; the women are bodies. This hierarchical distribution defines a woman's place as above "matter" but below "mind" and Marian, the woman, is faced with the dilemma of what she is to "become." As she says : "I couldn't become one of the men upstairs; I couldn't become a machine person […] as that would be a step down" (**EW** 19). Her problem of 'becoming' is both a metaphysical as well as a socio-political problem. At the metaphysical plane, Marian's quest is for a meaningful human identity. At the socio - political level, her

desire is to become neither a man nor a machine but a woman with an absolute, rather than a relatively defined identity.

Marian's problem of 'becoming' constitutes and expresses Atwood's feminist polemics against the restrictive gender role imposed upon a woman in a paternalistic society. The given role models not only inferiorize woman but, at the same time, distort and problematize her self - perception as well. The hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to an in-between thing and a mind-less body. For Atwood, Marian's predicament and position typify the situation of women in male-dominated society and implicitly enshrines "Atwood's criticism of patriarchal, hegemonie and gender-specific role-models."[11]

As a matter of fact, Marian has no freedom in her work and therefore she feels forbidden to do what she likes. She has no future because her job as a researcher cannot provide her with adequate pension after a lifetime of unrewarding work. She feels it to be an outrageous infringement of her personality. Moreover, Seymour Surveys proscribes marriage and pregnancy of women in employment. It regards marriage and pregnancy as acts of disloyalty to the authority of the company. Marian experiences an identity crisis in her place as researcher because of the discrimination against women. She feels outraged at the comment of a man whom she interviews. He says : "You ought to be at home with some big strong man to take care of you" (**EW** 50).

Marian seeks a male alternative in Peter, her boy friend, to fulfill her objective. Marian looks upon him as not only "a rescuer from chaos" (**EW** 96), but

also as a provider of stability. She is drawn to him because of his pleasing manners and impressive way of talking. Peter, a young lawyer, is prosperous, well- dressed, and good - looking. His distinction is his normalcy. Peter is not a monster of male-chauvinism; he is, in Marian's words, "ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well- groomed faces of cigarette ads" (**EW** 62). She thinks that he is an ideal choice for her. Little does she realize that all his characteristics are nothing but affectations intended to win her over.

Marian's Choices:

Apart from Peter, Marian has a few other choices. This prompts Alan Dave to observe that "The Edible Woman is a novel about choices".[12] To make the kaleidoscopic picture of her life more real, Marian is presented as a perfect foil to her friends. Through them, she learns immensely of women's problems.

Subscribing to the Requirements of the Society:

Marian's friends, colleagues and acquaintances illustrate various attitudes towards their own status as women. Marian's spinster colleagues, "the socially conscious Lucy", "Emmie, the office hypochondriac" and "Millie the girl guide practicality" (**EW** 22) nicknamed as "the office virgins" occupy the victim's 'First Position': they are unaware of being victims in a patriarchal society. They unquestioningly accept society's definition of the role of a woman as a wife. Their sole aim in life seems to be about getting a husband. All of them are artificial blondes, since blonde hair is one of the charms required by their society in women.

Lucy dresses elegantly and systematically visits all the expensive restaurants in town during lunch break, in the hope of catching a prospective husband.

When Marian announces her engagement to Peter at lunch, their expression changes "from expectation to dismay" and Lucy blurts out : "How on earth did you ever catch him?" They look up with "pathetic too-eager faces poised to snatch at her answer" (**EW** 124). When they are invited to Peter's last bachelor party they come eagerly. "They were so excited. They were each expecting a version of Peter to walk miraculously through the door, drop to one knee and propose" (**EW** 258). They anxiously surround Len Slank because he is "single and available" (**EW** 260). Lucy even tries to attract Peter, fluttering her silver eyelids and paying him lavish compliments. "You are even handsomer than you sound on the phone" (**EW** 263) she says.

Later, when Marian disappears from the party, Lucy accompanies Peter in his search for Marian, displaying concern and sympathy and Peter is properly impressed : "Damn nice of her to take the trouble, it's nice to know there are 'some' considerate women left around" (**EW** 295). One might perhaps surmise that Lucy or some one like her would succeed in hooking Peter and living to his stereotyped expectations concerning a wife. Undoubtedly, Lucy seems better suited to Peter than Marian for both of them are dedicated to the false gods created by their society.

The brief but vividly etched sketch of the landlady of Marian's apartment is another example of a woman drifting through life in a state of unawareness blindly accepting and enforcing society's cliched expectations from women. She is a self -

appointed champion of bourgeois morality and strongly disapproves of a rebel like Ainsley.

Subsiding into Grim Inert Fatalism:

Clara and Joe present Marian with another alternative- a different facet altogether of love and marriage. Clara, Marian's former classmate, a natural blonde, had been "everyone's ideal of translucent-perfume-advertisement-femininity" (**EW** 37) during her high school days. She had fallen in love with Joe Bates in her second year in college and had been swept into matrimony and motherhood in a state of unawareness. She had "greeted her first pregnancy with astonishment," the second with "dismay" and with the third she had "subsided into a grim but "inert fatalism" (**EW**38).

Repeated pregnancies bring Clara to accept her life as something inevitable and fated. One way of responding to this position is with passivity; another is with anger. Clara chooses the first response in general, though here is humorous exasperation, bordering on anger, when she refers to her children. Her resentment of her position comes out when she calls them "leeches" (**EW** 32) "barnacles" (**EW** 38) "all covered with suckers like an octopus" (**EW** 32). Marriage and multiple motherhood seem to have reduced her to a state of exhaustion and inertia, almost to a vegetable. "She lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, looking like strange vegetable growth" (**EW** 32). Ainsley is furious about Clara's passivity: "She just lies there and that man does all the work! She lets herself be treated like a 'thing'[…]. She should 'do' something; if only as a token gesture" (**EW** 39).

Joe prepares the meal because Clara is pregnant for the third time. After vainly trying to feed her son, she sits "in a nest of crumpled newspapers with her eyes closed" (**EW** 36), while Joe does all the chores. Full of 'embarrassed pity' for Clara's helplessness, Marian sees that Clara's house littered with papers, garbage, dirty diapers and the babies are all beyond Clara's control. Even Clara's "own body seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any directions of hers" (**EW** 37).

All the babies have been unplanned. Ainsley, Marian's room-mate criticizes Clara for not being organized, for not finishing her degree, and for "draining" (**EW** 38) her husband's energy. But Marian asks : "Where would Clara be without him?" Ainsley retorts : "She would have to cope by herself" (**EW** 40). Marian is indignant with Ainsley for not understanding "Clara's position" (**EW** 38). Atwood wants the readers to see that Marian is wrong here.

Ainsley wants Clara to at least finish her degree. When Clara's husband Joe Bates suggests that she should go to night school she just gives him a "funny look" (**EW** 262), as if that were impossible. She probably considers her position to be unchangeable because she believes it to be inevitable. However, she does not blame her husband; instead, she considers him very good (**EW** 143).When Marian tells Clara of her engagement, Clara does not sound at all happy.Sensing a question mark in her own life, she perhaps wonders if Marian will be as happy as she hopes to be.

Joe's attitude to women is gentle and patronizing. He tends "to think of all unmarried girls as easily 'victimized' and needing protection" (**EW** 37). He sees

women as inevitable victims in another sense too. Analysing the condition of university educated women who marry, he sees an opposition between women's self image or 'core' or inner self and her feminine role as a wife and mother.

> A woman who has been to the university gets the idea she has a mind, her Professors pay attention to what she has to say, they treat her like a thinking human being ; when she gets married her core gets invaded. Her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her […] so she allows her core to get taken over by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she doesn't have anything left inside, she's hollow, she doesn't know who she is any more; her core has been destroyed (**EW** 261).

This chilling analysis of the core or the inner self being destroyed by her role is followed by the startling conclusion, that sinking into unawareness is the best course to be adopted : "Of course it doesn't help to realize all that. It happens whether you realize it or not" (**EW** 261). Joe therefore concludes : "may be women shouldn't be allowed to the university at all ; then they wouldn't always be feeling later on that they're missed out on the life of the mind" (**EW** 262).

Though a considerate and kind husband, Joe endorses and thus perpetuates the victim position of women as something inevitable.He too thus contributes to Clara's position as a victim. He recommends unawareness as the only strategy of survival. Perhaps Clara achieves this in the end, for she seems better – adjusted and capable of

coping with life. Her membership in a Burial Society takes on a symbolic meaning, perhaps indicating that she is buried alive in her victim condition, like Meridian's mother, Mrs. Hill, in Alice Walker's novel, Meridian (1976) who found herself "being buried alive, walked away from her own life, brick by brick", [13] with the birth of each successive child.

Dopple-ganger:

Atwood achieves correction of Marian's opinion about Clara by introducing Duncan, who is in the same position as Clara. Although he is an unmarried young man instead of a married young woman, and emaciated instead of being bloated by pregnancy, he is given a setting both literally and symbolically analogous to Clara's. Duncan is described sitting in the middle of chaos just as Clara is described sitting in hers, and he is shown to be exactly what she is; disorganized, unable to finish his graduate work, passive, a voracious child dependent on others for both his physical and emotional nourishment. His gloomy apartment is like Clara's house : "littered with notebooks, books opened face down, 'rats' nest of papers"(**EW** 50,51), and garbage bags in every corner.

In the midst of this chaos, he crawls into his bed of tangled sheets and sits there motionless, "backed into the corner formed by the two walls" (**EW** 54). His two solicitous room mates, his surrogate parents, fuss over him, shop for him, offer him beer in bed, and one of them even cooks him huge gourmet meals. He not only devours these but, like Marian, is constantly snacking and sometimes "speaks in the

wheedling voice of a small child begging an extra cookie" (**EW** 55). He exists as the opposite of all that Peter represents.

Just as Clara is more her husband's child than the mother of his children, Duncan is a child, too, and as his immobility on the bed suggests, he too is stuck in his position, not only in his relationship with his roommates, whom he professes to dislike, but also in his unproductive graduate work. Though his roommates, Fish and Trevor, are almost of the same age as he is, they act as if they are a family with Trevor assuming the role of a mother, Fish, that of a father, to Duncan, their only child. Thus, they cannibalistically feed on each other's emotions and do not want to live away from each other.

He presents his own situation thus: "They think I'm mad […]. I think they're mad" (**EW** 99) - a situation that Marian is being led to recognize as her own. Marian is visually linked to Duncan rather than to Peter. As Jayne Patterson has observed : "[…] the split voice […] allows her to objectify her experience, to stand back from herself as it were, and it is through this distancing process that she is able to emancipate herself from her initial role as victim".[14] When Marian nuzzles against Duncan in an effort to get warm, he provides a need, human but not, as yet, sexual, that she cannot find in Peter.

Although Marian and Duncan climb up the spiral staircase to reach the ancient Egyptian section in the Ontario Museum, the journey clearly represents a symbolic visit to the underworld, a descent to the world of the dead. On the way, he shows little interest in her marriage, though he remarks : "[…] it sounds evil to me" (**EW** 184)

before directing the conversation back to the complex and ever - fascinating subject of himself.

Although he sounds egoistic, Duncan, as guide, is indirectly teaching Marian an all important lesson in self - responsibility : that she must ultimately think for herself and make decisions for herself. “Duncan's point seems to be that life is always deceptive and equivocal, that he is offering valuable practice in interpreting and surviving in a duplicitous world”.[15] Marian asks him to return and talk to Peter, but he refuses; all he can do is to show her the way back to the upper world. Thus, Duncan is a splendidly complex creation, one of the most original creations in Canadian fiction.

When Marian meets Duncan at the laundromat, she symbolically meets her 'other' self. Atwood reinforces the intended symbolism by making Duncan actually emphasize the similarity between him and Marian. “You look sort of like me in that" (**EW** 144), Duncan tells Marian who is wearing his gown and thereby quite clearly precipitates his function as Marian's alter ego. What differentiates the two, however, is that whereas Duncan only self - consciously plays the role of a victim and uses this pretended posture to exploit the others, Marian is actually a victim, exploited by others. Nonetheless, "Marian is able to see herself in Duncan's affected pose as a victim".[16] She is able to see herself as he is and not as seen by others. This confrontation with the 'other' self sets in motion the process of self-examination and re-appraisal of herself in relation to others and Marian eventually acquires a new knowledge about herself.

Parody of Extreme Feminism:

In Ainsley, we have a parody of extreme feminism. At one extreme, we have the Victorian narrow rectitude of the lady down below ; at the other, there is Ainsley, with her liberated views derived from, some dubious anthropology courses at her college. Ainsley is against marriage because marriage, according to her, kills the identity of the woman. But she wants to give birth to a child, to fulfill her deepest femininity, as she puts it. All she wants is a man with a decent heredity, who would father her child and then leave her. She succeeds in trapping Len, Marian's former classmate.

Ainsley Tewkes repudiates the victim role assigned to woman, and her rejection of marriage as an exploitative relationship probably stems from this. But she wants to give birth to a child, to fulfill her "deepest femininity," (**EW** 42) as she puts it. But she believes that "the thing that ruined families these days is the husband" (**EW** 42) and decides to dispense with one. All she wants is a man with a decent heredity, who would father her child and then leave her "and not make a fuss about marrying" (**EW** 44) her. Marian knows that Ainsley is wrong but finds it difficult to argue with "some one who sounded so rational" (**EW** 43).

Ainsley's strategy is thus to turn the tables on man and use and exploit him to fulfill her own need to become a mother. In her relationship with Len Slank, the traditional male- female role assumptions as victor – victim and hunter – hunted are reversed. The images used to describe her in Len's apartment make this role reversal clear. She is compared to a "pitcher - plant waiting for some insect to be attracted, drowned and digested" (**EW** 81). Putting on a school - girlish innocence, Ainsley

makes Len believe that he is the hunter stalking the prey, while the truth is different. Later, when Len hears how he had been used by Ainsley he is filled with shock and anger and rails at all women as "clawed, scaly predators" (EW 238). Atwood, through Ainsley, brings out the challenge to convention that manifests itself within the complex art of living.

A psychologist's lecture on the importance of a strong father image for the normal healthy upbringing of a child radically changes Ainsley's view of marriage. She is now determined to get a husband. When Len refuses, Ainsley is not unduly upset. Her response is : "I guess that's that" (**EW** 238). "I'll simply have to get another one, that's all" (**EW** 239). For her, a husband is just a replaceable spare part, whose function is to provide a Father image to her child.

Finally, she manages to get Duncan's friend, Fisher Symthe, to marry her. Fisher, who is a pro-birth, fertility worshipper, complies readily. Ainsley thus repudiates the victim role in the politics of gender, by assuming the power-wielding victor / dominator role. She does not come out of the victor-victim ambit but merely reverses the roles. She ultimately accepts the traditional role of a wife and mother. Thus, she becomes edible in the marriage market against which she has professed earlier.

Len Slank also lacks a core and is as much of a victim as he is a predator. Len is "a self-consciously lecherous skirt-chaser" (**EW** 87) who delights in "corrupting" young virgins under seventeen and running away from them before they start chasing him. Beaten by Ainsley at his own "hit and run" (**EW** 66) game, his play-boy image

crumbles and he sounds very much like an injured maiden when he accusingly tells Ainsley: “The only thing you wanted from me was my body” (**EW** 159). What Len does not realize is that all his ex-girlfriends could well accuse him of the same thing. Len’s agony intensifies when Ainsley tries to rope him into marriage and he reveals himself to be an emotionally insecure person who, unable to handle a crisis, regresses into infancy.

Predator – Threat to Identity:

While Marian struggles to overcome her psychic alienation and move towards spiritual survival, these minor characters are depicted either as existing in their alienated states or at various stages in their personal quests. As Ainsley, Clara, Lucy, Emmie and Millie fail to offer appropriate alternatives to Marian’s identity crisis, she seeks an alternative in Peter to fulfill her objective. Peter is a law graduate who is well known for his purchasable hobbies. Peter needs a girl to complement his collection of knives, rifles, pistols and cameras. His recently married friend is significantly named 'Trigger'. Peter likes Marian as she never demands anything from him. He sees her as a girl who wouldn’t try to take over his life. However, Peter’s hobbies unnerve Marian. Peter hunts wild animals, but Marian begins to feel herself as the potential prey. She recognizes herself as the victim. She “let go of Peter's arm and began to run” (**EW** 71). The hunting imagery gives way to that of a military operation.

At the end of the flight when she apologizes, he is appeased by her penitence and proposes marriage to her. Just then, there is a flash of lightning and she sees herself : “small and oval, mirrored in his eyes” (**EW** 89). This image conveys that

henceforth she will strive to be the mirror reflection of the ideal that Peter has imagined. Peter, who at first is found lamenting over the marriage of the last of his bachelor friends, later proposes to Marian just because it suits him and his values, which are well synchronized with those of the plastic society he serves. He rationalizes his sudden surrender to marriage by saying:

> A fellow can't keep running around indefinitely. It'll be a lot better in the long run for my practice too, the clients like to know you've got a wife, people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age, they start thinking you're a queer or something […]. And there is one thing about you, Marian; I know I can always depend on you. Most women are pretty scatter brained but you're such a sensible girl. You may not have known this but I've always thought that's the first thing to look for when it comes to choosing a wife (**EW** 96-97).

Queerness is not a quality Peter associates with himself. What Peter actually means by 'sensible' is 'conventional'. Believing implicitly in male superiority, he feels threatened by outspoken women like Ainsley who dare to reveal the presence of a mind.

He likes Marian for her passivity and her lack of strong conventions and feels she is not the kind of girl who would try to "take over his life" (**EW** 61). "Peter's manner of choosing a life partner on the basis of her outer or social self is not very different from that of choosing something like a packet of noodles at the supermarket

based on the attractiveness of its package".[17] Having selected her with care, he then thinks he owns her and displays her with pride to his successful friends.

Rapidly, Peter assumes a proprietorial air over her : "He sounded as though he's just bought a shiny car, I gave him a tender chrome - plated smile" (**EW** 96). Peter imposes on her his image of a perfect woman, as when he tells her that he chose her because she was "sensible", a quality he wanted in his wife. "I didn't feel very sensible, I lowered my eyes modestly" (**EW** 97), says Marian.

Female Passivity and Submission:

Her loss of autonomy comes as a shock even to her. When Peter asks : "When do you want to get married?" to her great astonishment, she heard "a soft flannelly voice," barely recognizable as her own, saying : "I'd rather have you decide that, I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you" (**EW** 98). The very prospect of marriage makes her take on the role of the subservient wife. Her inner self is subordinated to her role. Marrying Peter, thus, implies having someone who would always make decisions for her.

Marian's loss of individuality is indicated by the silencing of the inner voice of ironic commentary. Instead of asserting herself, she begins to quote Peter as an infallible authority even to herself, in private and "thus she becomes Her Master's Voice".[18] Marian also sees marriage as a matter of convenience and inevitability, especially after the trauma she undergoes when she hears about the pension plan in her office. "Given her insights, her constant paranoia, her inner doubts and defensiveness, it is not surprising that she considers marriage as a means of total

concealment".[19] It is when she is about to take this extreme step that her body intervenes and confronts her with the reality of the situation. It makes her realize that marriage to Peter means more than protection, that it means death – a form of socially acceptable suicide. The rebellion is carried on through the 'body language' in which the body makes it impossible for Marian to eat one thing after the other and it is in this sense that the significance of the food metaphor can be felt.

Threat to the very Survival of the Self:

The first symptom of anorexia (loss of appetite) is seen in Marian immediately after she agrees to the marriage proposal made by Peter. When she goes to a restaurant along with her colleagues who are all spinsters, she finds it difficult to eat: "Marian was surprised at herself. She had been dying to go for lunch, she had been starving, and now she wasn't even hungry"(**EW**114). However, she is aware that one has to eat to live. She chooses to eat very rarely and stops eating non-vegetarian food. This seems to be a form of a disapproval and protest against all that Peter represents.

In course of time, Marian understands the true character of Peter as a manipulator and gets insights into the truth of her relationship with him. She realizes that she has let herself be sold as some kind of a dispensable commodity. Marian's rejection of food points out, paradoxically enough, that in order to survive one must starve, and that by starving one can survive. Her non eating thus turns into a metaphor of sustenance.

As the date of her engagement approaches, Marian feels nervous and disturbed. She realizes that her interests and identity can never be safe and secure in

the event of her marriage with Peter. She begins to look at him as a destroyer of her individuality and identity. She becomes more and more aware of her loss of free will and choice. She finds herself lost and she wants to know what she is becoming and what direction she is going to take.

The events in Marian's life reach a climax when Peter arranges the Cocktail party on the occasion of their betrothal. The artificiality in the consumer society manifests itself in Marian who is dressed up in red with a heavy make-up and gold earrings, as directed by Peter.

> She held both of her naked arms out towards the mirror. They were the only portion of her flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or leather or varnish covering, but […] even they looked fake, like soft, pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible (**EW** 229).

Marian realizes that a woman's primary market value in the marriage depends upon the artificiality of her fascinating image. She finds herself dwarfed by her fatal metamorphosis into Peter's wife. She becomes progressively divided and objectified in the marriage market. As she is made a mere decorative object, she is reduced to insignificance. Marian is now defined as 'other' and becomes an object. As she turns from subject into object, from consumer into the consumed, Marian loses her capacity to perceive anything.

Two events bring Marian's subconscious rejection of the victim-wife role to the conscious level. One is Duncan's brutally frank question: "You didn't tell me it was a masquerade, who the hell are you supposed to be?" (**EW** 265) This makes

Marian realize the inauthenticity of her appearance. The other is Peter's attempt to photograph her in that guise. She finds this a threat to her real self, a delimitation and a dehumanization of herself into an image.

Peter is a camera enthusiast. His camera is his substitute for his gun, the weapon. He gives up all his thoughts of loving her. He looks upon her as an image of saleable commodity. He wants to get a couple of shots of Marian alone in order to show her 'red' on a movie slide in the 'zero hour' of the party. He evokes uneasy feelings in Marian for she feels as though she has become a lifeless statue meant for commercial display.

She perceives Peter as a victimizer who carries on technological assault on women by means of a camera. She sees him a "homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands" (**EW** 246). The image of Peter as a hunter upsets Marian emotionally. A short while before his party, he looks at his clothes neatly lined up in his cupboard and feels she dislikes them for asserting an "invisible silent authority" (**EW** 229). Moreover, she does not want to touch them, for, aware of his multiple selves, she fears his clothes will be warm and that each costume will contain a fragment of Peter.

The climactic section of the novel also provides Marian an occasion to bring together all her male and female friends who figure as her alternatives. Marian finds that Peter, Len, Emmy, Lucy, Millie, Clara and Joe are all both victims and predators swamped by their social system in varying degrees. She decides to run away from them all, metaphorically by rejecting all the alternatives they represent. She feels the

need for fresh air, the freedom to grow and develop her personality. She refuses to be his 'edible woman'. She upsets Peter's designs to control and dominate her by running away from her engagement. It shows her feminine valour and her potential for wholeness.

Peter, "the symbolically named rock of this consuming society" [20] is the most tragically self-alienated character in the novel. Unaware of his true or inner self, he is a random conglomeration of what T.S. Eliot calls "a heap of broken images" derived from the technological, consumer society in which he lives. "Peter-the-Presentable"[21] is "ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads" (**EW** 61).

Marian tells us that he is in his articling year as a lawyer and that though his is a small firm, "he's rising in it like a balloon" (**EW** 57). The image of the balloon reinforces our impression of Peter as made up of surfaces and totally without a core. Though the building in which he lives is still under construction, his apartment is largely finished and is used as a model for prospective buyers. Like his apartment, Peter struggles to be a model of modern, successful man.

It is because of the "anxiety of being influenced"[22] that Marian takes a flight to Duncan. She believes "he would know what to do" (**EW** 244). When she finds Duncan at the laundromat, he greets her as "the Scarlet Woman herself" (**EW** 247). Whereas Marian has run to him for guidance and protection, as soon as they meet, the roles are reversed. She begins to look suspiciously like a seducer who has tracked

down her prey. "The pattern of production and consumption, consumer and consumed, is continually working both ways".[23]

When Marian observes that she must now decide what she is going to do, his reply is honest and trustworthy in its refusal to offer advice that cannot properly be given. Marian asks him to return and talk to Peter, but he refuses; all he can do is to show her the way back to the upper world. Duncan's point seems to be that life is always deceptive and equivocal, that he is offering valuable practice in interpreting and surviving in a duplicitous world.

D.J. Dooley makes the following observations about Duncan:

> This man is anything but ordinary […]. His response to the world of commerce […] is gamesmanship […]. The difference between him and most other people is that he is quite aware that he is playing a role, whereas they are falling into roles without knowing it. Just as he is capable of looking at his own situation objectively, he is capable of analyzing his society. He prefers a literal waste land to the waste land of the modern commercial world […]. In other words, his response is to being as it is defined in the modern mercantile world – fitting into the cycle of production and consumption, making one kind of garbage into another – is to come as close as possible to not-being.[24]

Duncan may be an irritatingly paradoxical character, but he is advocating the paradoxes of duplicity as a possible way of coping with the world. W.J.Keith applies

to Duncan a remark used of one of the world's most profound but also enigmatic mentors: "He saved others; himself he cannot save" Matt.27:42).[25]

It is from the experiences of her friends and her own evaluation that Marian gradually but painfully learns that a woman in contemporary society is reduced to a commodity meant only for male consumption. Hence, she takes exception to the obscene posters of women to boost up the sales of different products. She is aware of the necessity to wage a war against those who exploit women for their advancement and prosperity by way of nude and semi-nude advertisements. She struggles against technologically oriented men with cameras, guns and planned careers who direct technological assaults on women. She opts for a long battle "in a spirit approaching gay rebellion" (**EW** 267) against exploitation and oppression of women.

Daring to Resist the Consumer Society:

Marian rejects her passivity and refuses to be a victim. She bakes the cake-woman to test and expose the true colour of Peter. It is a test "simple and direct as litmus paper" (**EW** 267). The immobility imposed by the victim role has slowly drained her and she has been approaching stasis. The process of creation (cake-making) is joyful, though the product makes her pensive, as she recognizes her own complicity in her former victimization. Addressing the Cake Woman, who is an image of her former self, Marian in fact addresses herself : "You look delicious. Very appetizing. And that's what will happen to you; That's what you'll get for being food" (**EW** 300). If a woman makes herself consumable, she will be consumed. She understands that her curse has been her own meekness.

She bakes the cake-woman in her own image, the surrogate of her own artificial self she presented at the cocktail party. In an interview with Gibson, Atwood comments: "Marian performs an action, a preposterous one in a way, as all the pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are, but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself". [26] She has become a sculptor rather than be a lifeless statue erected in the name of beauty. By creating the cake, she would like to symbolize her feelings. Thus, "symbolically the cake-woman represents woman as an object for male consumption. It also reveals over-richness and over-decoration visible in the gender system of marriage."[27]

When Peter comes, in lieu of an explanation, she offers the cake to him with the words : "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you? You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it?"(**EW** 301). When he refuses to eat the cake - woman, and is horrified at seeing it, it is clear that he does not understand Marian. But what triumphs is Marian's sense of self - determination, her recognition that she was being consumed by Peter and her desire to remain intact as a person. Once Peter leaves her apartment and her life, her body returns to normal metabolism and she eats the cake herself. With her new consciousness, she has a new perspective. She is no longer a status symbol for Peter, once the transference of victim - identity she has projected out of food disappears.

Once Marian externalises society's gender-role expectations from her, she is set free from the immobility of the role and begins to eat again. It is not only that.

She is also set free from the need to be needed by Duncan. Self-consciously recovering her individuality, she says : "Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again, I found my own situation much more interesting than his" (**EW** 308). With this, she reverts to the first person narration.

The Edible Woman asks the question "What is a woman in a consumer society?" The answer that she is a seductively packaged female, both hunting for and hunted by the hungry male, is partially denied by the novel's ending ; Marian, its ironically named heroine, decides against marrying. The circular plot that leads her into an engagement with Peter, a conventional young lawyer, leads her out of it again. The novel does not conclude with the traditional comedy ending of a wedding cake. The consumption of the symbolic cake - woman is the novel's climax. It defines Marian's mis-conceptions about her female identity by contrasting them to cultural assumptions about male identity. As Sharon Rose Wilson puts it: "By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake-woman image […] Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food".[28]

Written mainly in the past tense, the novel is divided into three parts; Part I and the very short part III are narrated in the first person by Marian, and part II is narrated in the third person. One partial reason for this switch in point of view is Marian's engagement near the end of Part I. Throughout Part I, she is hungry and eating. In Part II, she begins to identify herself with the objects she has previously ingested and consumed. The last chapter in Part I switches to the present tense, and begins : "So here I am" (**EW** 101). "Here" is motionless on the bed, where Marian

remains through the entire chapter. Thus Part I leads up to a point where Marian begins to crumble and eventually has to try and break free. It is a false climax that has led Marian into a seeming acceptance of her role as fiancée. But it is at this point that the work jarringly switches to a third person narrative that allows the reader to hover ominously above Marian's life and her actions until she finally breaks free for real.

The first chapter in Part II returns to the past tense but begins in the third-person point of view: "Marian was sitting listlessly at her desk" (**EW** 107). The significant similarity between the end of Part I and the beginning of Part II is her continued motionlessness. But Part III begins with bustle: "I was cleaning up the apartment" (**EW** 277). These contrasts between apathy and energy are paralleled by another set of somatic changes. In the first chapter of Part II, Marian begins to lose her hearty appetite; near the end of Part II, after she and Duncan have become lovers, her anorexia hits bottom ; she can eat nothing. But in Part III, Marian's appetite is restored when she bakes the cake woman. Marian ends with no lover, no job, no room mate, but with a remarkably healthy appetite.

Spiritual Survival:

Thus, The Edible Woman, a convincing narrative of personal growth, shows how female passivity and submission in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self. Marian, after being battered in body and psyche, finally passes into a state of raised consciousness. She comes to think of herself in the first person singular and acquires a confident voice of her own. The

Edible Woman begs its readers to revaluate their own roles in society, and as Hutcheon describes, the novel warns us about the dangers of "accepting the victim role in a consumer society". [29]

Marian Mac Alpin is a sensitive, self - reflective and exquisitely articulate female. She has quite an artful language to voice forth the changes that take place in her attitudes and feelings, as she journeys through her various associations with several male and female friends, and arrives at an understanding of what it means to be a woman. Though the narrative language abounds in various symbols and metaphors, it is the food metaphor which is the chief vehicle that serves to put forward the feminist tendencies of the heroine and helps her protest against the dehumanizing tendencies of her society and save herself by rejecting her inauthentic self.

The Edible Woman is clearly a satire on consumerism and packaging, to which we all comply in varying degrees. Atwood attacks consumerism through the image of literal consuming, a motif that runs through the book from the epigraph which quotes, "The Joys of Cooking" to the half-symbolic baking of the woman-cake, from getting breakfast on the opening page to the final consumption of the cake on the last. Marian is both consumer (she must eat to live) and consumed (she sees Peter as wanting to devour and absorb her).

Intellectually, the ending is a necessary compromise; Marian establishes a reasonable equilibrium. From being someone uncritically accepting her society's mores, she becomes in the course of her life excessively defiant of them - the politics

being physical and psychological as well as instinctive and basic. At the end, she finds some kind of balance between the consumer and the consumed, accepts the realities of modern living while clearly recognizing their frequent absurdities.

Marian MacAlpin, Atwood's 'abnormally normal' heroine struggles to survive spiritually in her seemingly sane but actually insane society. George Jonas says:

> In organic life we tend to feed off each other. Natural as this condition maybe, it has some curious emotional implications. We try to surround it with rituals and generally eat things looking as much as possible the other way. We speak of 'meat' rather than 'flesh' and use further linguistic refinements to turn gamboling calves and whimpering piglets into veal and pork on our table. And after we have perpetuated our existence at the cost of a once-living thing that has itself known the pleasure of eating, we embark on the less obvious but equally unpleasant process of feeding our emotions chunks of the emotions of others, devouring whole egos at times to satisfy our own hunger.[30]

Atwood forces us to become aware of the dark, awkward, rejected and repressed 'shadow' side of ourselves by insisting that all of us get our 'emotional vitamins' (**EW** 185) from feeding on others.

Like Aldous Huxley's Brave New World and Erich Fromm's psycho analytical and sociological work The Sane Society, The Edible Woman too is a critique of what Fromm calls "the pathology of normalcy"[31] in contemporary western society. Most of the characters in the novel, including Marian, reveal a passionate

desire to appear ‘normal’ and ‘well-adjusted’. Little do they realize that their society itself is sick. It was Freud who first spoke of social or collective neurosis in his Civilization and Its Discontents. According to him, social neurosis is a lot more difficult to remedy than individual neurosis for

> in the neurosis of an individual we can use as a starting point the contrast presented to us between the patient and his environment which we assume to be ‘normal’. No such background as this would be available for any society similarly affected; it would have to be supplied in some other way.[32]

What is interesting is that collective neurosis seems typical of the so-called civilized communities indicating that, unlike traditional or tribal societies, such communities fail to satisfy certain innate needs of human nature. The spiritual side of the psyche is starved by a life devoted solely to the pursuit of material prosperity. This defect is, however, cunningly masked as a virtue.

Consumer ethics idolizes the materially prosperous individual and regards the spiritually inclined person with disdain. To add to it, a wide variety of ‘desirable’ images are created for the appetite of consumers, most of whom are made to forget that happiness lies within themselves rather than in the external world. However, Atwood does not show every one being inevitably swamped by the social system. In its own way, the novel celebrates the spirit of those who dare, like Marian, to resist the consumer society and survive spiritually.

Chapter III

Surviving Duplicity: *Lady Oracle*

> I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which I meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it (**LO** 3).

The central character's death is her contrived disappearance, the consequences of which serve as a frame for the narration of her life story in Lady Oracle. Her life story is many stories just as Joan is many women. Her story questions the duplicity of women's lives and outline new scripts for women to survive.

In Lady Oracle (1976), published seven years after The Edible Woman(1969), Atwood again explores the issue of appearance and reality, the self as seen by others and the self as known from within. In this, her third novel, however, Atwood extends the concepts of doubling, of inner and outer selves, of surfaces and depths, of appearances and realities.

While her first two novels, The Edible Woman and Surfacing had come quickly and fluently, Atwood's third novel, Lady Oracle had to be written and re-written. When Lady Oracle appeared in 1976, it was warmly received by admirers for its readability and for its satire, though Atwood herself sees it more as a distortion of reality than as a scathing attack. It was awarded the 1977 City of Toronto Book Award and the 1977 Canada Booksellers' Association Award.

In an interview with Margaret Atwood, Sandler expressed the view that the plot of Lady Oracle is her most intricate, with various time zones and the interlocking

of real action with a gothic plot. Atwood explained that Lady Oracle is the most rewritten of her books and it took about two years to write. Surfacing and The Edible Woman each took six months, approximately, although she had been thinking about them for a long time before she started writing. With Lady Oracle, the conception and the writing were much closer.

The heroine of Lady Oracle says that writing gothics is like moving through a maze, and Lady Oracle's plot is something like that. Atwood says :

> Mazes are interesting. Apparently they were originally built for two reasons, religious initiation or defence […]. In gothic tales the maze is just a scare device. You have an old mansion with winding passages and monster at the centre. But the maze I use is a descent into the under world. There's a passage in Virgil's Aeneid which I found very useful, where Aeneas goes to the underworld to learn about his future. He's guided by the sibyl and he learns what he has to, from his dead father, and then he returns home.[1]

The plot of Lady Oracle is much the same. The central character is a writer of gothic romances partly because Atwood has always wondered what it was about these books that appealed.

The hypothesis of the book, in so far as there is one, is: "What happens to someone who lives in the 'real' world but does it as though this 'other' world is a real one? This may be the plight of many more of us than we care to admit".[2] Lady Oracle is not autobiographical. Atwood does not want her readers to assume that the novel is

just another version of her life. "With Lady Oracle I was determined to make the character physically unidentifiable with myself, so I made her very fat and I gave her red hair".[3] The novel follows the familiar pattern of unhappy childhood, escape from home, apprenticeship in exile, love and marriage, and the slow and difficult process of self-discovery through art. Joan's story is a poignant anatomy of childhood terror and alienation. It is also a parody on the stock image of a heroine in romantic fiction - beautiful, slim and tender.

The Plot:

As the novel opens, Joan has planned and faked her own death to avoid a blackmailer who would reveal to her husband her lover, her career as writer of romance novels, and her childhood obesity. As a child and as an adolescent, Joan is painfully obese, a disgrace to her middle-class, social climbing mother. At school, Joan is asked to do a moth dance, not the butterfly dance. Her mother advises her to buy clothes that would make her less conspicuous. She always quarrels with Joan, and the quarrel is on the territory of her body. Joan escapes her wretched childhood when her aunt dies, leaving her a bequest of two thousand dollars, on condition that she loses a weight of one hundred pounds.

Joan arrives in London, a different thin self. In London, she falls off a double decker bus near Trafalgar Square and an old Polish Count lifts her up. She lives with him for a brief period, and awakens to the fact that he categorizes women into either wives or mistresses and nothing else. His ever increasing possessiveness makes her run away from him.

She is next caught in a maze of incomprehensible, unresponsive apathetic marriage. Arthur, whom she meets by chance, marries her because that would be both convenient and cheap. He'd been giving it quite a lot of thought, he says. "Marriage itself would settle us down […] most importantly, we would live much more cheaply together than we could separately" (**LO** 197**)**. There is no talk of love here and yet she agrees to marry him in her desire to belong to him. Joan, although trying desperately to please him through her love, senses his over righteous airs. She resents his attitude, yet does not question it. The only way she reacts to his overtly pedagogical manner is by continuing to write escapist romances, without his knowledge.

Joan's literary reputation snowballs when she publishes 'Lady Oracle' and tells the media how she wrote it by automatic writing. She receives phone calls from all sorts of people. Some of them even want her to prophesy their future. The newspapers publish things which she has never said and for which ironically she has to face the consequences. Like all celebrities, she visualizes a threat to her life. Therefore, Joan dyes her hair, puts on dark glasses, dons a printed dress, flees to Rome in disguise with the help of her friends and relates her story to a reporter. Ultimately, Joan emerges as a serious writer in Rome and leaves an optimistic note for the female writers whose voices are marginalized : "[…] dark place is only a cocoon; we will rest there for a time, and after that we will emerge with beautiful wings; we will be butterflies, and fly up toward the sun" (**LO** 117).

Lady Oracle is divided into five parts - Part I deals with Joan's exile in Italy, Part II with her childhood in Toronto, Part III with her young adulthood in England,

Part IV with her marriage to Arthur and escape through pretended suicide and Part V with her resolution in exile. This division reflects Atwood's gradual development of a psychoanalytic perspective throughout the novel.

Joan Delacourt – Obese:

Joan's early childhood is one of a victim in Position Two as delineated in Survival. Atwood gives us a detailed view of Joan's early life and makes it clear that most of her difficulties with adult relationships are caused by transferences and projections from childhood experiences. Joan's mother represents the difficult but inevitable legacy of the younger protagonist. Joan reflects on her mother's ambition to shape her into her own mould in terms which reveal that Joan's lack of self-worth is the only gift her mother has been able to transmit:

> Her plans for me weren't specific. They were vague but large, so that whatever I did accomplish was never the right thing. But she didn't push all the time; it wasn't that she was aggressive and ambitious, although she was both these things. Perhaps she wasn't aggressive or ambitious enough. If she'd ever decided what she really wanted to do and had gone out and done it, she wouldn't have seen me as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize (**LO** 67).

Joan's father is an insensitive and irresponsible man who is an anaesthetist at the Toronto General Hospital. As a doctor, he has two sets of costumes, namely

'healer' and 'killer'. He goes to war leaving his wife pregnant and does not return home until Joan is five years old. He is a heartless wreck who abandons his wife and little daughter and lets them fend for themselves. He suspects his wife of infidelity. Consequently, Joan's mother remains a silent victim at the hands of her father. Her mother says: "You don't know what it was like, all alone with her (Joan) to bring up while you were over there enjoying yourself […]. It's not as though I wanted to have her. It's not as though I wanted to marry you […] had to make the best of a bad job" (**LO** 82). Thus, she is trapped into marriage by an undesired pregnancy and was "stranded in domesticity - a plastic - shrouded tomb from which there was no exit" (**LO** 201) for her.

Joan realizes that she is an "accident," the unwanted daughter of an insecure, unhappy woman and carries her sad story around her neck like "a rotting albatross" (**LO** 238). Fran, her mother, cares primarily about "what kind of impression she makes" and never grows to accept her life. Joan describes her as "an anxious, prudish adult" (**LO** 46) "too intense to be likeable" (**LO** 180), with "a hawk's eye for anything out of place" (**LO** 66), "menacing and cold" (**LO** 214). Fran "had been told to do with a sulky fat slot of a daughter and a husband who wouldn't talk to her" (**LO** 178). Joan adds : "I and my father had totally failed to justify her life the way she felt it should have been justified" (**LO** 178). What Joan's mother fails to see is that she is, at least partly, responsible for her misery, for, instead of living in accordance with her own inner self, she has let her society tell her how to live her life.

Joan's addiction to plots is a legacy from her mother. Suggestions that Joan as not a wanted child, but illegitimately conceived in a relationship between her mother and a wealthy young man, lead us to believe that the marriage to Joan's father was motivated by his name, 'de la court'. With his magical powers over life and death, he was indeed a knight to the rescue and a model for Joan's relationships with the Polish Count or the royal Arthur.

Names are significant as Joan soon realizes; they establish expectations, though they are frequently confusing too. Metamorphoses are suggested through her first name as well, changes which underline their own inadequacy since they result in alienation rather than identity. "What's in a name?" muses Joan:

> Did she name me after Joan Crawford because she wanted me to be like the screen characters she played – beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, and destructive to men – or because she wanted me to be successful? Joan Crawford worked hard, she had will power, and she built herself up from nothing, according to my mother. Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? Come to think of it, Joan Crawford didn't have a name of her own either. Her real name was Lucille Le Sueur, which would have suited me much better. Lucy the Sweat (**LO** 42).

As a fat girl, Joan can never be thin like the screen idol. This fantasy of the transformation of ordinary girls into starlets on the magic screen seems to provide a model for Joan's alienation from herself. Even though in her new thinness Joan

indeed undergoes such a metamorphosis, the fact that she remains encumbered in her mental image of herself with her Fat Girl's body makes this an incomplete change. Then, there is the other incarnation that the name suggests, an inverse one from saint to witch:

> May be my mother didn't name me after Joan Crawford after all, I thought; she just told me that to cover up. She named me after Joan of Arc; didn't she know what happened to women like that? They were accused of witchcraft; they were roped to the stake (**LO** 336).

Aunt Lou, 'Joan's early mother–image' educates her niece in matters of the heart and harbours characteristics opposite to those of Joan's mother, Fran, a woman caught in conventionality. Fran herself explains the difference between the two women, saying of Aunt Lou, "she's good-hearted but she just doesn't care what kind of an impression she makes" (**LO** 86).Aunt Lou declares to Joan by way of self - analysis, "that's just the way I am [...]. If other people can't handle it, that's their problem. Remember that, dear. You can't always choose your life, but you can learn to accept it" (**LO** 88). Having married at nineteen a man who was even years older and a compulsive gambler, because "she was madly in love with him […]. He was tall, dark and handsome" (**LO** 80), Aunt Lou is abandoned by her husband and provides a model of fatalistic emotional vulnerability which is, for her niece, both appealing and dangerous. She reports thus about their relationship:

> Then he'd come back and if he'd lost he'd tell me how much he loved me, if he'd won he'd complain about being tied down. It was very

> sad, really. One day he just never came back. May be they shot him for not paying. I wonder if he's still alive; if he is, I suppose I'm still married to him (**LO** 90).

The utter casualness with which she describes their relationship points to its coldness and unnaturality. After her frustrating experiences with her husband, Aunt Lou settles down as the Head, Department of Public Relations, of a Canadian firm. The sad tale of victimization of Aunt Lou further influences Joan's thinking on man - woman relationships and she begins to assess social relations from a fresh perspective. Joan benefits a lot from her association with Aunt Lou. She learns a great deal about the oppressive nature of the patriarchal world and the helplessness of women in playing out the roles prescribed by men in the contemporary society from the life of Aunt Lou. These lessons go a long way in shaping her views on unequal man - woman relations.

Once, Joan visits the Canadian National Exhibition along with Aunt Lou. She looks upon this visit as a "melancholy pilgrimage" (**LO** 155) and is deeply moved by the sight of a freak show of a Fat Lady on a tiny platform. After the "death defying" (**LO** 112) feat on the high wire, the Fat Lady has to return to "the freak show to sit in her oversized chair with her knitting and be gaped at by the ticket buyers. That was her real life" (**LO** 112). While the performance is painful and mortifying to the Fat Lady, the show is entertaining to the spectators.

Through this incident, Atwood seems to comment on the general plight of women who sacrifice themselves to please others. Joan analyses this fantasy in the

light of her "mothball" (**LO** 50) dance at school. Seven years old Joan was pretty fat and so she was stuffed into a mothball suit and forced to dance. She shed tears when she had to put on the white teddy - bear costume and hang around her neck a large sign that said "Mothball". She felt naked and exposed in the dance. She found the whole thing "grossly unfair" (**LO** 53) on the part of society. Therefore, she withdrew from the dancing school thinking that overweight should not be a criterion for judging women.

Joan feels that good - looking women are as horribly exploited and oppressed as ugly fat women by men. Atwood deliberately portrays Joan as a fat girl in the novel to question male attitudes to women's body, thereby presenting Joan "as a victim of sexist social pressures".[4] According to Molly Hite, "Fat is a feminist issue", and "excess of body becomes symbolic of female resistance to a society that wishes to constrict women to dimensions appropriate".[5] Joan is enraged by the attitude of the society towards woman's body: "What a shame […] how destructive to me were the attitudes of society, forcing me into a mould of femininity that I could never fit, stuffing me into those ridiculous pink tights, those spangles, those outmoded, cramping ballet slippers" (**LO** 112). The sensitive Joan feels very much humiliated at the sight of the costumed Fat Lady in the Exhibition. From this pathetic sight she learns to be "very true, very right, very pious" (**LO** 112) in her intentions to write about forced female roles in society.

Joan Foster – Paul's Mistress:

With the death of Aunt Lou, Joan makes her first escape. She frees herself from the clutches of her mother, just as soon as she has the financial motivation to lose the ungainly weight that had made her a social outsider during all her growing years. Having "dicted away her magic cloak of blubber" (**LO** 141), she heads for a new life in England.

Joan meets Paul when she falls off a double - decker bus in London. He is a Polish Count, who poses as "Mavis Quilp", the writer of Nurse Novels. He is a compulsive and romantic liar. He offers her his Nurse Novels, which are trashy books dealing with illicit relations between doctors and nurses, and compliments her for having "the body of a goddess". Thus, she appears to him as a goddess in moments of contemplative passion. Paul is as wildly romantic as is Joan herself. While Joan fantasizes about being a romance heroine, Paul fantasizes about being a romance hero. He feels that he has missed his chance of becoming a hero by escaping from Poland in a cowardly manner during the Russian invasion. He hopes there will be another war "so that he himself might fight in it and distinguish himself by acts of bravery […]. He didn't picture war as tanks, missiles and bombs; he pictured it as himself on a horse back with a sabre, charging against impossible odds" (**LO** 158).

Louisa K. Delacourt – Writer:

To kill time, Joan begins to write. She takes the name Louisa K. Delacourt as the pseudonym under which she writes the Costume Gothics. Joan uses the pattern of Aunt Lou's eccentric life to shape her Gothic heroines, career women of a kind who lure away other women's husbands and find a shaky happiness. Perhaps she reflects

upon her mother, too, for Joan divulges that "in my books all wives (like Fran Delacourt) were eventually either mad or dead, or both" (**LO** 319). And so, Joan's private life as a writer is always devoted to remembering her female ancestors, and that process merely becomes her primary occupation in Terremoto.

Joan Delacourt – Thin:

Joan's striking physical metamorphosis from fat girl to thin provides the more dramatic shedding of her younger self, but her physical change is outward only:

> Her camouflages and fibs are thoroughly conscious, although her improvisations come less from the desire to deceive than an oddly innocent longing for happy endings. She is not trying to escape reality so much as to help it along; to this end she has never found the truth "convincing". While she suppresses nothing in her own mind, her problem is to understand and rationalize the several selves she has lived, both in her real life and in her active fantasy world. Hers is not the simple dichotomy of an embattled natural self versus synthetic personality as in the first two novels, but rather, she faces the knowledge of multiplicity of selfhood, co-existent and sometimes at war within one's being. Joan's supposedly discarded life has a way of catching up with her, actually and psychologically.[6]

She has been an imaginary thin girl when she was actually fat and she is an imaginary fat woman while she is actually thin. She is still haunted by her other self from which she is unable to free her mind: "The outline of my former body still

surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant super - imposed on my own" (**LO** 216). All this emerges quite neatly in her writing problems with "Stalked by Love", the costume gothic she tries to write during her Terremoto exile.

Initially, Joan embarks on her secret career as a pulp writer out of financial necessity, taking the idea from Paul, who makes extra money with Nurse Novels. But soon Joan explores the personality of Paul as a manipulator. She realizes that he is a threat to her identity as a writer. She gives reasons for not being able to strike a meaningful relationship with him. First, she detests him because he considers a woman as an "empty vessel" and prescribes her the roles such as child - bearing and sewing; second, she resents his categorization of women as 'wives' and 'mistresses' - a derogatory word. She says:

> It's an odd term, 'mistress', was how he thought of me, these were the categories into which his sexual life was arranged; wives and mistresses. I was not the first mistress. For him there was no such thing as a female lover (**LO** 167).

Third, she learns that he believes in 'cataclysmic' relationships; fourth, she discovers that he claims man to be superior to woman. In fact, he declares: " […] the mystery of the man is of the mind, where as that of the woman is of the body'' (**LO** 188). In short, he considers a woman far inferior to a man in respect of intellectual pursuits. So, for all these above-mentioned reasons, she leaves Paul for Arthur.

Joan Foster – Arthur's Wife:

Paul represents conventional males: in contrast, Arthur is a radical who poses as a revolutionary and champions the cause of the oppressed. Atwood attacks not only conventional thinking which casts woman as inferior to man but also revolutionary thinking which exposes the shallowness and hypocrisy of the pseudo-radicals among men.

Joan meets Arthur by chance while she is walking through the Hyde Park, composing "Escape from Love," a piece which she writes to escape from Paul. She gets involved in a romance with Arthur, who is associated with the 'ban-the-bomb movement' (**LO** 189) as a 'leaflet man' and later in a civil rights movement. He changes his theories constantly. He transforms himself from Lord Russell to Mao. Thus, he is seen as a multi-layered personality with various colourful revolutionary costumes. He proposes to marry Joan because it would be both convenient and cheap to live with her. He says: "Marriage itself would settle us down, and through it, too, we would be better acquainted. If it didn't work out, well, it would be a learning experience. Most importantly, we would live much more cheaply together than we could separately" (**LO** 220). Joan yields and is trapped in the maze of incomprehensive, 'unresponsive' and 'apathetic' marriage. The so-called radical husband, Arthur, turns out to be always 'coldly dialectical' (**LO** 220).

Joan is dismayed when she discovers that Arthur, the so- called 'leftist' husband, expects her to be a cook. For the sake of her love for Arthur, she changes her right attitude and obeys him. She tries her hand at cooking. She soon realizes Arthur's sadism when he enjoys her failures as a cook. She says:

> Arthur enjoyed my defeats. They cheered him up. He loved hearing the crash as I dropped a red - hot platter on the floor, having forgotten to put on my oven mitt; he liked to hear me swearing in the kitchen; and when I would emerge sweaty - faced and disheveled after one of my battles, he would greet me with a smile and a little joke, or perhaps even a kiss, which was as much for the display, the energy I'd wasted, as for the food. My frustration and anger were real, my failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience (**LO** 234-35).

Joan is aware that Arthur wants to turn her into a domestic servant to serve him for years. Further, Arthur also restrictions that Joan should not wear long fashionable dresses in public because he feels that she may attract exploiters. He becomes sadistic in the bedroom. In spite of his oddities, she plays her role as a dutiful wife. She hopes to win his love some day as it is time for them "to settle down somewhere, a little more permanently, and have children" (**LO** 238). But Arthur deplores her suggestion. He festoons their bedroom with every known form of birth - control device and urges her to take the pill.

Lady Oracle- Successful author:

Joan gets bored and frustrated in her marital life with Arthur as he does not understand her ideals and aspirations. She defines him as a "cloaked, sinuous and faintly menacing stranger" (**LO** 241). She finds the gothics an emotional necessity. At this time, she publishes her piece, "Love Defied". Her pseudonymous activity gives her a secret independent identity, the freedom of a private bank account, but

more importantly, the fantasy life of the costume gothic scenario. But she hides her identity as a writer from her husband. Arthur has kept Joan so fearful that she suppresses her several identities. To Arthur, Joan, as readers come to know her, hardly exists. Writing serves a therapeutic purpose for Joan as it soothes and consoles her mind. She realizes the genuine need to be a committed writer to serve the community. Hence, she gets her book, "Lady Oracle" on 'male - female relationships' published.

Lady Oracle is a metafiction using the device of a novel within a novel to allow the heroine finally to recognize and accept the legitimacy of all her identities. Joan, the narrator of the story, defines herself as different from Joan, the writer. Joan is constantly confronted with an endless reflection of infinite images of herself which multiply in the distance. Every woman is many women, just as every story is many stories. Joan is also Louisa Delacourt, writer of Costume Gothics, and Joan Foster, Arthur's wife and celebrated author of 'Lady Oracle'.

Self as seen by others versus Self as known from within:

Joan Foster is most herself as Louisa K.Delacourt, and all the other Joan Fosters are afraid the world will find out. What would her husband Arthur, the radical standard - bearer in anyone's hopeless cause, think of his wife exploiting the people?

> What would her lover, Chuck, the way-out 'Master of the Con-Create Poem', think of his cult figure piece revealed as just another hustler? What would the reputable publishing firm of Morton and Sturgess, the establishment organization that had catapulted the unknown Ms.Foster

to instant fame as the poetess of the season, think of their discovery being exposed as a notorious literary hack?[7]

Arthur is appalled by the news of the publication of "Lady Oracle". He is bewildered by the sudden emergence of Joan as a writer. He feels embarrassed by the theme of her book. Her interview on TV is a terrible humiliation to him. He behaves as though she has committed "some unpardonable and unmentionable sin" (**LO** 262) by giving an interview on TV. "He feels as though the book just does not exist, but at the same time is hurt by it because it assails his misogynist mentality" (**LO** 263). He begins to look at her as a betrayer. He involves himself completely in the activities of Resurgence, a 'left-oriented' magazine. Marlene, a married woman, who is the managing editor of Resurgence and who has an illicit affair with Sam, the assistant editor, is a 'paragon' of virtue for Arthur. In fact, Joan's home is converted into "a camp - ground littered with other people's garbage, physical, emotional" (**LO** 280) of Arthur's colleagues.

Life becomes difficult for Joan. Tears trickle down her face. She sells her piece, "Love, My Ransom" and takes Arthur for a "honey - moon". She hopes to have reconciliation with him. But there is no change in his attitude towards her. Her relationship with him is like that of a father with his "smart kids who got bad report cards" (**LO** 34). His goddamned theories and ideologies make her puke. It is this attitude of Arthur that "prompts Joan to escape rather than confront - escape from the overpowering sense of righteousness, aloofness and indifference".[8] She is anguished by the sad state of affairs at home.

We see Arthur, in turn, pass through his own series of identities - pamphleteer in a British Ban the Bomb movement, U.S civil rights activist, writer for a Canadian nationalist tabloid - all of which fail to supply him with an acceptable sense of self. Joan realizes that he "was very good at respecting people's minds, initially. But he would always manage to find some flaw, some little corner of dry rot" (**LO** 228). Arthur then experiences a growing contempt, disillusionment, and apathy. Cut off, too, from ties to home and parents, Arthur is unable to form an intimate bond with Joan and remains isolated. She explains that "no matter what I did, Arthur was bound to despise me. I could never be what he wanted" (**LO** 247); Arthur "didn't trust me" (**LO** 230).

Arthur's pathology results from an inability to interact with the dominant order effectively, "perhaps reflecting his sense that Canada's historical ties with the parent country, England, have been served, yet a working alliance with the United States has not been acceptably formed".[9] Separated from his past and with no distinct and purposeful future, Arthur's desperate search for an adequate sense of self cannot, unfortunately send him to his wife for guidance; as rigidly conventionally male, Arthur is unwilling to look to Joan for help, and she, entangled as she is in self-deception, is incapable of offering it.

Joan Foster – Illicit relationship with Chuck:

Arthur is indifferent to his wife because of his own "complicated and possibly sadistic reason" (**LO** 303) of victimizing her. It is this indifference of Arthur that drives the naïve and gullible Joan to get involved with Chuck, the Royal Porcupine, a

"homicidal maniac" (**LO** 303) with costumes. He wants to be Joan's husband. He meets Joan after her TV interview. He poses as a "con-create" poet and invites her to the show called SQUAWSHT at an art gallery. He appears before her with "red hair […] an elegant moustache and beard, the moustache waxed and curled upward at the ends, the beard pointed […] wearing a long black cloak and spats, and carrying a gold-headed cane, a pair of white gloves, and a top hat embroidered with porcupine quills" (**LO** 266) and drags her into sexual immorality. Later on, he behaves "more and more like Chuck Brewer and less and less like the Royal Porcupine"[10] and blasts a dynamite for sensational news.

He wants Joan to leave Arthur and move in with him. He accuses her of not being motivated to leave her husband and comments: "You're like an out of control school bus" (**LO** 300). When Joan meets him next at his apartment he is no longer the Royal Porcupine. He appears as Chuck Brewer who looks plundered with his hair cut short and the beard shaved off. "[…] no cap, no cane, no gloves, just a pair of jeans and a T-Shirt that said Honda on it" (**LO** 301). He rips down his dynamite poster and throws it into the pile of his costumes. Joan is troubled by his unexpected behaviour and screams with anger. She realizes that Chuck has planned to occupy Arthur's place and to manipulate her by transforming himself into someone like Arthur.

Having known Joan's frustrated marital life, Paul reappears with a new layer of personality as a successful businessman and wants to kidnap her from Arthur. He tries to brainwash her. "You can trust me. You were a child; you did not know your

own mind. Now you are a woman. You will leave this man, you will divorce, we will be happy [...]. If you tell him it is I you love, he will [...]. But I have friends. If necessary I shall steal you" (**LO** 312) She does not want to be rescued by him. She realizes that Paul does not love her but he wants "the adventure of kidnapping her from what he imagined to be a den of fanged and dangerous Communists" (**LO** 315).

Multiple Selves revealed:

Fraser Buchanan (who meets Joan after her TV interview) appears to Joan in the bedroom. He is dressed in "a tweed jacket with the leather patches and a trendy turtle - neck sweater, plus a pair of black gloves" (**LO** 318). He poses as "The Montreal Poet" (**LO** 288). He too has two sets of costumes - a lover of arts and a fake - researcher. He threatens to blackmail her. He says: "The fact is, I know a good deal more about you than you think. I know things. I'm sure you would rather keep […] private. Just between us two" (**LO** 288). He cites a few incidents from the private life of Joan to black-mail her for sex and money but she rebuffs him saying that "I'm married, remember?" (**LO** 322)

Fraser Buchanan lets Joan know the existence of his 'black notebook' (**LO** 322) which is a collection of the data about the lives of women - his 'clients'. He is a sort of an 'agent' (**LO** 322) who knows about the private lives and secret identities of several authors including Joan. The note book is organized like a diary and it documents the personal and public lives of women writers from head to toe. It is clear from his use of the book that blackmail is the very breath of Fraser's life. Money, sex and power are the tools of his business of literary criticism. The

language used by Fraser in his 'black note-book' is primarily to oppress female writers and therefore it is, what Jacques Derrida calls, "the unity of violence and writing".[11] Joan realizes that language in Fraser's book is "inherently phallocentric since it merely establishes relationships of power between a victim and victimizer - a fact that manifests itself most obviously in the attempts made by the sexist Fraser Buchanan to blackmail Joan (and) to assert power over her by threatening to speak".[12]

Therefore, Joan seizes his black note-book and runs away when he is in a drunken state. She tears out a choice page from the notebook, seals it in an envelope and sends it to Fraser 'like the ear of kidnap victim'. Thus, she lets him know that she is in possession of his notebook. She also encloses a note: "If anything happens to me the book is in good hands. One word from you and it goes to the police" (**LO** 324). Thus, Joan pays Buchanan back in his own coin.

Joan receives anonymous phone calls, threatening notes and dead animals on the doorstep - signs of malevolence against her. She suspects that Arthur in collusion with Paul, Chuck, and Fraser, has plotted against her to get rid of her, because most of these sinister things occur when Arthur is not at home. She believes that they have all planned together to do her harm in some undetectable way. Ultimately, Joan concludes that every man with whom she has come across has had two costumes. She says:

> My father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double, Chuck Brewer, even Paul, who I'd always believed had a sinister other life I

> couldn't penetrate. Why should Arthur be any exception? The fact that I'd taken so long to discover it made it all the more threatening (**LO** 325-26).

In spite of her knowledge of the true nature of these men, Joan does not stop loving them, but her love is unrequited. So, she muses thus:

"I felt I'd never really loved anyone - not Paul, not Chuck the Royal Porcupine not even Arthur. I'd polished them with my love and expected them to shine, brightly enough to return my own reflection enhanced and sparkling" (**LO** 314 - 15).

Acknowledging the Various Personalities kept separate:

Despite all temptations, Joan zealously guards her individuality and refuses to walk into the traps laid by the men she encounters. She knows that Arthur – 'a hero', wears the mask of a villain whereas the other men, who are villains, wear the masks of heroes. Ultimately, she becomes the hero herself - the 'Lady Oracle'. In Lady Oracle, Joan shares Marian's division of self, but she possesses conscious knowledge of past, present, and multiple selves. Marian shows different sides of herself to Peter and Duncan, but Joan invents new identities, even new pasts, for a variety of different men. The unnamed narrator of Surfacing becomes the multi-named narrator of Lady Oracle. She is the fat, prosaic Joan Delacourt, who by age nineteen weighed 245 pounds. She is the thin Joan Foster, who after a fling with a Polish Count, marries a dull Canadian political activist and then has an affair with the Royal Porcupine. She is Joan Foster, author (via automatic writing) of a book of poems entitled "Lady Oracle". Finally she is Louisa K.Delacourt, successful writer of costume gothics.

The Edible Woman's rejection of food here becomes overindulgence, a use of eating as a means of defiance and escape. Joan becomes a cultural idol, a darling of the media, largely because her poetry makes men, including her own husband, feel threatened. But Joan's life comes to seem as sinister and complicated as the world of her creation, and her paranoia and desire for escape send her to pseudo-suicide – " a trashy, melodramatic fiction, both stagily convenient and perhaps morally reprehensible".[13] Joan's pain is caused by the clash between her multi-coloured fantasies and dull grey reality. Her overwhelming desire to see herself as a 'heroine', perfect in every way and utterly desirable, is thwarted time and again.

Deciding to be Pragmatic:

With her final escape, Joan thinks that she would step into a new life –a less murky and a clearer one, but it does not materialize. She asks herself, "where is the new life I'd intended to step into as easily as crossing a river?" (**LO** 310). This thought awakens her to sort out her life. She begins to think of ways and means of improving and reforming herself. Her recovery begins with a speculation about her mistakes of escapism, of being obsessed with her 'fat self', of indulging in fantasies and of being steeped in her romances. Her misadventures have done great harm. And she decides to be pragmatic, to return and face life head on : "I should have stayed where I was and faced reality" (**LO** 372).

Ways and Means of Improving and Reforming Life:

She is now ready to accept the reality that Arthur loves her in spite of her false pretences and consequently stops feeling rejected. She would stay put and face the

consequences rather than be scared of Arthur and his reactions. The obsessive, wildly romantic fantasies of Joan Foster prevent her from coming to grips with reality.

> Unable to distinguish between fantasy and fact, Joan fails disastrously in her numerous attempts to live out one trashy, melodramatic script after another. Joan's Quixotic mind-set, the chaos of her psyche and her multiple selves are brilliantly conveyed to us through the form of the novel.[14]

Unlike Atwood's second novel, Surfacing, which is essentially tidy in form, Lady Oracle has a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and meander like a frame of baroque mirror.

Gothic Fantasy:

Gothic fantasy has for centuries romanticized the victimization of women. Gothics are essentially mystery novels written largely by women for women. According to Juliann E Fleenor, women seek out gothic romances "to receive confirmation, and eventually, affirmation that love really is what motivates and justifies a woman's life".[15] Moreover, through identification with the Gothic heroine, the reader escapes into a world in which excitement, mystery, danger, and action occur side by side with domestic activities and social roles that women have traditionally performed.

Writers of popular Gothics con readers into believing that they are reading about 'real' life through elaborate descriptions of clothes, appearances and furnishings. As a writer of Costume Gothics, Joan devotes a lot of attention to the

clothes of her heroines, heroes, villains and rival females for she thinks that if only she can get the clothes right, everything else will fall into line. Her obsession with costumes in her novels spills over into her private life. Each time Joan sheds an identity, she discards the clothes associated with it and tries to transform herself into a different person. For instance, after her fake suicide she thinks it necessary not only to bury her "funeral costume" (**LO** 19) belonging to her "former self" but also to cut and dye her hair an innocuous brown and dress like a tourist.

The victimization of the heroine serves a necessary function in the formulaic plot of gothic fantasy. Although the heroine typically shows independence and courage, the pattern allows her to do very little for herself. The actions of the heroine in her own behalf only create the need for a saviour.

Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle relies explicitly on Gothic traditions. Joan is a writer of Gothic romances who follows their promises of romantic escape in her own life. Lady Oracle's heroine, Joan, learns life's lesson only after her Gothic obsession has led her into serious mistakes. For Joan, the mistakes are much more serious. Like the heroines of Gothic naturalism, she fabricates prisons of romantic self - deception. Atwood herself describes, her heroines as ones who "have become their own prisons".[16]

With each man in her life, Joan hopes for a happy ending. She can never reach it; she can never complete the recognition - transformation process, because her world is not the world of Gothic fantasy. Each of the men important to Joan seems first a hero, then a villain. She envisions them sometimes as double - natured (**LO**

325), sometimes as many natured (**LO** 236), sometimes as masked –good by evil, evil by good (**LO** 300).

Damaging Effects of Duplicity:

She flees from a lonely and banal existence into the arms of Paul, her first lover. Her life with him turns out to be hardly less lonely and even more banal. Her growing uneasiness with him necessitates her casting of Arthur in the role of a hero. From Arthur, she escapes to the Royal Porcupine, whose eccentric appearance promises material for heroic transformation. To her horror, though, she transforms him backwards into the antiheroic Chuck Brewer. Clean - shaven and T-shirted, Chuck is too much reality for Joan, who flees back to Arthur. When mysterious incidents make her fear that her life is in danger, she plans the ultimate escape by faking her own death.

Steps to Survival:

Joan needs a change of perception in order to move beyond passivity and self imposed victimization. Unlike the fantasy heroine who faces physical danger, Joan's fears stem not so much from external threats as from internal ones. On her escapes into love, Joan carries with her a heavy load of guilt, shame, and deception regarding her past and her 'real self'. Her need to see men as heroes, to escape into them, results from her desire to escape the unglamorous facts about herself. It forces Joan to deny aspects of herself not acceptable in a heroine. These denials create 'ghosts', terrors resembling those of gothic fantasy, but these ghosts are suppressed selves that

return to haunt her : "I wanted to forget the past, but it refused to forget me, it waited for sleep, and then cornered me" (**LO** 239).

Speculations about her Mistake:

Paradoxically, by modeling herself on the innocent, passive heroines of gothic fantasy, Joan is more and more haunted by guilt. Her habit of deception can be seen as a form of self destruction, making her 'confusion and fear' increase until they become intolerable. Finally, Joan must either destroy her selves completely (as she has tried and failed to do) or enter the maze and face the ghosts she herself has created.

The scene in which Felicia, the 'female foil' of Joan's gothic novel, enters the maze dramatizes Joan's 'confusion and fear'. Half fearful, half fascinated, Joan imagines her simplified projection, Felicia, being drawn into the maze. The path closes behind her and she is trapped with Joan's other alter egos. When she asks the way back, one Joan - self replies : "We have all tried to go back. That was our mistake" (**LO** 342**)**. The way in which Joan's simplified, partial selves have entered the maze prevents them from getting out without further destruction. These selves are caught because her way of escape, time after time, is to tell another lie, 'kill' another self, and enter another maze - another man. The mysterious door they point to as the 'only way out' of the maze opens to reveal Redmond, the gothic hero - villain, then a series of other hero – villains ; Joan's father, Paul the Royal Porcupine, the man with icicle teeth, Arthur, and then Redmond again.

"Both the necessity for and the process of a change in the foundations of perception are dramatized in Lady Oracle in a drive to connect".[17] Joan Delacourt must reject this polarity and accept the multiplicity of her being in order to find herself. "Joan plays with triple mirrors, which disrupt any temptation to dualism, opening up an infinity of perspectives that eventually encompass all the characters of the novel within the expanding persona of the mirror, Joan".[18] The narrative itself is a narrative within a narrative. Atwood plays with the notion of distorting mirrors, convex and concave, foregrounding here the central issue of the novel, that all reflections are distortions, all mimetic representations lies:

> I (Joan) felt very visible. But it was as if someone with my name were out there in the real world, impersonating me, saying things I'd never said but which appeared in the news papers, doing things for which I had to take the consequences: my dark twin, my fun-house mirror reflection. (**LO** 250-51).

Joan's life is increasingly taken over by the lives of her fictional creations when she, as Felicia, moves into the labyrinth. Ultimately, there are no boundaries, only perpetual metamorphoses, for the writers are intrigued by the point at which one thing becomes another.

Joan fragments her personality through multiplication, rather than by division. And within Lady Oracle, we move between past and present, between Toronto and London, between Italy and ancient Greece as rapidly as Joan changes costumes or sentences. Lady Oracle is the lady within the mirror, alias the Great Goddess, alias

mother, alias Joan. Joan gives her own attributes, red hair and white body, to Penelope in "Love, My Ransom" and to Felicia in her current novel, placing her, too, "at a vanity in front of a mirror" (**LO** 318). Joan confuses her pronouns, taking herself as Charlotte into the maze (**LO** 332) in an ever increasing number of the blurrings of the boundaries between art and life.

Resolution of the Multiple Selves:

In a final gesture, wearing the mask of Felicia, Joan strikes Redmond, who looks like Arthur and turns out to be Fraser Buchanan. It is fitting that Joan's story leads her at this point through the maze to one man who has managed to put together the fragments of her story. Everything converges from the moment she gives herself up to multiplicity. When she sees herself playing the role of the many wives of Redmond, she gains her power to kill him.

Paradoxically, in the process of discovering her own guilt, Joan gains a new strength. That strength comes from having glimpsed the responsibility of inter - relatedness. Seeing her own victimization fuel a system of exploitation frees her from her paralyzing need to remain innocent. After all, there can be no villains without victims.

Although Joan does not give up fantasizing even at the end, continuing to play the role of a nurse to the reporter she has attacked and wounded, there is no denying the fact that the process of 'becoming' for Joan begins in her decision to accept responsibility for her action and thus symbolically assert her will. In all the novels of Atwood, the ending marks the beginning of the process of 'becoming' which may

eventually lead to 'being'. As Atwood says: "I never make Prince Charming endings because I don't believe in them. But I do believe that people can change. Maybe not completely but some".[19] Atwood does not believe in one - (WO) man revolutions. She believes in progressive evolutions that may eventually lead to the humanization of the woman in the socializing and idealizing male world. As Atwood says, Joan at the end of the novel has "gotten as far as saying I am who I am, take it or leave it". [20]

Appearance versus Reality:

Atwood's Lady Oracle makes us re-vision our notion of reality and see every human being as a fascinating mixture of reality and fantasy. Popular art, radio, television, movies and advertising fill our minds with standardized images which force us to live narrow, limited lives. Unlike serious art, popular art (fairy tales, romances, gothics and science fiction) reduces life and language to cliché. Joan, who writes Costume Gothics, is both a creator and a victim of popular art. Writers of popular art feed their readers with regressive escape fantasies.

In her 1981 address to the Amnesty International, Atwood bemoans the popularity of such art when she says:

> In Canada, the artist's duty is to entertain and divert nothing more […]. On the whole the audience prefers art not to be a mirror held up to life but a Disneyland of the soul containing Romanceland, Spyland, Pornoland and all other Escapelands which are so much more agreeable than the complex truth. [21]

By and large, women feel the need for escape to a greater extent than men. This is so because "the weight of patriarchal tradition educates women into nothingness and denies them transcendence of being".[22]

Elizabeth Janeway is of the opinion that popular literature functions as a psychological safety valve for women. She writes :

> […] very few women can be really good at everything they are expected to do. Some are good mothers and bad wives, while some devoted wives and loving mothers are perfectly terrible home-makers. Some women who can do all these things adequately find it hard to shift back and forth from one to the other as quickly as may be needed. As a result, there is almost always a little failure packaged in with any woman's success in playing her various roles […]. Men are more free to walk away from failure than women. Women's traditional role demands that she go on doing things even if she knows she's not very good at them. So women more or less have to live with a knowledge that they are failures in certain areas of their lives and see themselves as disappointing creatures who have to act out their disappointments over and over.[23]

Joan likewise defends her readers' pure need for escape when she says:

> Life had been hard on them and they had not fought back […]. Escape wasn't a luxury for them, it was a necessity. They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their

> own, mine were available for them […] neatly packaged […]. I knew all about escape, I was brought up on it (**LO** 34-35).

Joan feels that by offering "a vision of a better world" (**LO** 35), she is providing succor to the thousands of depressed women, who read her books. Her self-delusion prevents her from realizing that by giving false hopes she is encouraging them to accept their victim positions passively, instead of actively striving to change them.

Fairy tales generally emphasize physical beauty and fine clothes and imply that girls who deserve happiness are invariably gentle, affectionate, forgiving, obedient, hardworking and home loving. The men in these tales are either heroes who rescue the virtuous sweet-hearts in distress, or they are villains. "None of the tales say what the future holds for plain-looking or overweight girls like young Joan or for men like Paul, Arthur and the Royal Porcupine who, far from being rescuers, themselves need to be rescued from their life-denying ego-cages".[24] In Lady Oracle, Joan, her mother, Aunt Lou, the Polish Count and Paul are shown to be victims of gender stereotypes.

It is important to note that though Joan desires the simple, romance-filled life of her heroines and relishes the escape that her work provides her with, she feels that her own novels fail to satisfy her inner needs. She admits this: "My Costume Gothics were only paper; paper castles, paper costumes, paper dolls, as inert and lifeless finally as those unsatisfactory blank- eyed dolls I'd dressed and undressed in my mother's house" (**LO** 216). Her disillusionment with Gothics is because they

misrepresent life and only serve to alienate her and her readers from their own inner selves as well as from those around them.

During one of her rare moments of self-awareness, Joan realizes that all her fantasies have turned into traps and that all through her life she has been moving from one form of bondage to another. Joan thinks to herself:

> I might as well face it, […] I was an artist, an escape artist. I'd sometimes talked about love and commitment, but the real romance of my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and the locked trunk; entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again. What else have I ever done? (**LO**334)

Lady Oracle thus parodies Gothic fiction, romance literature and the numerous fictions we live by.

Through Lady Oracle, the autobiography of Joan Foster, Atwood proclaims that both men and women are equal as they have the same human capabilities and therefore gender - based injustices should be fought against in society. Lady Oracle exhorts women not to barter reality for a pseudo security promised by male. It also reveals that women no longer wish to be scapegoats in the mazes, thickets, and brambles of life. It encourages women to be bold enough to face life head-on. It makes clear that they must no longer hold on to the wife - mother role as it has been interpreted in the past. It exhorts them to exercise their autonomy and be free to pursue interesting and challenging careers.

The protagonist in The Edible Woman only learns to live meaningfully but she does not endeavour to change her society, where as Joan Foster, the protagonist of Lady Oracle, wishes to transform society through her writing and thus deconstructs male discourse in which the victimization and trapping of women are romanticized for centuries.

Atwood believes that "fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects".[25] As a self-conscious political and didactic writer, therefore, Atwood in her fiction not only reflects society but also aims to re-form it by exposing, as in Lady Oracle - the damaging effects of duplicity in women who succumb to patriarchal forces.

Chapter IV

Political Survival: *Bodily Harm*

In Bodily Harm (1981), Margaret Atwood's fifth novel, one finds a sense of commitment in Atwood to expose the wickedness of men on the one hand and the brutality of the state on the other. It is no different from her previous novels in that it follows a character trying to break free from her past and grasp a brighter and more promising future. And yet, Bodily Harm takes this idea a step further by criticizing and questioning the actions of those in western culture. In this respect, Bodily Harm is Atwood's most political novel. It drives home the message which is embodied in Atwood's address of the World meeting of Amnesty International :

> Oppression involves a failure of the imagination : the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings. If the imagination were a negligible thing and the act of writing a mere frill, as many in this society would like to believe, regimes all over the world would not be at such pains to exterminate them.[1]

The Plot:

This gripping yet sensitive novel tells of Rennie, a young journalist in the process of re-evaluating her life and relationships after undergoing a major surgery. Feeling the need to escape, she gets an assignment to write a travel article about the fictional Caribbean island, St. Antoine and St. Agathe. 'The idyllic island of her fantasies', however, is in fact a depressed country on the brink of revolution and uprising. More accustomed to writing about fashion and food, she is increasingly

caught up in the revolutionary politics of St.Antoine, as the atmosphere in the island becomes more and more sinister.

Rennie struggles to absent herself from local politics for as long as possible, but after becoming infatuated with Paul, a shadowy player in the local scene, and being entrusted with the confidences of Mr. Minnow, a doomed candidate for the minority opposition, Rennie realizes that she has no choice but to become involved. With commitment comes responsibility and implication, and Rennie soon finds herself thrown into a nightmare she could not have anticipated. Her efforts to not only survive but comprehend and report 'the swirl of events' around her, lead her to new levels of personal and artistic awareness. The maze of wild events force Rennie and the different characters on the island to question their place in the world.

The contrast between her memories of the narrow minded community of her small town and the raw violence she is now encountering comes to a peak in the horrors of a prison confinement after an abortive revolution attempt. By turns comic, satiric and terrifying, Margaret Atwood's Bodily Harm is ultimately an exploration of the lust for power, both sexual and political.

Wickedness of Men and Brutality of the State:

Rennie is a woman in her thirties used by the author to explore how "she reacts to oppression in all its manifestations, both physical and psychological".[2] Atwood, in her later novels and poems, seems to focus on the struggle in which she sees men and women caught up : she examines "who can do what to whom and get away with it". Bodily Harm focuses on "the contrast between affluent thinking and

the brutal reality of power and sexual politics".[3] The protagonist, Rennie, is a 'lifestyle journalist' who has just had a mastectomy. Atwood traces her internal torment in dealing with this trauma, her troubled childhood, her relationship with men and a violent society at large. Bodily Harm is hence a warning to young women of the 'post – feminist' 1980's and after, who began taking for granted those rights that had been secured to women.

Pen as a Weapon:

Renata Wilford, the "Camera narrator"[4] of Bodily Harm is a Canadian free-lance journalist as well as a "Life Tourist" writer. She uses "pen" as a "weapon"[5] to write her travelogue, "Bodily Harm". She reflects Atwood's poem "True Stories".

> The facts of this world seen clearly
> are seen through tears;
> why tell me then
> there is something wrong with my eyes?
>
> To see clearly without flinching
> without turning away,
> this is agony, the eyes taped upon
> two inches from the sun.
>
> The razor across the eyeball
> is a detail from an old film.
> It is also a truth.

Witness is what you must bear.[6]

To comprehend the progression of Renata Wilford's career as a free-lance journalist and a "Life-Tourist" writer, it is important to consider her early life in the small town of Griswold, Ontario.

Rennie is the child of an irresponsible man who has abandoned his family for a mistress in Toronto. She is brought up in an unhealthy and joyless environment in Griswold by her grand parents. For Rennie, her grandparents' place is " a subground, something that can't be seen but is nevertheless there ,full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones" (**BH** 18). Rennie's impressionistic years of childhood are suppressed and spoiled by her grand - mother's traditional approach.

She is never allowed to think and feel independently by her grandmother's rules of do's and don'ts. Rennie says: "As a child I learned […] how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them […] .According to her, it was bad manners to ask direct questions" (**BH** 54). Apart from such an unhappy state of affairs in Griswold, Rennie feels hurt all the more as she is badly neglected by her mother. Her mother had sacrificed her own life in order to look after her aged parents, but neglects her own daughter.

Rennie detests the servile existence in Griswold. She also detests the self – abnegation of her mother: "I don't want to be trapped, like my mother. Although I admired her - everyone was always telling me how admirable she was, she was practically a saint – I didn't want to be like her in any way" (**BH** 58). Thus, Rennie

remains an outsider in Griswold and leaves for Toronto to free herself from the oppressive environment, and to lead a life of freedom. Griswold therefore, forms the background to her career of freelance journalism as well as her travelogue.

Rennie begins her adult life in Toronto as a versatile writer. She gets commissioned to write articles for 'Pandora', a woman - oriented magazine, and for 'Visor', a man oriented journal. These two offer her enough scope to write about both men and women. The three things which she has learnt from childhood : " how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them" become deeply "ingrained in her" (**BH** 118). "Rennie looks, which is her function" (**BH** 88) and reports what she sees in as light-hearted a manner as possible.

In the course of writing a piece called "The Young and the Solvent" for Visor, Rennie comes into contact with Jake who works as a designer of appearances for a packaging company. Rennie is of the view that she is a product of the post – feminist era. She seems to be over-confident that she can stand upon any crisis situation without any harm either to her body or her psyche. But little does she realize that Jake is an exploiter.

In spite of all her care and intelligence, she allows herself to be sucked into the evil designs of Jake. He uses all his tricks to use and abuse her just as he does things. Later on, she realizes that his interest in her is limited to the gratification of his carnal desires. Michael Dixon rightly says that "As a packager of images for advertising he shares her taste for the superficial and her distaste for massive

involvement"[7]. Her relationship with Jake remains as if it were a "newly renovated house" (**BH** 102) without a strong foundation.

In fact, Rennie takes the stance of the non- feminist, quite satisfied with Jake. Everything seems to underline the power relations between male and female: he asks and she complies. He extends his day time job to their relationship: she is one of the 'packages' Jake is using.

Rennie gets trapped "in things that are beyond (her) control" (**BH** 47) when breast cancer is diagnosed in her by Dr. Daniel Luoma, a male gynaecologist. Jake feels ill-at-ease in the company of Rennie following her mastectomy. He imagines the scar on her breast as "the kiss of death on her" (**BH** 20). Jake abandons Rennie, feeling that life is not enjoyable with a diseased woman. Rennie regrets that she has allowed herself to be used by Jake as a commodity - a kind of 'raw- material'. Mastectomy – only a Minor Accident in her Life:

Human Malice as Dangerous as Cancer:

More than the mastectomy, it is Rennie's passive adherence to Jake's every whim that eventually drives him away. He loses interest because she is so passive and accepting of his oppressive and abusive nature. Even when Jake leaves her, she takes it upon herself to be the absolute cause. In doing this, Rennie tries to embody the victimized woman, the innocent one in a perverse world of wrong-doers. Thus, Rennie's maiden encounter with love in Jake ends abruptly, leaving her bruised and battered, physically and emotionally.

Female Passivity:

Rennie represents all women who, through the influence of culture, become passive and allow themselves to be taken advantage of by men whom they are anxious to please. She allows herself to fulfill the male desire, and becomes an exhibitionist object to fill the man's gaze. The concept of the detached body comes in repeatedly in Bodily Harm. It is represented in the second picture that Jake hangs up in the apartment wherein a woman sprawled on a 1940's sofa is seen separated from her head due to the angle from which it is taken. This image presents the female in terms of a body rather than in terms of a face; once again, the body becomes a replaceable object and the subject (the head) is denied.

This disconnection is rooted in Rennie's mind. Not only does she imagine Jake's lover as 'a headless body', but also feels this alienation with her own body. After her mastectomy, she regards the operation very little in terms of a salvation; she views it more as an evil violation by man, her body and self cut away from each other and marked by male 'probers, the labellers and cutters'.

Since Jake had seen her in completely sexual terms, she initially turns to Daniel (her surgeon), the male protector, who is seen in contrast to Jake the predator. He possesses the healing touch, so that Rennie comes to be obsessed with his hands. She wants and needs his hands to touch her. But he is not able to get her reconciled with her body. He does not tear her body. He does not tear her out of the darkness and insecurity that overwhelms her after the operation. She feels that she has saved him in some way. Subsequently, she feels violated, victimized, since in his ordinariness Daniel still manages to take something of her which she had not

expected. He too has 'won'. Her fantasy is unfulfilled. Rennie begins to look at Daniel as "the man with the knife, the bringer of death".[8] He is the man with the scalpel mutilating the female body.

Rennie experiences the trauma of mastectomy. She is emotionally disturbed by the mark of scar on her body. Cancer destroys her trust in appearances. She feels that she has her malignancy uncured. She has nightmares and asks her surgeon anxiously: "Either I'm living or I'm dying" (**BH** 60). Daniel evades her question and says: " You're not dead yet. You're a lot more alive than many people" (**BH** 60). Daniel, who is afraid of "emotional commitment, is unable to offer her anything but platitudes".[9] But Rennie wants something definite, the real truth, one way or the other. Then she will know what she should do next. "It's this suspension, hanging in a void, this half-life she can't bear. She can't bear not knowing" (**BH** 60). Rennie is aware how she has been the "raw-materials, violated and doctored"[10] by Daniel.

Rennie awakens to the fact that she has been surgically as well as sexually violated by Dr. Daniel and Jake. She regrets that she has allowed herself to be used, manipulated and debased by Jake and Daniel as a kind of " raw-material" according to their own impoverished values.

On the day following Jake's departure and the dead - end relationship with Daniel, there is an attempted crime in Rennie's apartment. A man leaves a coil of rope on her bed in Toronto as a reminder of his visit. She takes the coil of rope left on her bed as a sign that she has long been confined and fettered by her situation as a

woman. The rope symbolizes bondage and entanglement; it also seems to be drawing Rennie towards some kind of new awareness.

Rennie's concept of reality is what lies at the core of her tragedy. The narrative seems to force Rennie to see what she has for too long tried to ignore. Every time she is in personal crisis which requires her involvement, she detaches herself by trying to turn the event into some piece for a magazine, using dark humour to evade actually thinking about things too much. After her mastectomy, she walks home, thinking of possible titles that might suit this sort of topic. To counter- act the shocking incident of a man who breaks into her apartment leaving a rope on her bed, she tries to take on a write-up on pornography. When events start to take their toll on her, to escape from her all-too-real reality, she opts for a travel article on a 'paradise' island. But the paradise is never actually what it sets out to be and confrontation inevitably returns. She has to see the reality.

The article she chooses to write is a form of escapism. She opts for superficial 'life style' writing and evades the truth - what ultimately art is meant to portray. She refuses to see and only looks at the surface of things. This is, of course, one of the first things she learnt during her stern upbringing in Griswold : "how to look at things without touching them".

It is Paul, a tourist guide in the Caribbean island, who eventually rescues Rennie, who gives her back her body. She falls in love with Paul because of his impressive manners and ideals. She feels that Paul is a good substitute to Jake, the exploiter and seducer. She hopes against hope that she might be able to live with

him while keeping her 'options' open. She is of the view that she might be able to strike a meaningful relationship with him. Dorothy Jones rightly comments : "Unlike Jake, who tries to make her over into something else, or Daniel who sees her as the answer to his emotional needs, Paul accepts Rennie for what she is".[11] Unlike Jake, Paul does not hate or abandon Rennie on the grounds of the scar on her body. She thinks that he has some compassion for her damaged body. Experience with Paul gives her a new life and his touch enlivens her.

The age-old maxim, familiarity breeds contempt, seems to influence both Paul and Rennie. Very soon, she realizes that he is an immature person interested in sporting and wielding a gun needlessly. She begins to detest him because she is scared of the very sight of the gun. She is gradually disillusioned with him. She realizes that she has had yet another meaningless relationship with Paul. She feels that involvement in love affairs is "like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles" (**BH** 102). She realizes her female passivity and her inability to establish meaningful relationships with anyone of her male associates. She feels a sense of urgency to run away from all her meaningless and loveless involvements with men. Rennie says: "I should take my body and run. I don't need another man. I'm not supposed to expect anything" (**BH** 227).

Paul, who helps Rennie reconcile herself to her body, is typically a male. His taste for danger fits him neatly into the role of renegade hero. He lives on the edge, he deals in drugs, and he rescues maidens in distress. The reasons for his actions are purely amusement. Rennie grasps the truth about knights - 'the maidens were only an

excuse; the dragon was the real business'. In his attempt to save Rennie during the uprisings at St. Agathe, he fails and she remains imprisoned. For the rest of the novel nobody knows what becomes of him, just as nobody really knew where he had come from. Rennie's attempts at having him disclose anything about his life fail. The photos she finds reveal little and she must take that little to make him any more than a one-dimensional figure. In fact, one can almost equate him with the faceless stranger with the rope.

Every attempt that Rennie makes at actually identifying the man with the rope fails her. She tries to identify him as Jake, as Daniel, as Paul, until, terrifyingly, she begins to realize that this facelessness is the possibility of any male in society: "he is an agent of male oppression".[12] He represents the potential in all men to brutalize women. This is not the individual brutality of a certain person inflicted upon another but the collective consequence of a patriarchal structure. It is the need for male dominance and female subordination.

Power Politics and Women's Liberation:

Rennie's association with Jocasta, a feminist activist, raises her consciousness of herself and helps her understand better the villainous attitude and victimizing nature of the male world towards women. She is convinced that woman's liberation continues to be a distant dream and a lot has to be done to realize the desired goals. Jocasta toys with the fantastic idea of reversing the role of men and women. She says: "I think it would be a great idea if all the men were turned into women and all the women were turned into men, even just for a day. Then they'd all know exactly

how the other ones would like to be treated" (**BH** 156). Jocasta's assessment of man-woman relationship illuminates Rennie's thinking. She begins to assess all her love relationships from a fresh perspective. For Rennie, Jocasta represents a complete and complex socio- gender system. Under the influence of Jocasta, she publishes an article entitled, "Burned out", on the alleged death of the women's movement. In this piece, Rennie reasons out why and under what circumstances women take to odd, mean and degrading vocations like "bitching" and "trashing"(**BH** 93).

Rennie treats relationships with irony in her little articles on how to combat boredom in a relationship, but paradoxically also fantasizes with her friend Jocasta about taking on Jake's role in altering the appearance of men: "Pick a man, any man, and find the distinguishing features. The eyebrows? The nose? The body? If this man were yours, how would you do him over?" (**BH** 157). Despite her attempt at being or seeming to take on the role of power, Rennie does not actually go as far as Jocasta whose 'drain- chain' jewellery is an absolute mockery of the female sexual slave, and who has no qualms about seeing men as little more than sexual commodities, to be used and passed on.

When Rennie repeats Jocasta's idea of men and women swapping sex for a day in order to see how either would like to be treated, Jake's answer allows the reader to peep into Jake's perception of his female- male relationships: "The women would say, now I've got you, you prick. Now it's my turn […]. They'd all become rapists" (**BH** 156). In this inversion of reality, we can only see it as man actually acknowledging playing the part of the empowered rapist and the female playing the

role of 'the victim'. In Jake's eyes, the reversal of the sexes would give a female a 'go' at what they have to suffer.

Rennie takes to writing as a serious and full-time occupation. She does a piece on pornography as an art form from the 'woman's angle' for "Visor". She interviews Frank, an artist, who depicts pornography as an art form. She even visits the Toronto policeman's pornography museum along with Jocasta when she writes the article. It points out the abuse of women in the so-called civilized countries and stresses that they are primitive, as far as brutality of a woman's body is concerned. Rennie realizes that women are stripped of their identity and are reduced to raw-materials. She also feels that men destroy women's individuality from behind a mask of anonymous authority and power. She realizes that she too is part of the 'raw-material'.

Survival of a Country:

She is commissioned to do a travel piece for 'Visor' and it takes her to the Caribbean island. She carries a camera bag which symbolizes her tourist vision and identity. Rennie travels around the Caribbean island for the next six days meeting people. She lives in the real world. She finds her tragedy reflected in the tragedy of mute and innocent masses all over the world. She discovers that all human principles and issues like democracy, liberalism, individual dignity and even love are used as pretexts to get "rid of people you don't like" (**BH** 240). The malignant cancer cells within her body function as a metaphor for the malignant manifestations of power in the external world. The growing cancer within her and her inadvertent involvement in the political intrigues on the Caribbean Islands of St. Antoine and St.

Agathe shatter her complacency and she realizes for the first time in her life that anything can happen to anyone, anywhere.

Rennie detects that the voter's list in the Island's elections contains dead people's names while many living people's names are excluded. Floods are a boon to the rulers because these fetch charity and aid which are used for purchasing votes. Thus, the political scene on the island has no room for love, decency and humanity. Women are treated as non-entities. They are tortured and even sliced off into pieces. So Rennie discovers different victims in the Caribbean island. She understands that women are not different from common people because both of them are powerless and hence are abused. Rennie's travel piece expands and extends the implications of the term 'woman' to cover all the exploited and abused people in the world.

Need for Mercy, Pity and Love:

Rennie finds out that women are still where they were a century ago. The much spoken freedom and identity of women are only delusions. She realizes that people enjoy torturing women. She recognizes that the Caribbean is essentially as bad as Canada, which to her represents the civilized world. Rennie points out in her article that women everywhere are abused just like the helpless poor. In this way, she equates women with the poor throughout the world.

Rennie visits women prisoners in a Caribbean prison along with Dr. Minnow who is known for his rebellion against the tyranny of the government. Minnow, who

is one of the politicians of St. Antoine, plays a significant part in guiding Rennie into touching things, into realizing the core of things, the ugly truth:

> There are still things that are inconceivable […]. Here nothing is unconceivable. I wish you to write about it […] all I ask you to do is look [...]. Look with your eyes open and you will see the truth of the matter. Since you are a reporter, it is your duty to report (**BH** 270).

The reality that Atwood points at is the male violence against women which seems to have been brought out "to counterbalance women's recent self assertion".[13] Although this isn't wholly true in Rennie, this self-assertion is understandable when one takes women's progress in the last few decades. Nonetheless, men's behaviour, as brought out in the novel, takes on a chilling aspect.

Rennie is accused of massive involvement in the island's current revolution and in its political affairs. Following an out-break of violent disturbances on the island, Rennie is arrested. She is accused of being an outraged tourist. She suffers incarceration for about two weeks in a Central American prison where she comes into contact with Lora Lucas, a fellow prisoner.

Lora Lucas – Voice Remains Unheard:

In her travelogue Rennie includes the tales which Lora narrates to her in the prison. Lora's tales of woe and brutality completely shatter Rennie's over-confidence in woman's liberation. Lora narrates the story of her life of terror under the gross exploitation of her step-father, which had led her to stab him and leave the

place for good. Lora's account of her childhood brings home to Rennie, the vulnerability of the female.

Following her escape from home, she is hired to work on a boat. Lora's experience at this place of work turns out to be still worse. She is shocked to know that all the men around expect her to sleep with them. Either she has to comply with them or lose her job. The very assumption that a woman is meant for rent, smacks of male arrogance towards women. The tales of Lora's experience in Canada and in the Caribbean shock Rennie's feminist sensibility.

Lora's 'better' and more violent stories are intertwined with Rennie's .When Lora begins to tell another one of her tales, Rennie wishes she could not hear her. She fixates on Lora's opening and closing mouth. Rennie's attitude is much like that of her society, which marginalizes women like Lora. Lora belongs to the lower class of loose, dishevelled women who get what they deserve by Griswold's standards. The social and sexual oppression that she experiences are different from Rennie's. In a male- ordered society, her voice remains unheard .Women like her, of her standing, are not taken any notice of unless her dialogue and experiences are placed alongside Rennie's.

This is why Lora is finally the silenced, victimized woman – she is attacked after a threat she lashes out at the guards. Therefore, despite Atwood trying to make Lora's story heard, she is still muted and Rennie's tale is made predominant again .What Atwood thinks and believes to be needed in all of us is massive involvement; the need to take in and take part in the reality around us.

Brutality on Lora – Real Bodily Harm:

The sight of the neglected and uncared for dead body of Lora touches the very core of Rennie's being. She feels a sense of empathy with her. Lora's face is not

> a face any more, it's a bruise, blood is still oozing from the cuts […] the mouth looks like a piece of fruit that's been run over by a car, pulp […] it's the face of a stranger, someone without a name, the word 'Lora' has come unhooked and is hovering in the air, apart from this ruin […] face off with, all the cloth in this room is filthy, sceptic, except her hands […] there's no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone's, it has a name (**BH** 298-99).

Rennie feels, touches and finally licks the dead face of Lora as animals do to their newly born offspring .This is how she identifies herself with the tragedy of Lora. Feeling the hand of Lora, Rennie imagines the possible resurrection of the dead. She mutters: "Something will move and live again, something will get born" (**BH** 299). This precisely is the feminist consciousness of Rennie. Rennie is committed to immortalize Lora in the form of a book she wants to do as per Lora's death wish. Lora tells Rennie: "The story of my life, you could put it in a book" (**BH** 270).

Rennie and Lora in their prison cells symbolize how women in all walks of life are victimized and oppressed by male power and authority. The brutality done to Lora is the real 'bodily harm' which surpasses both in agony and shock the partial mastectomy done to Rennie. The brutal and heartless mutilation of Lora is symbolic of the limited gender-specific role of women in society. It finally dawns on Rennie

that cancer or partial mastectomy of her breast has no significance and it is no more than a minor accident of her life.

Rennie feels enlightenment in her. She refuses to be a victim although she has "her scar, her disability, her nibbled flesh, the little teeth marks on her" (**BH** 284). Rennie's body which has been maimed, dismembered, altered and fragmented symbolizes the crippled human beings all over the world. Rennie realizes that human malice is as dangerous as cancer. As Dorothy Jones says: "Fear of death by a disease like cancer is weighed against those threats to life which result from human malice – poverty, malnutrition and political violence".[14]

Rennie tries to figure out the 'bodily harm' done to Lora, and other modes of harm which might be done to other bodies in future. She reflects : "This is what will happen" (**BH** 293). In her travel piece, Rennie encompasses a reality of 'bodily harm' which merges past-present-future. Rennie asserts that 'bodily harm' is everywhere – both inside and outside the prison, both in civilized and uncivilized countries, both in political and personal fields. Thus, there are no fixed hard boundaries to 'bodily harm'.

Free-lance journalists like Rennie never leave the prison cells as the rulers will ensure her continued imprisonment. Rennie does have some sort of epiphany. She eventually tries to save Lora (after she has been beaten up by the guards), by touching her hand and by calling her name. In recognizing that Lora's prostitution is braver than her cold, impermeable self, and in licking away the encrusted blood on Lora's face, she accepts Lora's humanity – Lora gave herself up sexually and maybe even

dies for them – and so comes into contact with her own humanity. And once she escapes, she realizes her duty to write, to report the truth; she will choose her time: then she will report.

Though Rennie sees herself in a moment of anguish as "afraid of men because men are frightening" (**BH** 290) and seems to imply that it is only women who suffer at the hands of men, the novel shows that men too are victimized by those who have power. Thus, it is not true to say that all the women in the novel "are victims because of their sex and as a result of their sex they are brutalized in some way" for, besides Rennie, Lora, Elva and the young mother and child at Fort George, Dr. Minnow, the deaf and dumb man, Prince, Marston and probably even Paul, also suffer bodily harm.

People Crippled by Poverty, Ignorance and Political Tyranny:

The deaf and dumb man is beaten up by the police in the street. He is brought to the prison in a bad shape. He is a crusader for human rights and civil liberties. He represents "the vast mass of people in the world crippled by poverty that ignorance and political tyranny have deprived of their capacity to proclaim the suffering and injustices of their plight".[15] From her prison cell Rennie watches with impotent rage the barbaric killings of people who oppose the ruler. Rennie is a witness to some riots in the prison cells following which the male prisoners are tortured and their heads shaved off with bayonets. Bodily Harm challenges the chauvinisms of class, culture, race and nation by emphasizing the need for mercy, pity and love in our power-mad world.

Rennie is set free at the instance of a Canadian diplomat. However, she continues to be a living witness. Rennie uses her pen as a 'weapon' to depict her experiences in her travelogue. She takes a pledge to devote her life to the service of the weak and women. According to Helena Cixous, Rennie puts herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. 'Bodily Harm' is what Rennie has reported to the world as her novel.

The name 'Renata Wilford' implies "Born again".[16] She takes in her strides all her ugly and unpleasant encounters of her life. In this process, she is born anew and lives in the present with a meaningful message for the future. In her new role as a committed writer, she uses pen as a 'weapon' to expose the cruelty and brutalities on the weak and women. She also looks forward to a day of better and healthy relationships between men and women.

But does this actually happen? In using the future tense in the ending, Atwood evades closure. The open-endedness allows the protagonist to be saved once again, or else it could be her imaginings of the possible endings. Rennie is now more open to life and sees more:

> She doesn't have much time left for anything. But neither does anyone else. She's paying attention, that's all. Rennie 'will never be rescued' and yet 'has already been rescued'; although she is not 'exempt', she is 'lucky', suddenly, finally, she's overflowing with luck.[17]

Atwood liked the idea of the reader participating in the writing of the book. So it is left up to us whether or not we should see Rennie released. With this positive

ray, the average reader would like to hope for a happy ending. It is hoped that Rennie returns to Toronto to write of these occurrences, defying all, becoming the voice of those who remain oppressed. Although the male rescuer does not appear in Bodily Harm, the humanity found in others allows the survival of the female protagonists.

To Tell, to Report, to bear Witness:

Rennie decides she will report. Her keeping of this diary that makes up the novel finally makes her a heroine.

> I keep going with this sad and mutilated story, because after all, I want you to hear it. By telling you, anything at all, I'm, at least believing in you […]. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light (**BH** 14).

Her experiences are found recorded on tapes and this is "for Atwood as well as for her heroines, the final irrevocable commitment to one's society and to one's own humanity."[18]

For Atwood, as stated in the epigraph to the novel, "the act of writing" is not "a mere frill"; it is a subversive weapon or a tool which projects the alternative reality. So a novel for her is "a vehicle for looking at society – an interface between language and what we choose to call reality" (**BH** 246). Thus, in Bodily Harm Atwood states explicitly the moral function of writing, which does more than "take what society deals out and makes it visible" (**BH** 208).

Bodily Harm is Atwood's best known post-feminist text to date. The novel shows that the legal, economic, political and social conditions of women are still bleak and that they are still where they were a century ago. Though women have become conscious of their rights, they are exploited, oppressed and deprived of their basic human rights like all the weak and powerless in the world. In the 1970's feminist activists were very hopeful and optimistic about the transformation of the society for the better. But their efforts which were geared towards the restitution of rights for women failed to produce the desired results even in the 80's. Atwood, who is critical of the facile optimism of the post-feminist era concerning the state of women's liberation, comments thus:

> It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed […] the goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we're living in a post feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the same subject.[19]

Thus, Bodily Harm draws our attention to the horrifying status of women in the post-feminist era. The novel, as Elaine Tuttle Hansen says is "a different kind of therapy to gender victimization – the kind of open conversation or consciousness raising session central to the development of the feminist movement". [20] In Bodily Harm, gender politics are contextualized within "the brutal injustices of modern global politics". [21] As an active member of Amnesty International, Atwood is interested in gender power politics and demonstrates in Bodily Harm "how power operates and who has power over whom".[22] Therefore, Bodily Harm is in no way

the "immense failure" [23] as J.A Wainwright contends, nor is it "a piece of overt misogyny"[24] as Jennifer Waelti Walters thinks. The novel succeeds both as a profoundly humanitarian text and a powerful political feminist novel.

Chauvinisms of Class, Culture, Race and Nation:

Bodily Harm addresses itself to the "violation of human rights".[25] It is a violation of human rights when thousands of women are subjected to rape, brutalized by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation in the process of dealing with the nature of violence, human cruelty and victimization of women. Atwood has for Bodily Harm a very apt quotation from John Berger's "Ways of Seeing" as epigraph: "A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you; by contrast, a woman's presence defines what can and cannot be done to her".[26] The epigraph clearly indicates male aggression and female passivity. It is evident from the epigraph that the novel focuses on gender / sexual power politics. As Howels says: "In Bodily Harm female bodies are all passive, distorted, dismembered or coerced, witnesses to the sexual power politics of the Berger epigraph".[27] The novel presents poignantly the abuse, torture, mutilation and finally the destruction of the female body in hospital beds and prison cells for purposes of male sexuality. According to Lorne Irvine, Bodily Harm illustrates, ironically, the "inscription of the female body and, by connecting hospital room and jail cell, dramatically presents the injury to the female body that results from its confinement".[28]

The subject of Bodily Harm is also depicted in Atwood's collection of poems entitled True stories which appeared the same year : "the knife that cuts lovers out of your flesh like tumours leaving you breastless and without a name, flattened, bloodless, even your voice cauterized by too much pain".[29] The metaphoric relationship between the female body and the country, Canada, here, as in Bodily Harm, insists on the connection of the politics of sexual power with the politics of colonial domination, for like women, Canada is only now emerging from a 'deadly brainwashing'. Atwood seems to suggest that such a brainwashing has clearly interfered with both Canada's history and her literature.

The sexual battlefield with its various power plays is paralleled in certain nationalistic themes that appear from quite a different perspective in the opening section of Survival. While discussing the ways in which victimization seems to dominate the Canadian imagination and offering her thematic study as a "map of the territory",[30] she uses as a dominating question Northrop Frye's frequently quoted statement about Canadian literature – " Where is here?" The opening sentence of Bodily Harm - "This is how I got here" – thus alerts the reader to the novel's interest in Canadian nationalism and to its political intentions.

Indifference – Acquiescence in Evil:

The refrain, "the sweet Canadians", reiterated by 'the shrunken Fisher King', Dr. Minnow, means different things at different points in the novel. Sometimes, it implies the naivete of the Canadians, a theme given physical representation through the character of Rennie, who, like the narrator of Surfacing, represents the country in

which she lives. Like Canada, Rennie is perceived by many different characters as naïve, politically uncomplicated and obscurely old-fashioned. Paul says this about her: "For one thing you're nice […].You'd rather be something else, tough or sharp or something like that, but you're nice, you can't help it. Naïve. But you think you have to prove you're not merely nice, so you get into things you shouldn't" (**BH** 15). At another point, an old couple questions Rennie: "You're Canadian, aren't you? We always find the Canadians so nice; they're almost like members of the family. No crime rate to speak of. We always feel quite safe when we go up there" (**BH** 186).

In this respect, then, the novel ironically attacks the Canadian simplicity by dramatizing the massive involvement of Rennie in the political affairs of a country she knows so little about. Far from keeping her safe, her naivete is responsible for her ultimate victimization. No one, not even the Canadians, can stay outside contemporary political violence or placidly castigate other countries for encouraging such violence. As Dr. Minnow says to Rennie : "Everyone is in politics here, my friend […]. All the time. Not like the sweet Canadians" (**BH** 124) and, later, "There is no longer any place that is not of general interest [...].The sweet Canadians have not learned this yet" (**BH** 135). Furthermore, even Rennie, who at the beginning emphasizes her own neutrality, is embarrassed by the Canadian official in his safari jacket, attempting to play neutral.

Bodily Harm which superficially follows a narrative logic, and offers the reader a plot to hold on to, thus appears to have its attention on varied images of Canada. The novel fulfills its expected function of offering the right co-ordinates to

recognize and comprehend the "here", which evidently is the desperate need in the Canadian context. The availability of the geography of the "here" guarantees survival and prepares the right environment for the voicing of the vital question "Who am I?"

The novel also tells us that "nobody is exempt from anything" (**BH** 290). Most of us are as complacent as Rennie. By reducing individual sufferers to statistics, the newspapers and the media help create the feeling that we are 'safe' and that all the terrible things that take place in the world happen, and can happen, only to others. Atwood feels that it is necessary to get rid of this illusion and recognize the fact that the ubiquity of evil cannot be wished away. Similar feelings are expressed by her in her deeply moral short prose piece "Bread".[31] Our world is a prison cell in which we are all inescapably caught. Some of the prisoners terrorize the others by virtue of their brutal strength. Those of us, who, like Rennie, are fortunate to suffer less, must do all we can for our worse off fellow beings and reach out towards them with love and genuine compassion. Indifference to their misery implies acquiescence in evil.

Chapter V

Surviving Theocracy: *The Handmaid's Tale*

It is a known fact that Atwood deals with women's experience in a male – dominated culture. Her novels present women caught in oppressive stereotypes from which some women struggle to escape. This is done through autonomy of thought, through self- definition and self- reconstruction of one's own history, through creative composition and through a refusal to take up the victim position or the role of subjugation.

The Handmaid's Tale (1986) is Margaret Atwood's international award-winning best seller. It was made into a movie by Harold Pinter starring Faye Dunaway and Robert Duvall. It is a critique of female brutalization, a cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society where women are denied the basic rights. The novel is a kind of anti- utopia of the not-too- distant future as reflected through the voice of Offred, a Handmaid, one of the victims in the theocracy.

In form, the book is a dystopia, a cognate of A Clockwark Orange, 1984, Brave New World and Fahrenheit 451, a troubling cautionary vision of mankind's potentially dismal future. The Handmaid's Tale paints a picture of what can happen if people fall into indifference trusting that things will remain the same. Atwood states:

> Every book is a sort of mushroom cloud thrown up by a large substance of material that has been accumulating for a lifetime. I had

> long been interested in the histories of totalitarian regimes and the different forms they have taken in various societies. This is a book about what happens when certain casually held attitudes about women are taken to their logical conclusions. The root of the book goes back to my study of the American Puritans. The society they founded in America was not a democracy as we know it, but a theocracy.[1]

All of the things that Atwood has written about have – as noted in the "Historical Notes" at the end – been done before, more than once. History proves that what we have been in the past, we could be again.

Atwood argues for the possibility of the creation of her imagined Republic of Gilead. She asks :

> If you were going to take over the United States, how would you do it? Would you say, "I'm a socialist and we're all going to be equal?" No, you would not because it wouldn't work. Would you say, "I'm a liberal and we are going to have a society of multiple toleration?" You probably wouldn't say that if you wanted mass support. You would be much more likely to say, "I have the word from God and this is the way we should run things".[2]

Atwood's novel reflects the form and style of the early puritan society and addresses the dynamics that bring about such a situation.

Offred, the protagonist in The Handmaid's Tale escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the underground Female road to tell her tale of victimization. The novel takes the form of a memoir, where the memories combine to build an extraordinary portrait of an ordinary woman in extraordinary circumstances. Freedom of speech is a capital offence in Gilead. Hence Offred uses 'language' as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings and bitter experiences, as well as a 'subversive weapon' to tell her tale. Her tale addresses itself to the marginalization of women. She tells her tale with a sense of commitment to expose how the dignity and autonomy of women are negated by anarchic and repressive societies like the Republic of Gilead. She also suggests the ways and means to surmount the barriers to woman's individuality and autonomy.

The manuscript of The Handmaid's Tale is a reconstruction from voice recordings of Offred on cassette tapes. Offred uses language to demolish absolute authority of the Republic of Gilead. She rebels against male hegemony on the one hand and cruelty of the State on the other. Atwood explains the use of the tape recording as a device: "I had to do it that way. The paper and pencil supply would have been quite limited. It also allowed for the discontinuous, episodic nature of the narrative".[3]

Victims in Theocracy:

To comprehend the tale of Offred, a Handmaid, it is important to evaluate the background that has led to the establishment of the class of handmaids in Gilead. The Republic of Gilead is governed by a Fundamentalist Christian theocracy. The so-

called church-state regime, Gilead, legitimizes and enforces the class of Handmaids out of the dire necessity to overcome a fertility crisis among the ruling elite. Due to AIDS, Syphilis and environmental toxics, many of them are sterile, their wives barren and the children mostly wretched mutants called 'unbabies'. Thus, the birth rate, which is dangerously low among the ruling elite, has led them to establish the class of Handmaids whose 'domestic' duties form a degraded obscene, version of the 'flurry of sexual activity'.

Anti –Utopia:

The Bible is used by the regime as an authority for their laws. Atwood says that the "mind - set of Gilead is really close to that of the seventeenth-century Puritans".[4] The polygamy of the Old Testament provides them with the sanction of Handmaids. They regard themselves as latter-day Jacobs and use their Handmaids in a similar way in this new Gilead. In this way, the Republic of Gilead justifies its "sexist policies with the socio - biological theory of natural polygamy and legitimizes its racist and sexist policies as having Biblical precedent".[5] Offred, the narrator is one of the several 'Handmaids' who, because of their "viable ovaries" (**HT** 135) are to be recruited for ' breeding purposes' by the 'Commanders of the Faith' who are childless as a result of their wives' infertility. The Republic of Gilead is openly misogynistic in both its theory and practice. The state reduces the Handmaids to the slavery status of being mere 'breeders'. As Offred says : "We are two legged wombs, that's all; sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (**HT** 128). If a Handmaid becomes pregnant, the child she bears will be regarded as that of the Commander and his wife.

After the delivery, the Handmaid has to surrender the child to the Commaner's mistress. So the Handmaid must act as surrogate mother and bear a child for the aging Commander with the collusion of his barren wife – a device invented by Rachel in the Bible. In this way, the Handmaid is desexed and dehumanized.

The Handmaid is proclaimed an unwoman if she does not succeed by the end of her third two-year posting. The dire alternative for her is the punishment of being banished to the Colonies, where women clean up radioactive waste as slave labourers. Thus, the dictates of state policy in Gilead "relegate sex to a saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival". [6] In contrast, male sterility in Gilead is unthinkable. As Offred says : "There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (**HT** 57). So, women are judged by double standards of morality in respect of infertility.

Erasing Identity of the Past:

Moreover, the state cancels the original names of the Handmaids in order to erase their former identity and labels them according to the names of their Commanders. The state given names are a metaphoric suppression of women's identities. Hence, 'Offred', the narrator's relational naming is not a name but a tag that she wears to signify that she is the Handmaid 'of Fred'. As Offred says : "My name isn't Offred, I have another name , which nobody uses because its forbidden [...] name is like your telephone number, useful only to others" (**HT** 79-80). Similarly, other Handmaids' names are Ofglen, Ofwayne, and Ofwarren. They are doomed to wear the scarlet robes signifying their adultery. Thus a deliberate and

systematic attempt is made in Gilead to obliterate all sense of individuality and identity in women, by taking away their names from them. A Handmaid's name indicates merely the male to whom she is assigned. The name "Offred" is composed of the preposition 'of', indicating possession and the name of her Commander. It is the Gileadean variation of the contemporary patronymic "Mrs. Fred".

The destruction of the individual name is part of the attempt to destroy a woman's past and force her to live in the present moment alone, in a two- dimensional existence. But Offred carves a free space for herself in her flashbacks, contrasting her free and casual style of life in the past with her present regimentation, her past friendship with other women like Moira and her own mother with her present enforced isolation. She often recalls the views and actions of her mother, a militant feminist who believed that "A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women" (**HT** 130-31) and spoke of 'networking' or forging ties with other women. She often recalls vignettes of her life with her husband Luke and their daughter, perhaps to convince herself of the objective reality of the former state of affairs before Gilead. As narrator, Offred apologizes for her frequent flashbacks : "You'll have to forgive me. I'm a refugee from the past and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I've left or been forced to leave behind me" (**HT** 239).

Offred's willed excursions into the "distant past" (**HT** 94) – along with her nightmares – flesh out the narrative. In these sequences, one learns something of her personal history – her prickly relationship with her ardently feminist mother, her

marriage to Luke, the birth of their daughter, and her tendency to take too much for granted : "I trusted fate, back then"(**HT** 37).

One also gets fragments of knowledge about the coup and the changes gradually instituted in the months following. Women were let go from their jobs, denied employment, and – with the regime in command of all the computer data banks – their money and property were transferred to the control of husbands or male relations. "There were marches, of course", Offred recalls, "a lot of women and some men". But when it was known that the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would open fire almost as soon as any of the marches even started, the marches stopped. For her part, the narrator attempted withdrawal into domesticity, "doing more housework, more baking". Too often though, she found herself crying "without warning" (**HT** 189).

When Luke remained insistently reassuring, she realized – to her horror – that "he doesn't mind this […]. He doesn't mind it at all. May be he even likes it? We are not each other's anymore. Instead I am his" (**HT** 191). Only when their marriage is decreed invalid – because of Luke's prior marriage and divorce – does Luke attempt escape. But their forged documents are detected at the Canadian border and a desperate run into the woods is quickly thwarted.

Luke is shot, the narrator captured, and their five-year-old daughter taken away. In the worst of her nightmares, Offred can still "see her […] holding out her arms to me, being carried away" (**HT** 85). Except for a small Polaroid photograph

purloined by her Commander's wife, Offred never sees her daughter again; nor does she know what has become of Luke, whether he is alive or dead.

Following the capture at the border, her memory lapses. "There must have been needles, pills, something like that. I couldn't have lost that much time without help" (**HT** 49). When the narrator regains full consciousness, she is at the Leah and Rachel Centre, formerly a high school, now converted for the training of Handmaids. Here – in a flashback sequence – the novel opens.

The present time of the plot, however, covers the period from Offred's arrival at the home of the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy, to her final escape from Gilead in a black van. Thus, in what is by now a familiar pattern in Atwood's longer fictions, the events of the present are set against the episodes of the past, with the past requiring the reader's active reconstruction.

If the narrative structure is familiar, the narrative voice is not. Offred's is the most anguished voice in Atwood's fictions to date, and the most self - conscious. She struggles with the process of telling, trying out different versions, inventing – then recanting – scenarios that might show her in a better light, and agonizing over missed opportunities in a past she can never recover. "I wish this story were different" is her repeated refrain.

Everything she has suffered and her attempt to bear witness to that suffering are rendered meaningless without a recipient who will honour her survival by learning its lessons. Offred, therefore, has no choice but to take a leap of faith and will her

audience into being : "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you. I believe you're there. I believe you into being [...]. I tell, therefore you are" (**HT** 279).

Gilead's aim is the total annihilation of woman as a person. Offred discovers later when she is able to procure a photograph of her daughter that even the memory of her has been erased from her daughter's mind, as if she had never existed: "I have been obliterated for her [...]. You can see it in her eyes: I am not there. I can't bear it, to have been erased like that" (**HT** 240). Her 'Being-for-others' has been destroyed.

Offred recalls her visceral connections to the husband and daughter from whom she has been so abruptly separated. She mourns her loss of a holistic love for them:

> Nobody dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from. There's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere [...] where they are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person. From time to time I can see their faces, against the dark, flickering like the images of saints [...]. I can conjure them (**HT** 97).

She hopes she will receive a message from her daughter to keep her alive.

Gilead is a highly alienating society, especially for women. Women are prohibited from communicating with one another, under the 'Divide and Rule' policy of patriarchy. Women are separated according to their functions, as Wives, Marthas (house keepers), Handmaids (child bearers), Aunts (disciplinarians), and Jezebels (prostitutes), and kept apart. Marthas are forbidden to become friendly with

Handmaids, Wives regard Handmaids with hostility and envy; Aunts are used to oppress Handmaids; and Handmaids are not supposed to talk with each other. There is constant invigilation to prevent the forging of relationships among women.

In Gilead, women are alienated from their own bodies by the elaborate clothes that have to be worn by them at all times, covering them fully in many layers. The Handmaid's clothes are specially designed to hide bodily contours and the wings and veils are meant to prevent her "from seeing and also from being seen" (**HT** 18). She is not even allowed to bathe by herself. Around her ovulation time, on the night before the 'Ceremony', she is given a bath by a Martha. After the bath, she waits for the Ceremony, feeling completely dehumanized : "I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig" (**HT** 79).

Divide and Rule Policy:

The separation of women according to their functions in Gilead, promotes their fragmentation. The Wives are mainly decorative in function and are dressed in blue. The Marthas are the middle-aged housekeepers, and they are dressed in green. When they become weak and sick and cease working, they are deported to the Colonies. The Handmaids, dressed in red, are young women in their twenties or thirties and serve as child-bearers to elderly childless Commanders. The Biblical precedent of Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah, who served Abraham and Jacob as handmaids are quoted in support of the practice. Prostitution continues in Gilead, though its presence was assiduously denied by the Establishment. These women are dressed in feathers and sequins and the system of prostitution is justified as being dictated to by

Nature: “Nature demands variety for men. It stands to reason; it’s part of the Procreational strategy” (**HT** 249).

Of all these functional roles assigned to women in Gilead, the Handmaids’ role is the most dehumanized. Handmaids are valued only as walking wombs, for their child- bearing function, all other personal traits having been annihilated. They are a “national resource,” (**HT** 75), “containers” (**HT** 107), “two- legged wombs”, “sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (**HT** 146). In the case of most of the Handmaids, Gilead succeeds in reducing woman’s perception of herself to a mere function. Offred experiences anguished disappointment because of her failure to conceive: “I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (**HT** 83). She herself thinks of herself only as a womb, that is, only in the child-bearing context and regards herself as a failure when that function is not fulfilled.

Offred, the Handmaid, in her “reduced circumstances,” (**HT** 99) obeys orders, accepts ‘ritualized subjugation’ to the ruling elite because she knows what the statement “Give a child, or else [...] die” (Genesis) means. She is compelled to discharge her duties as a Handmaid knowing fully well the consequences. Under the pressure of terrifying alternatives, Offred feels: “ I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject” (**HT** 268). Offred is forced into pregnancy tests every month. The doctor who examines her and other Handmaids periodically for signs of pregnancy never even sees their faces. The Commanders, who attempt to impregnate them once a month, are indifferent to their

appearances. As appearance is unimportant for them, the Handmaids are not given face cream. Their bath is regulated by others. Their food is not chosen by them. For minor offences like reading, their arms and legs which are seen as inessential for reproduction are ruthlessly chopped off.

As part of their 're-education' in submission, Offred and other Handmaids are made to watch pornography films from the seventies and eighties in which women appear in various attitudes of submission, brutalization, and grotesque mutilation. To keep them obedient to the regime, the Handmaids are ordered to listen and utter the prayers which Soul Scroll machines recite while printing them. They are also taught by the 'Aunts', the thought-police of Gilead, to walk with their heads bent down low. So, silence and powerlessness go together in the lives of Offred and other Handmaids.

The Gileadean social structure with its focus on child-bearing is devised because of the decline in Caucasian birth- rates, due to the conglomeration of causes in our own age- widespread birth disorders like "stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities due to nuclear plant accidents, shutdowns, sabotage, leakage from chemical and biological warfare, stockpiles and toxic waste disposal sites and uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides and sprays" (**HT** 316-17).

When Gilead had first come into being , the very first step of the new regime was to freeze women's credit cards and bank accounts and take away their jobs and property rights, thus destroying their financial independence, which is the primary requisite in any true liberation of women. With the loss of her job, the protagonist

had felt stripped of her independence and individuality, perceiving herself as "a doll - wife, her husband's possession" (**HT** 191).

In the separation of women into functions, Wives become ornaments. Serena Joys' way of creating female space in this context is through gardening. This is a device resorted to by many Wives in Gilead, reminding one of Alice Walker's discovery about her mother's garden. [7] Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them "to order and maintain and care for" (**HT** 22). That it is a subversive device and a symbol is made clear: "There is something subversive about this garden of Serena's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly into the light, as if to point, to say : "whatever is silenced, will clamour to be heard, though silently" (**HT** 161). The Aunts in Gilead are rigid, middle- aged women who have internalized patriarchal values and are used to impose them on other women. The basic principle of colonialism, "Control of the indigenous by members of their own group" (**HT** 320) is adapted in Gilead to the control of women, for it is believed that "The best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves" (**HT** 320).

In Gilead , only the women of the poorer classes, called Econo- wives, wearing striped dresses in red, blue and green, are not separated into functions: "They have to do everything, if they can" (**HT** 34), i.e., wiving, housekeeping and child-bearing. This is looked down upon as an existence that is inferior to the fragmented, functionalized one of the Wives, Marthas and Handmaids.

In addition to the Handmaids, the Republic of Gilead offers its own state - sponsored brand of sex prostitutes called the Jezebels whose sole function is to entertain foreign delegates. The Aunts, the police women of Gilead, who are clad in paramilitary khaki, train the Handmaids. Thus, women are completely controlled by men and are arranged in a hierarchy of value in Gilead. Therefore, Offred's The Handmaid's Tale posits a "future culture in which … feminist dreams have been replaced by fundamentalist patriarchy that divides women into rigid categories based on function". [8]

Isolation:

Gileadean women are alienated from the universe around them by the severe restriction on their freedom of movement. They are forbidden to read and write, for that is a man's prerogative in Gilead. By thus being denied self- expression through writing and speaking and being denied perception of reality around them through reading, they are isolated from the world around them. However, they try to keep in touch with the world through furtive reading, whenever possible, and through a secret exchange of oral information with one another.

Slow Forging of a Caring Sisterhood:

Women try to overcome this externally imposed interpersonal alienation by reaching out to one another secretly. The bonding among women and the slow forging of a caring sisterhood is a strategy by which female space is acquired in the novel. As Olivia Frey points out : "The ethic of care and relationships is most commonly at the center of women's lives; it provides us with 'space' to think

differently, another model for doing things". [9] Despite the strict regimentation in their training centre, the Handmaids communicate with one another through whispers, lip reading and touch. Despite being constantly warned against the evils of talking and reassured by the advantages of silence, the handmaids communicate, in different ways and defy the vigilance of Aunts:

> We learn to whisper almost without sound. In the semi- darkness we could stretch our arms, when the aunts were not looking and touch each other's hands across space we leaned to lip read […]. In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed; Alma, Janine, Dolores, Moira, June (**HT** 13).

These soldiers of revolution, apparently passive, voiceless, erased, circumscribed, assert their identity by exhuming their names from the pit of obscurity with the help of a new mode of speech. Their new code language is carried to the other with the movement of "silent lips, looks, smiles, whistles, and winks" (**HT** 18), or Ofglen's " MayDay" message or Moira's conversation with Offred through the "wooden holes" in the " wooden stalls"(**HT** 83). "Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently" (**HT** 161), comments Offred and her statement is accurate.

The protagonist manages to communicate with her former friend Moira who also arrives at the same training centre. Later, the Handmaids Offred and Ofglen discover joyfully that they are both "non-believers". The discovery makes Offred "delirious with joy" (**HT** 177). Despite the ban on all communication between the Handmaids and the Marthas, one of the housekeepers, Cora, develops a liking for

Offred and is even willing to lie for her once .For Offred that is a triumph in itself, a subversive way of survival. “It pleased me that she was willing to lie for me, even in such a small thing, even for her own advantage. It was a link between us” (**HT** 160).

When Offred first arrives at Serena’s house as a Handmaid, she wants to turn her into “an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect her” (**HT** 25-26). But Serena, the Commander’s wife, was hostile at first, though she later offers to help Offred and arranges clandestine meetings between Offred and Nick and gets a photograph of Offred’s daughter to be seen by her. Serena’s offer of a cigarette to Offred (**HT** 216), Rita’s gift of an ice cube to her (**HT** 219) and Offred’s compliments to Rita on her vegetable-carving (**HT** 219) for the dinner table, all are examples of the growing goodwill among the women in Gilead, under restricted circumstances.

The importance of the oral tradition among women is indirectly suggested in the novel by the manner in which Moira’s story is pieced together from what others have said, a story passed from woman to woman, by word of mouth: “Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard it from Aunt Lydia” (**HT** 139). This is not gossip. The reason for the spread of Moira’s story is that Moira’s daring escape served as a positive role model for all Handmaids: “Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us. She was with us in secret, a giggle” (**HT** 143). When Offred records Moira’s story on tape it becomes the oral narration of an oral narrative: “I’ve tried to make it sound as

much like her as I can. It's a way of keeping her alive" (**HT** 256). In a way, narration confirms existence.

In Offred's room, the previous occupant had stealthily scratched a coded message in a cupboard: "Nolite te bastardes carborundarum" (let not the bastards crush you). The language is foreign to her yet the message is carried : "It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think that I am communicating with her […]. They give me a small joy" (**HT** 62). Despite the restrictions and the impossibility of the situation, Offred communicates with the unknown inscriber and demolishes the barriers of death. The speech of the oppressed metamorphoses into a rallying cry for liberty.

Suicide is one of the ways in which the women in Gilead attempt to escape from their intolerable oppression. Offred's predecessor had hanged herself from the light fixture. The Gilead administration therefore takes preventive measures to block this particular escape- route. In the Handmaid's room, "They've removed anything you could tie a rope to" (**HT** 17). In the bathroom razors are removed ; framed pictures have no glass and "the window-pane- glass is shatterproof so that there is no cutting edge" (**HT** 18).

Association wih Underground Network:

There are other ways of maneuvering survival in Gilead. Moira adopts defiance and rebellion. Ofglen joins a subversive group with the password 'Mayday' and indulges in sabotage activities. Playing games with Man in a show of acquiescence or compromise, but with the ulterior motive of wheedling privileges out

of patriarchy, is yet another subversive method of creating female space. In return for clandestinely playing Scrabble with her Commander, Offred gets precious hand-lotion for her face and hands. But more valuable than that is the intangible gain that she is no longer just an object to him after that: "To him I'm no longer merely a usable body" (**HT** 172).

Offred finds herself preferred by the Commander. Once in a while, when his wife is safely elsewhere, the Commander sends for Offred to come to his study. Offred wonders what he could want of her, perhaps something perverted. She is right, this man to whom she is a bonded slave sexually, wants to do something forbidden with her – play Scrabble. Playing Scrabble has all the excitement of a forbidden pleasure. So also the notion of meeting a Handmaid under circumstances other than those designed for procreation.

Her stealing into her Commander's study to play illicit games of Scrabble makes her discover that there can be freedom even within the prison house of language. She is able to ask the Commander questions, to criticize and even to condescend to him. She gives him an insight into the real living conditions and situation of Handmaids. Offred imagines stabbing the Commander when he asks her to kiss him. She says : "I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup […] over my hand" (**HT** 131). She realizes the power of the 'pen'. As she says: "The pen between my finger is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains […]. Just holding it is envy, I envy the Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal" (**HT** 174).

Offred and her Commander meet several times in the greatest secrecy and do many forbidden things together; he lets her look at a magazine ; she reads Dickens in his room; finally he even takes her out one night. The outing is to a kind of playboy club, the sort of thing supposedly rooted out of the theocratic State. The play- boy club incident where she does not fall in with the Commander's wishes is an instance of her continuing to exercise an option, an assertion of individuality.

When the Commander in the new found intimacy of Scrabble and reading asks Offred what she wants, she answers: "I would like to know". The Commander smuggles her out so that she could know atleast a fraction of what goes on. Unfortunately, what she learns of the leisure pastimes of the Gileadean elite is not very edifying. Offred learns other things as well, but without the Commander's connivance but with that of his wife; she has a brief interlude of love with Nick, the Commander's driver. The wife who is the Rachel of the novel (Biblical original who conceived the notion of begetting by proxy) believes that if she is to bear children, the Biblical arrangement is not good enough but a further refinement is necessary. It is not enough for a Rachel to have her obliging Bilhah but a counterpart of Bilhah has to be found for her barren husband also.

The choice is Nick, who is not averse to Offred, for aversion is a free man's prerogative and Nick lives in Gilead where all rights have been abolished to accommodate one paramount duty which is to be fruitful and multiply. Offred's interlude with a man with procreative potential takes on other dimensions; under the circumstances, it acquires a tinge of romance. The curious, pathetic thing about it is

that even in Gilead, under the bestial conditions of breeding in captivity a human relationship sprouts, though Nick makes a joke of the dehumanized, clinical need that bring Offred to him, the necessity to prove herself fertile so that she may not be classified as dispensable and shipped off to the colonies.

Offred, who witnesses the bloody 'salvagings', the ritual slaughter and dismemberment of women, begins to feel shock, outrage, nausea and considers them as barbarous. She is alert and seems to be put in jeopardy. She feels her stay as if it were a jail sentence and she would like to scratch marks on the wall. She is filled with lassitude in Gilead. She would like to repent, abdicate, renounce and sacrifice her life in Gilead. She feels her body is no longer suited for pleasure. She does not wish to be a doll hung up on the wall. She occupies herself with nostalgic memories of her husband and daughter, and strongly desires to escape from her present claustrophobic environment. She is not even free to die in Gilead. Ultimately, Offred decides to end her life by hanging herself : "I could noose the bed sheet round my neck, hook myself up in the closet, throw my weight forward, choke myself off" (**HT** 274), but she considers suicide an idle thing, a timid action. The cushion on which the word "Faith" (**HT** 274) is embroidered is an image that reveals Offred's profound faith in her life as a woman. Although she lives in man's tyrannical world in Gilead, she feels a sense of pride for having been born a woman. As Offred says: "Oh God, king of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man" (**HT** 182).

Emergence from Silence:

Offred's gradual development of feminist consciousness toward initiating risky but assertive schemes breaks the slavery syndrome completely. As Offred says: "I'm tired of this melodrama, I'm tired of keeping silent" (**HT** 275). It is through Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, that Offred associates with underground network which shifts her from "being helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor".[10] Ultimately, Offred is rescued by Nick, the Private Eye and the Underground May Day resistance group who have come in the 'black van'. Nick calls her by her real name and says: "It's May Day. Go with them" (**HT** 275). She escapes via the "Underground Female road" or "Frail road" (**HT** 313) to Canada and thence to England or elsewhere.

Offred's lover, Nick, redeems all men by his act of saving Offred, although it may mean his own death. He is a kind of Orpheus to her Eurydice, as he brings her out of the world of the dead. This is a novel about survival because one learns from the novel's appendix which is set in a further and presumably better future in which women again participate as human beings in an apparently benevolent society.

Offred's 'The Handmaid's Tale' conducts one on a miniature tour of the Republic of Gilead. Offred escapes along with the underground May Day resistance group to the Underground Female road to tell her tale. She tells most of her tale in the present tense, giving it the immediacy of direct experience. Her voice on cassette tapes serves as a record of an emergence from silence. Atwood's strong point is satire, often hilarious, often very pointed. Humour is in short supply in this novel, but it is a

satire nonetheless. Atwood's love for language play becomes a major characteristic of the protagonist of the novel. Her jokes are dark and bitter, but they are pervasive.

Narrating a Story – Effective Strategy ofSurvival:

Offred is initially silenced by Gileadean culture, but she eventually works her way to freedom through language. The very thing that is denied Offred – the freedom to speak up, speak out, be heard – becomes the medium through which she defines herself. Offred realizes the centrality of language to the process of self-realization and the struggle for equality. Language – the ability to speak, to tell one's own story is at the heart of Offred. So language is initially an intimidating silence for Offred but ultimately she converts it into a liberating phenomenon. Language enables Offred to survive in Gilead and to raise her voice against the sexual oppression of the patriarchal society.

The Handmaid's Tale is not presented as history or his story, i.e. a story from a man's point of view, but as her story, the story of Offred, narrated by herself orally. The story is narrated off and on, not chronologically, into a recording machine and preserved in tapes. Annis Pratts' generalization about women's fiction could perhaps be applied to Offred's narrative: "Women's fiction manifests alienation from normal concepts of time and space precisely because the presentation of time by persons on the margins of day- to- day life inevitably deviates from ordinary chronology".[11]

Though "Goddesses like Saraswathi in India, Brigid in Britain and Nidaba in Sumer were credited with the invention of the alphabet and the creation of language

and writing,"[12] women in general are connected with the oral tradition and language. The entire novel, except for the Epilogue, is supposed to be orally narrated by Offred. The oral element of the narration is often emphasized: "It's also a story I'm telling in my head as I go along. "Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden" (**HT** 49).

For Offred, narrating her own story validates existence and makes her exist, in a certain sense: "I don't want to be telling this story […]. I don't have to tell it. I don't have to tell anything to myself or to anyone else. I could just sit here peacefully. I could withdraw" (**HT** 237). And yet she does not do so. She tells her story to herself lying on her bed, and later to another, on tape. Atwood concentrates on the problem of woman's survival in a hostile male dominated world through Offred's refusal to be a silent victim.

Atwood frequently reminds the reader that the narrative is an oral reconstruction by Offred, after the events, and as such, can only be an approximation to reality, and never the actual happening itself . Of course, this is true of all narration and of all history too, though one does not think of it as such: "It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you can say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, riders, cross currents, nuances" (**HT** 144).

Reconstruction of one's own Life –Sense of Control over one's own life:

According to Offred, the reconstruction of one's own life as a story gives a sense of control over the events in the story, and hence a sense of control over one's

own life: “I would like to believe this is a story I am telling”. Narrating a story thus becomes an effective strategy of survival for oneself and others in a patriarchal universe. “I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized […]. I’m sorry there is so much pain in the story […]. This is the story then” (**HT** 278). Story telling presupposes the presence of speech, a speaker and an audience.

In the hands of Atwood, language becomes a powerful weapon to wrench female space within the existing structures. She exposes the shortcomings of conventional patriarchal language and the encoded sexism in it. For example, after declaring : “The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us”(**HT** 21), Offred adds : “There was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister, though one may coin “sororize.” While the word “fraternize” exists, which means “to behave like a brother,” there is no corresponding word for women. It was as if language in collusion with patriarchy conspired to deny sisterhood to women.

According to Offred, language in the Republic of Gilead is officially forbidden because the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons that can free the people from bondage. In Gilead, only the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons that can free the people from bondage. In Gilead, only the ruling class has access to books. As part of their training, the handmaids are required to recite the Biblical injunctions which are distorted to reinforce their submissiveness. “From each”, says the slogan, “according to ‘her ability’; to each according to ‘his needs.’” Offred questions the authority of this patriarchal language which comes from the reservoir of male discourse.

Language has always been acknowledged as a powerful weapon at the disposal of those under subjection. A strategy, by which those under subjection try to survive, is by using language to debunk the wielders of power. This is the motivation behind all ironic fables and satiric narratives which are obliquely directed at the powers that be, whether the power is colonial or patriarchal.

Patriarchy and colonialism are both power structures which operate on similar principles. Colonialism may well be seen as a paradigm of patriarchy in feminist literary criticism. This is because gender relations provide the "blue print for all other power relationships" and are "the model for power relations between generations, socio- economic classes, relations, racial and ethnic groups as well as between imperial powers and their colonies".[13]

From being a Helpless Victim to being a Sly, Subversive Survivor:

Both in patriarchy and colonialism, various subversive tactics may be resorted to by the dominated group – open rebellion, secret revolt, formation of defiant groups, outward submission accompanied by a slow carving out of inner independent space, acts of subversion and sabotage and the creation of free space through written or oral language composition.

According to Northrop Frye, Canada is "the only country left in the world which is a pure colony, colonial in psychology, as well as mercantile economics".[14] Margaret Atwood says : "Canada as a whole is a victim or an 'oppressed minority' or 'exploited', a colony for someone else's profit".[15] Just as colonial power structure seems to be built into the collective unconscious of Canada, patriarchal

power-structures too have left their impact on the female psyche. A sensitive and consciously self- aware writer like Atwood exposes these power-structures and their effects on both those who exercise power and those who are subjected to it.

While colonial domination is a recurrent theme with the Canadian male writer, women writers may see colonialism as a metaphor of the gender power struggle. In Linda Hutcheon's opinion : "In all her writing, Atwood shows herself to be the tireless explorer and exposer of cultural clichés and stereotypes, in particular of those that affect women".[16] The Handmaid's Tale carries patriarchal power to its logical and nightmarish extreme and shows how women live such a situation and create female space for themselves through various strategies – bonding with other women and forging a sisterhood, defiance, sabotage, compromise, maintaining autonomy of thought, holding on to the objective reality of the past through flashbacks, keeping the oral reconstruction of one's own history, physical flight and as a last resort, suicide.

Offred uses language in her tale with a sense of commitment to demolish the totalitarian society in the so-called church state regime, Gilead. She condemns Gilead for "its intolerant, prescriptive set of values that projects a tunnel vision on reality and eliminates human volition".[17] She rejects the male misogynous mentality of the totalitarian society. In short, she raises her voice against the marginalization of women in anarchic or repressive societies.

Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale is a challenge to traditional values. It can be taken as a warning about the danger of a patriarchal society and the dogma of the

religious right. It is also a recognition that the structures that cause and perpetuate women's oppression are arbitrary. Therefore, any kind of oppression is subject to change. In this way, Offred tells the reader in her cautionary tale something one needs to know about the human capacity for survival.

At the conclusion of this grim saga, the fate of the heroine is left essentially unknown. But the very fact that the question remains unanswered gives one reason to believe that this compelling fictional character was meant to ultimately triumph. It is this hope that transforms what could have been an abrupt, unsatisfying end into a reason for optimism about the human condition.

The 'man, sometime in the future' who takes charge of Offreds' narrative turns out to be the exegate Offred had tried to guard against. In "Historical Notes," which follows as an appendix, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, Director of the Twentieth and Twenty-first century Archives at Cambridge University, England, addresses an academic conference in the nation of Nunavit (a nation carved out of what was once northern Canada by the native people). The date is 25 June 2195. Gilead no longer exists, but in its wake the map of North America has been radically redrawn. Pieixoto's subject is the provenance of the Tale and the problems he has had, as a historian, in authenticating it. The narrative we have just read, it turns out, is Pieixoto's (and his collaborator, Professor Knotly Wade's) arrangement and transcription of some thirty tape cassettes 'unearthed on the site of what was once the city of Bangor', Maine. The cassettes are of the type that became obsolete sometime in the eighties or nineties with the advent of the compact disc. Offred is

presumed to have made the tapes while hiding out at a "way-station" en route to Canada on "The Underground Female road" that operated secretly in Gilead (**HT** 313).

Pieixoto opens his remarks with a series of sexist puns. He then details the discovery and transcription of the tapes, briefly digressing to what he terms 'an editorial aside' before launching into his main subject. The editorial aside is a caution against "passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans" (**HT** 314). His main subject is the attempt to "establish an identity for the narrator" (**HT** 315) or for any of the personages mentioned by Offred. Bringing his remarks to a close, Pieixoto registers disappointment at the "gaps" (**HT** 322) of information within the narrative and reiterates his contention that voices from the past are "imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come"(**HT** 324).

The reader who has been moved by Offred's rendering of the dailiness of suffering in Gilead is unprepared for this kind of discourse. Because of the subject matter of the Handmaid's testament, what jolts us in Pieixoto's remarks are both his delight in salacious puns – especially those "having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word 'tail' (**HT** 313) –and his "editorial aside" against "passing moral judgement". Pieixoto subscribes to the relativist argument that all "such judgements are of necessity culture – specific" (**HT** 314). As a congress of historians, he states : "our job is not to censure but to understand" (**HT** 315).

The implied objectivity of this stance has the effect of repressing moral valuation because it flattens the uniqueness of Offred and her telling into a

domesticating matrix. She has been consigned safely to history. As Pieixoto puts it : "Our author […] was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part" (**HT** 317). By telling his audience that "Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise" (**HT** 315), Pieixoto has not really explained racist and sexist policies that led to a virtual reign of terror.

The "Historical Notes" was an inspired device. Pieixoto's analysis of the history and ideological underpinnings of Gilead, along with his pursuit of the identity of Offred's Commander, provides Atwood a mechanism for offering information to which her first person narrator could not have had access. At the same time, the "Notes" section provides Atwood with a mechanism for posing profound questions about what should constitute the narrative of history. Atwood puts forward two opposed narrative possibilities: Offred's halting reconstruction of her own "limping and mutilated story" (**HT** 279) followed by Pieixoto's orderly excavation of identifiable personages, relationships, and motivations that might be derived from it. The two stand opposed not because of content – both are incomplete attempts at accurate reconstruction – but because the single response demanded by the primary document is the same response that its interpreter categorically refuses.

Offred bears witness that lessons may be learned, judgements made, future atrocities avoided. Her recollections are an admonition. "There were stories in the newspapers of course, that gave clues to a right-wing takeover in the offing", Offred

remembers, "but most people lived, as usual, by ignoring" (**HT** 66). Pieixoto records past social and cultural practices 'for their own sake'. "He does not read The Handmaid's Tale as we have been reading it: that is, as a call to critical awareness of the praxis current in one's own society".[18] Thus Pieixoto is able to congratulate his era for being "happily more free of the adverse demographic and environmental factors to which Gilead reacted" (**HT** 315), but he is oblivious to the Gileadean echoes in his own sexist jokes.

By engaging the reader first in an empathetic identification with Offred, Atwood has ensured that Pieixoto's putative objectivity will not be ours. In so doing, Atwood places us in the peculiar position of rejecting one kind of formal historical narrative – Pieixoto's – about a past – Offred's – that has not yet occurred but might be our future.

Because The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopia set in an invented future, there is some temptation to regard it as a romance fantasy. Atwood herself, however, insisted that she had projected only "a slight twist on the society we now have". In the widely publicized CBC interview, she explained:

> There isn't anything in the book that isn't based on something that hasn't already happened in history or in another country or for which the materials are not already available. Futuristic though it is, then, in its 'fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable', The Handmaid's Tale adheres to Hawthorne's definition of a novel".[19]

It could be warning about the future, but it is also certainly a cry to the injustices of the past; it offers a perspective of a possible world that is utopia for some and a nightmare for others.

Not wanting to write a piece of fantastical literature, Atwood writes about a dystopia firmly rooted in the reality of the Eighties. Women in Gilead dress the way women do in Islamic Fundamentalist societies like Iran and are forced to carry passes like the Blacks in South Africa. The Handmaids need to undergo pregnancy tests every month like women in Rumania under Ceacescu where all forms of birth control had been abolished. Rumanian women were forced into pregnancy tests every month and their wages and promotions were likewise linked to fertility. Canada too attempted to pass an anti-abortion law which required a woman to get the signed consent of her husband or nearest male relative before undergoing an abortion. The practice of government terror against its adversaries is something which Atwood is all too familiar with as a member of the Amnesty International.

Executions in Gilead are termed "salvagings" which is the Philippine expression for state-sponsored murders and the place where the Handmaids are trained is termed "re-education centres" which is from the Cambodian and Vietnam takeovers. Further more, a Catholic sect in New Jersey actually refers to women as handmaidens. Racial intolerance of the kind demonstrated by the Neo-Nazi groups in Germany and the imperialists in the African countries is an ugly fact of our so-called democratic age. Therefore Atwood's vision is essentially panoramic because

journalistic fragments are transformed into a synthetic whole by her artistic imagination.

Atwood feels that in an age such as ours, writers cannot and should not live ivory-tower existences oblivious to the still sad music of humanity and keep feeding readers with escapist literature. According to her, writers must create social and political awareness among the readers. For, repressive governments like the Republics of Gilead come into being with a sudden upsurge. Such an upsurge can occur anywhere in the world at any time, as evil is inherent in all human beings.

Offred's "time out" is the time we live. Ours is the world she attempts to conserve in memory. When we find fault with Pieixoto's commentary, we become the appropriately responsive audience whom Offred has willed into existence. In effect, we are the alternate possibility brooding over Gilead, "ours the realm of potential interpenetration" (**HT** 109). We can both rewrite Pieixoto's narrative and unwrite Offred's only if we attend to the warnings in her tale and guard against Gileadean impulses. To recognize these obligations is to recognize that we are Offred's ultimate fantasy of escape. To do otherwise is to measure Offred's future suffering in the magnitude of our present complacency. The alienation and torment of the victims of repressive regimes and their struggle to survive as live human beings therefore cause so much of unease in our minds that we cannot just ignore it, but think seriously about our political responsibility to survive in inhuman and inhibiting conditions.

Chapter VI

Surviving Childhood Victimization: *Cat's Eye*

Cat's Eye (1988) is the story of Elaine Risley, a middle-aged painter, who returns to Toronto after many years of absence for a Retrospective of her paintings. The Retrospective becomes the novel's central metaphor, since what the novel depicts is Elaine's retrospection of her own life. Her recollections of her girlhood in Toranto form the story. Elaine re-enacts what Atwood says about cultures in her introduction to The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse: "All the cultures are to some extent retrospective: we see where we are and where we're going partly by where we've been" [1]. A retrospective is a sign of accomplishment, a point of arrival, or a plateau that provides a view of the past – a reflective pause – before one moves into the future. Hence, in Cat's Eye, Atwood turns from the life of the buried, smothered women to examine the other side of the coin, the woman who has fought her way to freedom as an artist.

Cat's Eye (1988), Atwood's seventh novel, was received by a few critics as a 'jeu d'esprit' (Oxford Dictionary shorter: "a witty or humorous trifle"). But Margaret Atwood does not agree to it. In an interview with Earl G.Ingersoll she says:

> In fact, I don't think my other "comic novels" are jeux d'esprit, either, I suspect that sort of definition is something people fall back on because they can't take women's concerns or life patterns at all seriously; so they see the wit in those books, and that's all they see. Writing is play in the same way that playing the piano is "play" or

> putting on a theatrical "play" is play. Just because something's fun doesn't mean it isn't serious. For instance, some get a kick out of war. Others enjoy falling in love. Yet others get a bang out of a really good funeral. Does that mean war, love, and death are trifles ?[2]

Cat's Eye is unusual in that it builds upon the most detailed and perceptive exploration of young girlhood. There is fiction which explores the stage of young boyhood, but even writers who are women, haven't dealt with this stage of a woman's development before. Atwood says that the tendency is to think that the only relationships of importance to women are their dealings with men as parents, boy friends, husbands or babies. The writer has taken a bold step in writing about how the little girl who got run over by her girl friends was able to respond to the other women when she grew up. She says:

> I sometimes get interested in stories because I notice a sort of blank – why hasn't any one written about this? Can it be written about? Do I dare to write it? Cat's Eye was risky business, in a way – wouldn't I be trashed for writing about little girls, how trivial? Or wouldn't I be trashed for saying they weren't all sugar and spice […]. Childhood is very intense because children can't imagine a future. They can't imagine pain being over, which is why children are nearer to the absolute state of Heaven and Hell than adults are.[3]

Quiet, pensive, confused and ironic middle-aged painter Elaine Risley of Cat's Eye seems to be a complex person. Elaine's inner journey helps her see the negative

effects of being overwhelmed by others. Unlike the "allegorical misery" of the women in most of Atwood's earlier works, the present novel "gives way to recognizable landscapes and more plausible grief and is Atwood's most emotionally engaging fiction thus far". [4]

Cat's Eye, a Bildungsroman:

Cat's Eye is a Bildungsroman that in its exploration of what Atwood believes is the central concern of both women's writing and Canadian Literature – survival – reiterates the importance of the universal quest for self-realization and self-expression. In early Bildungsromans written by women, the female protagonist discovered herself and her place only in marriage and submission to patriarchal norms, and thus grew "down" rather than "up" as Annis Pratt puts it : "it is only in the twentieth century that a feminine counterpart to the male version of the epic theme of the individual's growth into life and love has begun to emerge", [5] as women project into their fiction their belief that "the experience of a young girl may stand as a paradigm for that of the whole human race every bit as much as the boy's can" [6].

Some reviewers also regard it a "thinly fictionalized autobiography" and proceed to list the similarities between Elaine and her character. Atwood's prefatory note explains : "This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one". Though certainly not an autobiography, it is tempting to assume that this novel is a spiritual autobiography of Atwood. Lacking conclusive evidence regarding this aspect, it is best to assume that Atwood makes "cameo appearances"[7] in it as she does in some of her other works. The autobiographical

element is in no way important to this novel, which sensitively records Elaine's alienation and survival from childhood to middle age.

Early Childhood:

Elaine Risley's childhood begins in a literary home, filled with all those vanished things from Atwood's own childhood – the marbles, the Eaton's catalogues, the watchbird watching you, the smells, sounds, colours, the textures. For Atwood, fiction - writing is a celebration of a physical world she knew. It's partly an attempt to stop or bring back time. The theme of mental journey across time is established right at the beginning of the novel in Elaine's reference to time. She states: "You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away" (**CE** 3). The long sequences of her life from early childhood through art school, a disastrous love affair and her failed first marriage – the memories of her life down to the present moment culminate in the exhibition of her paintings.

Having lived in the wilderness while her father did field research on insects, Elaine is even more innocent than her young age warrants when her family moves to the city, and she is unprepared for the girls' games, having so far played only with her brother. She feels much more comfortable with boys, whom she considers her secret allies. However, social convention requires her to speak and act like the other girls. The uncertainty with which she attempts this behaviour makes her the object of ridicule among her girl friends – Cordelia, Grace and Carol.

Child Victim:

Cordelia's criticism forces Elaine to be unsure of every move she makes: "'What do you have to say for yourself ?' Cordelia used to ask. 'Nothing' I would say. It was a word that I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all" (**CE** 43). Cordelia's voice invades Elaine's consciousness, filling her with criticism and self-doubt. As Elaine's childhood feelings of fragmentation increases, she turns to self-mutilation as a means of grounding herself in reality; the pain of pulling strips of flesh from her feet "was something to hold onto" (**CE** 114).

Being young and vulnerable, Elaine cannot talk to her brother because she thinks he, being male, either would not understand or would laugh at her for being sissy about a bunch of girls, for making a fuss about nothing. And communication with her mother is difficult, for between them there "is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It's filled with wordlessness" (**CE** 98). Trapped in this silent isolation, Elaine naturally begins to look for methods of escape such as being sick and staying home from school, imagining that she is invisible, or willing herself to faint: "There's a way out of places you want to leave, but can't. Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it's later. Time has gone on without you" (**CE** 183). The split in her personality reaches its final stage when, after fainting, she actually flees her body. "I'm seeing all this from above, as if I'm in the air, somewhere near the 'Girls' sign over the door, looking down like a bird" (**CE** 152).

Only for a brief period during summer, camping out with her parents, is Elaine able to escape from being judged, from judging herself:

> I've begun to feel not gladness, but relief. My throat is no longer tight. I've stopped clenching my teeth, the skin on my feet has begun to grow back, my fingers have healed partially. I can walk without seeing how I look from the back, talk without hearing the way I sound. I go for long periods without saying anything at all. I can be free of words now, I can lapse back into wordlessness, I can sink back into the rhythm of transience as if into bed (**CE** 153).

But Elaine knows that this is only a temporary escape. That night, she dreams of her special marble, the one she calls 'Cat's Eye', as a sun or planet falling from the sky into her sleeping body, and making her cold – a dream which suggests that unconsciously she is maturing, acquiring new strength.

In the school years that follow her childhood, the torment increases; she holds on to the marble as though it were a magic third eye with an 'impartial gaze' that allows her to retreat back into her eyes. The marble enables her to hold on to the core of herself and to cast a cold eye on her tormentors. She attributes a protective power to the cat's eye:

> Cordelia doesn't know what power this cat's eye has, to protect me. Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees me. I can see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouth opening and closing but no real words coming out. I can look at their shapes and

> sizes, their colours, without feeling anything else about them. I am alive in my eyes only (**CE** 151).

Gaining Power:

Possessing this other eye enables Elaine to see Cordelia, Grace and Carol the way she imagines it sees them, and also to block out their tainting voices, for the cat's eye sees but does not hear. She reduces the girls to shapes and gestures that seem less threatening. Doing so, she begins to adopt the powerful, imaginative vision of an artist. Cordelia and the cat's eye marble are inextricably involved in Elaine's psychological, moral and artistic growth. Cordelia is Elaine's inner demon, an embodiment of all her self doubts. The marble is the inner energy source which protects her and urges her to more acute vision.

The transformation of the marble from child's toy, to talisman, the symbol of radiant art, parallels Elaine's own transformations as she grows up and learns how to evade victimization. A transparent crystal with a flower-like shape of opaque blue inside, the luminous cat's eye marble hints at possibilities of vision, energy and beauty – an instrument to capture the light. Inside it, Elaine says at one point, "I can see my life entire" (**CE** 378).

When the situation reaches a crisis in the freezing river in the ravine, Elaine has already gathered the strength to pull herself out and go on living, although she imagines that she is saved by a vision of the black virgin floating above the bridge. She had been praying to the Virgin Mary instead of to God in Sunday school, but language, as always, had been an impediment: "I know who it is that I've seen. It's

the Virgin Mary, there can be no doubt" (**CE** 204). From this point on, Cordelia and the other girls no longer affect Elaine : "It's as if I can see right into them" (**CE** 206).

As an Artist:

The first half of Cat's Eye builds suspensefully to that moment when Elaine turns her back on Cordelia. The second half of the novel covers Elaine's life up to the present, a life that she herself views as the aftermath of her ordeal with Cordelia. Her bitter experience prepares the adult Elaine to extricate herself from an absurdly constraining and pseudo-romantic affair with her art teacher, Josef. It also gives her strength to walk away from her unsuitable and exhausting first marriage to the irresponsible artist, Jon, although not until after she has theatrically attempted suicide, with a knife, with the internal voice of Cordelia urging her on. The only relationship in her adult life which is not tainted by the victor-victim struggle is her peaceful second marriage to Ben.

Elaine's adult life centres upon her art. She necessarily turns those events which were most wounding in her life into works of art. Elaine's paintings are sites where she can freely express her imaginative vision and where she attains the boundless visual powers embodied by her cat's eye to reduce people to shapes on her canvas. She asserts aesthetic control over the subjects she paints, the people in her life, such as Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia who have asserted control over her.

Insights:

Malice and the desire to regain control may have been the original impetus behind these paintings, but at her retrospective exhibition Elaine suddenly sees more

in them. “These pictures are not only mockery, not only discretion. I put light into them too” (**CE** 427). This light reveals different things to her now that she is older. As a child, Elaine fears Mrs. Smeath’s scrutinizing ‘evil eye’ (**CE** 194), but now when she looks at her eyes she sees that “they are also defeated eyes, uncertain and melancholic, heavy with unloved duty”(**CE** 427). These are the same eyes that she initially painted out of a desire for vengeance but the light they give affects Elaine differently now that she is older, or rather, now that she had gained solidarity.

Since childhood, Elaine has felt excluded from religion, and her experiences with feminists remind her of those feelings. She has also long mistrusted members of her own sex due to the torments inflicted upon her by Cordelia. Furthermore, she has always had difficulty communicating with other women due to women’s limited access to language. So, she realizes, did Cordelia. This suddenly becomes clear when she revisits the bridge, under which she almost died as a result of Cordelia’s games. Once again Elaine feels

> […]. the same shame, the sick feeling in my body, the knowledge of my own wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; the same wish to be loved; the same loneliness; the same fear. But these are not my own emotions any more. They are Cordelia’s, as they always were (**CE** 239).

She laments the friendship she will never share with Cordelia.

Elaine regrets not having tried to understand Mrs. Smeath’s frustration over being trapped in small town ‘threadbare decency’. She could have gone for ‘justice’ in

her portrayal; “Instead I went for vengeance”, she admits. Elaine realizes that Mrs. Smeath was as much a victim of patriarchal ideology as she herself was.

Cat’s Eye depicts how the young Elaine was moulded into surviving calamities of childhood oppression by her other friends. It is a critique of the popular ‘Good Little Girl Image’. The media symbol of innocence and goodness is a pretty little girl. In Cat’s Eye, Atwood sets out to explore the darker side of this popular image. She believes that the ‘Best Friend’s Motif’ which is an offshoot of the ‘Good Little Girl Image’ is largely a myth, for “little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another, they are not cute. They are life-sized” (**CE** 125). By showing little girls as mean to one another, Atwood explodes the myth of childhood innocence, as emphatically as Golding does in his novel Lord of the Flies. All three girls ape the models they have in mind and constantly attempt to belittle each other.

Elaine is unprepared when games of jump rope, ball and marbles yield to a far crueler game of psychological sadism in which Cordelia and the two others systematically dominate and brutalize her for a period of almost two years. Elaine first saves the cat’s eye marble, so like and unlike an eye in its crystalline transparency, because it seems beautiful and mysteriously alien, perhaps the first object she has ever looked at aesthetically. The marble’s purity and its gelid look suggest to her the power of disembodiment of resisting torment by seeing without feeling, a way of freezing out those who have frozen her out.

Imaginative vision is the only means that Elaine has as a child of resisting Cordelia and the other girls because she cannot speak about their cruelties to anyone.

Her silence is indicative of the barriers that reside within women's language, which are not conducive to communication. Dreaming is another form of escape from time, and one night she dreams that her cat's eye actually enters her:

> I dream that my blue cat's eye is shining in the sky like the sun, or like the pictures of planets in our book on the solar system. But instead of being warm, it's cold. It starts to move nearer, but is doesn't get any bigger. It's falling down out of the sky, straight toward my head, brilliant and glassy. It hits me, passes right into me, but without hurting, except that it's cold (**CE** 155).

Instead of trying to become invisible or faint, both of which activities involve escaping the constraints of time and entering another space-time or a different dimension, Elaine dreams that her cat's eye is now inside her. It is as if she literally incorporates into herself the cat's eye's visual powers in order to strengthen her own imaginative vision. In fact, Elaine's dream affirms that her imaginative vision will be her means of controlling the people and objects that obstruct her.

Moreover, when Cordelia, Grace and Carol leave Elaine alone in the ravine, her imaginative vision actually saves her from freezing to death. Lying under the bridge, she envisions the Virgin Mary floating down through the air towards her from the bridge, helping her to get up and go home. She had been praying to the Virgin Mary instead of to God in Sunday school, but language, as always, had been an impediment: "I don't know what to say. I haven't learned the words for her" (**CE** 197). But after this vision, Elaine's belief in Virgin Mother is confirmed: "I know

who it is that I've seen. It's the Virgin Mary, there can be no doubt" (**CE** 204). From this point on, Cordelia and the other girls no longer affect Elaine: "Its as if I can see right into them". And she deflects their cruel words: "I hardly hear them any more because I hardly listen" (**CE** 208). Now, that she has achieved individuality through her imaginative vision, she only needs to express it to be a dissident woman artist.

Schoolyard Victimization:

Cat's Eye has been justly praised for its faithful re-creation of the sights, sounds, smells and tactile sensations of a childhood in Toronto in the 1940's and 1950's and for its dramatic portrayal of the schoolyard victimization of young Elaine Risley. But critics like Judith Thusrman, who thinks that Cat's Eye should have ended "on page 206," at the moment when Elaine turns her back on her chief tormentor, Cordelia, and walks away, disregard the fact that Elaine's seemingly self-contained narrative of her early triumph over victimization bears a causal relationship to "a larger confessional narrative which ratifies her career as an artist".[8] There is a direct line of cause and effect between Elaine's experience of cruelty at the hands of Cordelia and her career as an artist who is driven to arrest, transfix and freeze the people and scenes of her life that have given the most pain.

Cat's Eye and King Lear:

During a graduate seminar at which Atwood was invited to discuss her work, she commented that Cat's Eye held more pertinent parallels with Macbeth than it did with King Lear, the play containing Cordelia's name - sake. This comment and "the reluctance Atwood displayed in discussing specific aspects of her work are not

surprising". [9] Throughout her career, Atwood has expressed the belief that interpretation is the work of students and critics, not of authors. Despite Atwood's denial of links between Cat's Eye and Lear, an examination of the character of Cordelia reveals strong parallels between Cordelia's role in Lear, and the role Atwood's Cordelia plays, both in her own family, and as a twin sister or mirror image for Elaine. Perhaps, the most interesting parallel to emerge from such an examination is that Cordelia embodies a "primary and dialectical theme"[10] in both Cat's Eye and King Lear: the theme of nothingness.

Atwood realizes the strength that the allusion holds for the reader when presenting Cordelia as a character. Through Elaine, Atwood reflects on the origins of Cordelia's name and her positioning in the family: "Cordelia says they're (her own name and those of her sisters) out of Shakespeare. She seems proud of this, as though it's something we should all recognize" (**CE** 73). Indeed, in this initial description of Cordelia, Atwood clearly challenges the reader to recognize the name, because Cordelia will act not only as a character within the narrative but also as a presence outside the story, "a symbol of the abjection" or sense of nothingness each reader experiences.

At the beginning of Cat's Eye, having mentioned Cordelia's name, Elaine remarks: "But which Cordelia? The one I have conjured up […] or the one before or the one after? There is never only one, of anyone (**CE** 6). Later in the novel, Elaine, meditating on the name 'Cordelia', wonders , "Why did they name her that? Hang that weight around her neck? Heart of the moon, jewel of the sea […]. The third sister, the

only honest one" (**CE** 263). Discussing her anxiety about encountering Cordelia at an art exhibition, Elaine remarks : "I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places" (**CE** 243).

The sense that Cordelia and Elaine are changing places emerges early in Cat's Eye. At the beginning of Cat's Eye, it is Elaine who answers "Nothing" to Cordelia's question : "What do you have to say for yourself?" (**CE** 41). The parallels between King Lear's daughter Cordelia and Elaine Risley's friend, Cordelia, again become disrupted when Elaine responds to Cordelia's "What do you think of me?" with "Nothing much" (**CE** 254). Thus, it is only towards the end of her stay in the city that Elaine understands that Cordelia is her doppelganger and that they are "like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (**CE** 411).

Creativity in Elaine:

To comprehend the growth and development of Elaine Risley's vision as a feminist painter, it is necessary to evaluate her background. Elaine is a painter by instinct; as such she was interested in painting since her childhood. As a child, Elaine draws in her school workbook girls "in old-fashioned clothing, with long skirts, pinafores and puffed sleeves, with big hair bows on their head" (**CE** 30-31). Thus, the workbook has an exotic appeal for Elaine. Further, she uses 'silver paper' of cigarette packages to draw figures of women as a childhood hobby. She likes the pictures in Eaton's Catalogue. She cuts the small coloured figures of women, cookware, furniture, out of the book and pastes them in her scrap book. She plays the scrapbooks

game with her brother, Stephen, and friends: Grace, Carol and Cordelia. Thus, she presents her "innocent vision of a child".[11]

Elaine also cuts out pictures of women from the magazines, 'Good House Keeping', 'The Ladies Home Journal', 'Chatelaine', and pastes them into her scrapbook. These pictures show the unenviable occupations a woman is conventionally associated with such as gossiping, knitting etc. She sums up sarcastically the whole business of their knittings thus: "Walking, riding, standing, sitting, where she goes, there goes her knitting" (**CE** 147). Elaine cuts out all these ordinary women, "with their forehead wrinkles" (**CE** 148) who play traditional feminine roles. She fixes them into her scrapbook to show how worried they are in discharging the duties assigned to them by patriarchal society.

Elaine's metamorphosis from a child in a fairytale world into an adult in a real world adulthood affects "not only her vision and the self but conceptions of time and art".[12] This 'backseat' vision begins to change as she acquires a camera. Photography also becomes one of her hobbies. She takes snapshots of women with her camera and pastes them into her album. Playing marbles with her brother is also a favourite pastime of Elaine. Blue Cat's eyes are her favourite marbles.

> The cat's eyes are my favourties. If I win a new one I wait until I'm myself, then take it out and examine it, turning it over and over in the light. The cat's eyes, really are like eyes, but not the eyes of cats. They're the eyes of something that isn't known but exists anyway; like

the green eye of the radio; like the eyes of aliens from a distant planet (**CE** 67).

Fortunately, Elaine is raised by parents who are unconventional. She is influenced by her father who is first an entomologist, and then a university Professor of Zoology. Occassionally, she has watched his students draw insects. She judges the drawings better or worse, depending on the colours used. She is fascinated by colours. Her interest in minute details later gives her a penetrating vision into things. She learns about insect infestations and acquires an interest in cross-section drawings, in which organisms are "cut open so you can see what's inside them" (**CE** 37). Thus, she develops microscopic vision.

Elaine also bears the stamp of her brother's artistic talent. Stephen aids Elaine in developing her mental perception and vision of painting by means of his drawings of dimensional universes. He says : "We're limited by our own sensory equipment. How do you think a fly sees the world?" (**CE** 232). Stephen's scientific enthusiasms, in significant ways, shape Elaine's imagination, so that her paintings and his theories come to occupy the same area of speculation on the mysterious laws which govern the universe.

His discourse on theoretical physics provides the conceptual frame work for her paintings, for Elaine is "painting time".[13] He teaches her how time and space go hand in hand in the universe. He says : "Time is dimension. You can't separate it from space. Space-time is what we live in" (**CE** 232). In her discussion of Cat's Eye at the National Theatre, London, in April 1989, Atwood admitted : 'The thing I sweated

over in that novel was time, for Elaine's story covers a period of nearly fifty years from the early 1940's to the late 1980's. This is a 'space-time' novel".[14] It is her brother's concept of 'space - time' which Elaine later adapts to painting.

Elaine discovers through her brother a way to explore the freedom of imagination beyond the constraints of time. As Sharpe says:

> Elaine unwittingly participates in this process when she embraces her brother's ideas about space-time and combines them with the symbolization of her private experiences in her paintings. She asserts no feminist political strategy, however, and claims simply to paint what she sees. But combination of science with private symbolization in her paintings challenges the language and conventions of linear time and challenges the limits placed upon women's communication. Elaine's paintings bridge the gaps between herself and other women; they communicate visually instead of verbally by depicting the objects and symbols of her own world or space-time.[15]

His letters, written when he was a summer camp instructor, empower her to paint women inspired by dream and memory. He also teaches her how to see in the dark and to move her feet slowly balancing on one foot. This learning further helps her have 'cat's eye' to look into the problems of women. She literally incorporates the cat's eye's visual powers along with what Stephen tells her about light and the solar system in order to strengthen her own imaginative vision. Elaine's association with

her brother encourages her to develop her talent for painting. Thus, her family environment forms the background to her career of free-lance painting.

Transformations:

The theme of transformation for survival is as dominant a motif in Cat's Eye as it is in Atwood's other novels, Lady Oracle and Surfacing. Atwood is greatly fascinated by transformations. During an interview with Linda Sandler Atwood says that her interest in changes from one state to another which began in early childhood has found its way into most of her verse and fiction. [16] The transformations in Cat's Eye are basically of two kinds. Those of the first kind are willed by the characters and are seen as necessary to help them fit in with the members of various groups while transformations of the second kind occur contrary to the character's wishes and are beyond their conscious control.

Among transformations of the first kind are the changes in Elaine's parents' appearances on account of the change in her father's job from being a forest insect researcher in the country, to being a University Professor in Toronto. Elaine and her brother, Stephen, have been used to seeing their father in windbreakers, battered grey felt hats, flannel shirts with the cuffs tightly buttoned to prevent the black flies from crawling up his arms, heavy pants tucked into the tops of woolen work socks and leather shoes water proofed with bacon grease. Except for the hats, their mother's clothes are similar. However, once they move to Toronto, her father wears jackets, ties, white shirts, tweed coats and galoshes that buckle on over his shoes. Their mother too looks entirely different in dresses and skirts. Used to seeing her only in

slacks, Elaine and Stephen are surprised to see her legs 'appear' sheathed in nylons. Unlike her country self, she wears lipstick on her mouth and wears a fur-collared coat and a hat. Elaine suggests that these city clothes are disguises or social masks which are totally unnatural to her parents for, the minute they are away from Toronto, they 'shed' their city clothes and turn back into themselves.

Elaine too transforms her life. While taking her final grade exams Elaine gets a flash - like thought that she will be an artist rather than a biologist.

> In the middle of the Botany examination it comes to me, like a sudden epileptic fit, that I'm not going to be a biologist, as I have thought. I am going to be a painter. I look at the page, where the life cycle of the mushroom from spore to fruiting body is taking shape, and I know this with absolute certainty. My life has been changed, soundlessly, instantaneously (**CE** 271).

From this moment on, Elaine nurtures her ambition to be a painter. Why is the protagonist very particular about being called 'painter' rather than 'artist;' a term which has social respectability? For Elaine, 'artist' is an "overblown, pretentious, theoretical" (**CE** 15) person who neglects the labour and the pain of creativity of painter. She juxtaposes these two activities: "The word artist embarrasses me; I prefer painter; because it is a tardy, lazy sort of thing to be" (**CE** 15).

According to Elaine, the artist leaves so much of a burden on the painter. To Elaine the painter is like a proletarian. Therefore, she chooses the profession of painting even though her parents are opposed to it because it is difficult to earn a

living by it: “Art was not something that could be depended on though alright for a hobby like shellwork or wood carving” (**CE** 289). Instead of the precise diagrams of botanical illustration, Elaine transforms “the master discourse of science [...] through another medium or another mode of figuration”[17] and creates surrealistic painting of women. The surrealistic quality of Elaine’s imagination makes her an ‘amateur painter’.

Apart from transforming her art, Elaine transforms her appearance too, to suit the situation or group that she finds herself in. At the Art and Archaeology Survey course, Elaine says that she tries to ‘blend in’ by wearing cashmere twin sets, camel’s hair coats, good tweed skirts and pearl button carriages like the others in her class. At the Life Drawing class she changes to black turtle- neck tops and jeans in order to show her allegiance to the group. Wishing to affect a further transformation in her appearance, her art teacher and lover, Josef Hrbik, ‘rearranges’ her to suit her fancy. He talks Elaine into leaving her hair loose and wearing a purple dress with a right bodice, a plunging neckline and a full skirt like a woman in Pre- Raphaelite paintings. When looking for a job, Elaine takes on yet another role and dresses to look distinguished in beige wool suit, medium – heels pumps to match, pearl button ear-rings, a tasteful silk scarf and hair done neatly in a French roll.

While these transformations appear innocent despite the alienation from the true self that they hint at, some others have a more sinister edge to them as they are well beyond the control of the individuals involved in them. Among such transformations, the most disturbing are the changes in physical appearance with

advancing age. Having reached "that borderline age, that buffer zone" (**CE** 6), Elaine lives in constant fear of looking like "an old biddy" (**CE** 19) and of falling prey to some kind of eccentricity or madness. Seeing the numerous young androgens along the side walks and the young waitress at the Four- D's Diner, Elaine feels 'outmoded' and miserable.

The Barbara Ann Scott doll which Elaine gets as a Christmas present when she is nine years old, reveals her society's worship of youthful appearance. Well in tune with her society's obsession with youth, Elaine too wants to believe in rejuvenating creams and transparent inguents and says that she would do anything to "stop the drip drip of time" (**CE** 113) and "mummify" herself in her present condition.

Soon, Elaine realizes that the past is inescapable, for beneath the superficial changes, one remains essentially the same and the present is only an echo of the past. Though outwardly one may appear changed, one does not, in fact, change, develop or grow. The universe may become more elaborate, but one does not necessarily become essentially different.

Elaine's preference in men changes from stumbling teenage boys to brooding Byronic types, and finally to her husband Ben, whose reassuring strength seems to epitomize the traditional male stereotype. Men always seem, however, peripheral to the real issues of Elaine's life. Her art teacher, Josef, is a walking catalogue of patriarchal myths of femininity; he feels women should live for him only (**CE** 305), and has an objectifying, Pre- Raphaelite vision of women as "helpless flowers, or

shapes to be arranged and contemplated" (**CE** 318). He is a demon - lover of the Heathcliff variety, and though Elaine is initially attracted by his mystery, she comes to see through "his secrecy and his almost - empty rooms, and his baleful memories and bad dreams" (**CE** 297).

In their relationship, Elaine and Jon constantly change from victim to bully positions. Elaine honestly admits that Jon and she are the survivors of each other. "We have been shark to each other, but also life boat". Jon desires to foist upon Elaine his own image of femininity and refuses to see and value her as an individual. Pretending to depend on her completely, he tells her that she should remain untouched by others and that Canada should remain untouched by heroes. He sees her as his 'country', his property and tells her that in most countries except Canada "a woman belongs to a man" (**CE** 316).

As an artist, Jon reminds us of the concrete artist, the Royal Porcupine, in Lady Oracle. Jon begins by painting frenzied loops and swirls "in violent eye-burning acrylics, reds and pinks and purples" (**CE** 317). He regards his non-representational art as "pure painting" and says that they are " a moment of process, trapped on canvas". A short while later when he moves on to doing pictures in which all the shapes are either straight lines or perfect circles, he dismisses his earlier style as "too romantic, too emotional, too sloppy, too sentimental" (**CE** 325). His new paintings which hurt the eyes, are given names like "Enigma: Blue and Red," "Variation: Black and white" and "Opus 36" (**CE** 345). A few years later, he paints pictures that look like commercial illustrations and supports them by talking about "

the necessity of using common cultural sign systems to reflect the iconic banality of our times" (**CE** 335). Finally, he stops painting on canvas altogether and makes constructions dismissing flat surfaces with paint on them as "art-on-the-wall" (**CE** 342).

Feeling that only his art forms are trendy and relevant, Jon, in the manner of a full-blown male chauvinist, makes Elaine feel that her art is "irrelevant" (**CE** 345). His attitude makes her keep her own artistic attempts clandestine and see her work as inferior and insignificant as is evident from her words: "the present tense is moving forward, discarding concept after concept, and I am off to the side somewhere fiddling with egg tampers and flat surfaces as if the twentieth century has never happened" (**CE** 345). However, time proves Elaine to be the more successful artist. This is because Elaine's surrealistic art reflects her private vision whereas Jon's art is both superficial and inauthentic. Through the character of Jon, Atwood hits out at fake artists who try to pass off their worthless creations as avante- garde art.

During her present visit to Toronto, however, she regards him with fondness, feels amazed at "all those explosions, that recklessness, that technicolour wreckage" (**CE** 265) they caused, and leaves Toronto having forgiven him whole heartedly. Unlike Josef and Jon who regard women as "helpless flowers, or shapes to be arranged and contemplated" (**CE** 318), Ben refrains from such categorizing. Josef and Jon are to be largely blamed for having wrecked their relationship with Elaine. But Ben refrains from such categorizing of women. He does not cherish popular images of womanhood, accepts Elaine as she is, and respects her decisions.

Elaine's adult life centres upon her art, about which she refuses to theorize, even privately; for all her retrospection, Elaine is not introspective. In contrast to the career of Jon, who slavishly follows every trend from abstract expressionism 'to op art to pop art', and ends up doing special effects for chain-saw-massacre films. Elaine follows the more difficult path of painstakingly crafting her own style. The first significant stage in her artisitic development occurs in college when, after all the art history and life -drawing classes, she becomes fascinated with painting reflective surfaces, "pearls, crystals, mirrors" and such domestic items "as ginger-ale bottles, ice cubes, and frying pans" (**CE** 347).

Turning away from impasto or even the use of textured brush strokes in favour of pure colour and reflectivity, Elaine teaches herself the ancient art of mixing tempers, colours suspended in a water and egg emulsion. It is evident that the vision of the cat's eye marble, the 'kernal of glasses, has been absorbed into a painter's eye which leads her to depict "objects that breathe out light" (**CE** 346). This is the first stage in Elaine's artistic growth, the rejection of 'viscous', textured, self-expressive art in favour of a highly skilled and optically precise art of painting the light as it strikes the world. The next and more difficult task is to bring the vision of a world of radiance to bear upon her own emotions and memories. Her rejection of impasto, indeed of any textured brush strokes that betray the artist's hand, leads to a cold, dispassionate presentation of subject matter drenched in passions, her own most memorable moments of being.

And yet, Elaine becomes fascinated with Van Eyek's well-known painting, 'The Arnolfine Marriage', not so much for its pellucid rendering of the wedding couple as for the framed convex mirror in the background, which reflects the figures of two people who exist in a different world outside the picture. "This round mirror," she thinks, "is like an eye". A surrogate eye fascinates her because it shows the outside of the painting's inside, peeling back its reality and revealing the figure of the artist. "By trickery, the artist is both conceded and revealed. For Elaine, I believe, that mirror, which, art historians tell us, symbolizes the spotlessness of the virgin, externalizes the artist's vision, the eye and the age, cleansed and made spotless by the will of the artist".[18]

Painting from memory rather than from life means that all of Elaine's art is extremely personal, even when it seems objective; moreover, the unconscious has already played a role in selecting and shaping the images that offer themselves to the artist. And the very events which make art a necessary means of expression for Elaine are also the subjects of her art. As the novel begins, Elaine sees herself in the middle of life's journey, like Dante on his pilgrimage, a position she images as "the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge" (**CE** 14). The bridge is a literal one; it crosses a river in a ravine in Toronto, the scene of Elaine's most extreme duress, when she nearly freezes to death, following a command of Cordelia. Cordelia and the cat's eye marble which Elaine uses as a talisman against her are inextricably involved in Elaine's psychological, moral and artistic growth. And both Cordelia and the marble symbol are internalized - Cordelia as Elaine's inner demon, embodiment of all her self-

doubts, and the marble as the inner energy source which protects her and urges her to more acute vision.

Art bearing witness to Life:

Elaine's art bears witness to aspects of her life she cannot otherwise express. In 'Picoseconds' for example, Elaine paints a landscape depicting her parents picnicking above an iconic band of old gas pump logos, emblems of their traveling days. The parents are painted tiny. These are parents who have twice abandoned her, most obviously by dying – she cannot bring them back for a trillionth of a second – and less obviously by her father's obliviousness and her mother's mute bafflement in the face of Elaine's torment at the hands of her supposed friends in childhood.

More conspicuously, an old searing hatred is made to bear fruit in Elaine's repeated transformations of the detested Mrs.Smeath, mother of her second tormentor, Grace, who, with her dowdy apron, sagging underwear, and rubber plant represents middle-class Canadian Protestant hypocrisy at it deadliest. It takes a long time for Elaine to exorcise Mrs. Smeath, because unlike Elaine's own sympathetic but ineffectual mother, Mrs. Smeath is a mother figure who openly countenances the other children's cruelty to "heathenish" Elaine. Elaine exorcises Mrs. Smeath by painting her half - undressed in various absurd postures of apothesis appropriate to someone who has a monopoly on God.

At Elaine's retrospective, the last two paintings described in 'Cat's Eye' and 'Unified Field Theory' allude to their own making and contain the artist's presence through the images of the mirror and the cat's eye marble. Both paintings refer to the

crisis at the ravine, and both represent objects suspended against the sky without visible support, suggesting a precariousness, an uneasy balance. 'Cat's Eye' depicts not the marble but the convex mirror, ornately framed and hung against a blue field. Facing forward in front of the mirror is the upper half of Elaine's middle - aged wrinkled face, while the convex mirror shows the back of her head at a younger age, and beyond it, the reflection of her three childhood tormentors advancing through the snow. This painting is ambiguous. It may be read as witnessing a triumph ; since Elaine's back is turned to the image of the girls, she may be said to have put the childhood crisis behind her by capturing it in her art. On the other hand, the mirror reflection in the painting indicates that the tormentors are actually in front of her, a forever - approaching reminder of their false friendship and her lonely pain.

Elaine's paintings defy linear time by interweaving the symbolic with the ordinary. For example, in her painting 'Our Lady of Perpetual Help', she depicts the Christian symbol of woman as mother, the Virgin Mary among the objects that pertain to her world as a wife and mother. And she paints her with the head of a lioness because

> it seems to me more accurate about motherhood than the old bloodless milk-and-water Virgins of art history. My Virgin Mary is fierce, alert to danger, wild […]. I paint the Virgin Mary descending to the earth, which is covered with snow and slush. She is wearing a winter coat over her blue robe, and has a purse slung over her shoulder. She's carrying two brown paper bags full of groceries. Several things have

> fallen from the bags; an egg, an onion, an apple. She looks tired (**CE** 365).

Not only does Elaine debunk the traditional representation of the Virgin Mary as the eternal woman in this painting, but also summon her help. Elaine's symbolization of the Virgin Mary is actually relevant to her experience, unlike the symbolization of Christian iconography, for she paints 'Our Lady of Perpetual Help' when she is feeling stifled within her first marriage and is looking for ways to escape, just as she did as a child-only this time she attempts the ultimate escape; suicide. Her vision of the Virgin Mary saved her then, and the painting seems to be the reconstruction of that initial vision, and another invocation for help.

Elaine asserts aesthetic control over the subjects she paints, the people in her life, such as Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia, who have asserted control over her. Elaine paints Mrs. Smeath repeatedly: "Mrs. Smeath sitting, standing, lying down with her holy rubber plant, flying, Mrs. Smeath unwrapped from white tissue paper, layer by layer, Mrs. Smeath bigger than life, bigger than she ever was. Blotting out God" (**CE** 426). Elaine gives shape to the hate she feels as a child for this woman. She paints her with an "imagined body, white as a burdock root, flabby as pork fat. Hairy as the inside of an ear" (**CE** 426).

Thus, behind the painting there is the real story, lived by Elaine, that makes up the novel Cat's Eye. Each chapter even bears the title of one of her paintings. Yet, there is a discrepancy between the story behind her works and the official feminist meaning ordained by Jody and Charna, the two feminists in the novel. Looking at

Mrs. Smeath, Jody declares: "It's woman as anticheesecake. It's good to see the aging female body treated with compassion" (**CE** 368). Yet, Elaine's rendition was hardly painted out of compassion. Still, if their history is not taken into consideration, her paintings do seem to sustain Jody and Charna's interpretations. Then, in spite of herself, Elaine finds that her paintings provide her with the recognition and acceptance of other women.

Collectively, on the night of the retrospective, the paintings form the shape of Elaine's life, the "series of liquid transparencies" into which she looks and sees her past. The flashbacks to the past finally meet the present in the narrative entitled "Unified Field Theory", in which we understand that 'Cat's Eye' is like the Universe; it is expanding. Thus, Elaine who remains a dissident throughout her life, finally obtains the property she needs and understands the need for female friendship, solidarity.

A Woman Artist:

In the chronicles of art, a woman painter is very rare to come by. The reason for this is not that women have no talent for creative work but that their egos are too badly smothered by the patriarchal order to germinate anything new. Germaine Greer observes thus:

> There is then no female Leonardo, no female Titian, no female Poussin, but the reason does not lie in the fact that women have wombs, that they can have babies, that their brains are smaller, that they lack vigour, that they are not sexual. The reason is simply that you

> cannot make great artists out of egos that have been damaged, with will that are defective, with libidos that have been driven out of reach and energy divided into neurotic channels.[19]

Thus, the history of women artists is the sad story of the damaged and distorted egos. A brief survey of the literature of art up to the twentieth century shows that either the women painters rarely exist or they are virtually ignored despite the widespread awareness about feminist issues in recent times.

Indeed, by making Elaine a painter rather than the usual writer-protagonist, Atwood takes an even harder look than in Lady Oracle at the position of women in a so-called post-feminist society, for women take to writing rather than to the other arts primarily because, as Virginia Woolf suggests in The Death of the Moth, writing materials are cheap, and writing itself is less disruptive of conventional social requirements for women.

Male Prejudice against Woman's Creativity:

Cat's Eye is Atwood's attempt to expose male prejudice against women's creativity and talent and shows how art can be used as a weapon against tyranny in all its manifestations. Thus, the novel is like "an oasis in a desert for those whose creativity is prevented from blooming". [20] What the novel depicts is Elaine's retrospection of her own life from her school days, adolescence and her involvement in the avant-garde art scene, to her present career as a painter.

These paintings depict a fusion of Elaine's conscious self with her personal and collective unconscious and show the way in which potent archetypes function in

our psyches. Elaine's inner journey helps her overcome her alienated existence. By assimilating her shadow and gaining self awareness, she moves to a state of psychic wholeness. By clinging to talismanic objects and by believing in private rather than social myths and images, Elaine avoids victimization and survives spiritually.

Retrospection as Survival:

The very fact that this is a middle-aged woman telling her story from childhood to the present, to the time the protagonist discovers where her selfhood lies, is itself a promise and an indication of feminine and human survival. As Saul Bellow sums it up in Herzog, "But for this higher education, survival is necessary. You must outlive the pain".[21] The title of the novel is an extended metaphor for survival. Just as cat's eyes glow in the dark, Elaine's art glows in her life. From childhood, the cat's eye marble has been a source of security and selfhood for her. As Elaine flies back to Vancouver at the end of the Retrospective, victorious over the new Toronto, sure of her survival in a world that will always be hostile, she looks out of the plane window and sees the stars in the night sky glowing like the cat's eye, "[…] shining out of the midst of nothing. It's old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by" (**CE** 446) – a summing up of the meaning of Atwood's portrait of the artist as a woman and a survivor.

Chapter VII

Summing Up

When Margaret Atwood published her first novel in 1969, she had a ready audience in Canada because of her strong reputation as a young poetess. Her fiction was to give her a popular international readership during the next decade chiefly because of her wry feminine perspective on contemporary domestic life. This does not mean that she is particularly a feminist writer. An overview of the five novels discussed here shows that she is a more broadly based novelist, an ironist who examines many facets of victimization and the possible ways of survival.

The study confines itself to the exploration of five novels for it is only in her novels that she has presented her survival theme elaborately. The wide fictional canvas has given her ample scope to view the existing reality from different angles not only to present its multidimensionality, but also to project a unified vision. While Atwood's non-fiction (Survival, Second Words and Conversations) form the

theoretical frame work of the theme of survival, her fiction is the illustration of her ideas.

In Atwood's fiction, from Marian to Elaine, women undergo a slow transformation. The mutation extends from being naïve and ignorant about the world's motive and outlook, to awakening to the realization that it is time for them to be on guard, to be alert so as not to fall a prey to the victimization of the oppressive.

Thus The Edible Woman is a comic-satiric commentary on modern day consumerism as it traces a few months in the life of Marian McAlphin who suffers peculiar consequences to an unsuitable engagement. Lady Oracle traces the multiple life of Joan Foster, once an ungainly fat girl, now the secret author of costume gothic and a glamorous over-night sensation as a poet. Bodily Harm explores the traumatic aftermath of a mastectomy. It also traces in small and large ways masculine aggression, atrocity and terror. In The Handmaid's Tale Atwood examines some of the traditional attitudes embedded in the thinking of the religious right, which she finds particularly threatening. Cat's Eye offers an alternative art history which foregrounds women's achievement as artists. It is like an oasis in a desert for those whose creativity is prevented from blooming. Thus, each novel explores a conventional aspect of young adult experience in somewhat unconventional terms. Each novel incorporates women and their battles for certain roles in society.

Surviving Consumerism:

Atwood's first novel, The Edible Woman, is perhaps still her most entertaining work even though she fails to give her central character the same novelistic substance of the

next protagonists discussed in the earlier chapters. Marian's increasing personal difficulties are heavily counter pointed with the defection of friends and acquaintances, who are the caricatures of Atwood's consumer - conditioned society.

Marian's job as a questionnaire editor at Seymour Surveys provides a wide range of bemused commentary on the inner working of professional consumerism. "Her association with Peter provides an increasingly biting view of the young professional set on the rise".[1] She consistently identifies him with advertising images of the anonymous well-dressed young bachelor and she thinks of his friends collectively as "the soap-men" (although only one of them actually works for a soap company). Her encounter with a curious young man, Duncan, introduces her to the eccentricities of English graduate student life with its own special forms of intellectual "production- consumption".

Most pervasive in the novel is the woman's world, conveyed through witty sketches, "some mere sustained than others, counterpoising Marian's character and circumstances".[2] There are the wistful 'office virgins' at Seymour's, Lucy, Emmy and Millie, each in her own way desperately anxious "to emulate Marian's good luck at landing Peter".[3] There is Clara Bates who married young, now palely enduring her third pregnancy, and whose chief conversation is the alimentary habits of her offspring. But most dramatic of all there is Ainsley Twekes, Marian's apartment-mate, currently a tooth-brush tester, who is determined to manipulate some unsuspecting male into fathering her child. Ainsley succeeds by the coy seduction of Marian's womanizing college friend Len, only to learn that all children need the male

model of fatherhood as well. These portraits and their related episodes do not so much advance the main action concerning Marian's worsening emotional and physical condition, as thicken the general delineation of the consumerism theme in its particular focus on feminine perceptions of and responses to contemporary middle class expectations.

Over all, The Edible Woman works as well as it does in its comic and ironic effect because of Atwood's gift for aptly witty language through which Marian expresses her responses to the consumer environment. Even her observations on people suggest consumerism in its many facets -exemplifications throughout the novel. For example, Ainsley, carefully dressed in an innocent girlish fashion in order to trap Len, to Marian demonstrates "the inert patience […] of a pitcher-plant in a swamp with its hollow bulbous leaves half-filled with water, waiting for some insect to be attracted, drowned, and digested"(**EW** 75). Clara in her seventh month of pregnancy "looked like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon" (**EW** 31). The egocentric Duncan in repose "sat holding the cigarette before him, his hands cupped, like a starved Buddha "burning incense to itself" (**EW** 51).

For Peter is reserved the mixture of synthetic images that reflect the basic confusions of Marian's involvement. He has for her the physical charm and poise of a magazine model that she quite often likes, although even in a casual mood he strikes her as too consciously dressed for the occasion. "Here is the language of the ordinary commercialized techniques familiar to her form her work, might personally affect her, does her peculiar breakdown set in. More and more she thinks of herself as a kind of

commodity in Peter's eye, epitomized by the frivoulous red dress she buys for his party and the hair style from a beauty salon where "they treated your head like a cake; something to be carefully iced and ornamented" [4] – all in a girl who, in Ainsley's observation normally wore her clothes like a camouflage.

Creativity is both the politics and process by which an individual acquires and asserts autonomy. "Creative activity of any kind gives a sense of control over one's own life, validates one's existence and enables one to come out of the situation of victimization and become a non-victim".[5] As a creative non-victim takes shape within her she shapes a cake woman as an image of her former self as a victim – the edible woman for man's consumption. She exorcises all the former victim elements from within her and projects them on to her artistic creation. Addressing the cake-woman, Marian addresses herself : "You look delicious, very appetizing. And that's what will happen to you; That's what you'll get for being food" (**EW** 300). If a woman makes herself consumable, she will be consumed. Thus what might have been a conventional story of self-discovery is instead, the frightening vision of a struggle for survival. Marian's journey is through powerlessness and inaptitude to power and aptitude.

Surviving Duplicity:

While Joan Foster, the heroine of Lady Oracle, suffers and survives versions of the same conflicts and complications of Marian of The Edible Woman she is presented in a less studied and decidedly more extravagant manner. Essentially Atwood is here indulging in an amusing expansion of her previous fictional motif of

the concentric escape. Joan, who secretly writes escapist costume gothic novels, is herself 'an escape artist' almost by nature and certainly in practice.

Joan's first escape at eighteen is from the clutches of her mother. She runs from her first lover Paul, when she falls in love with Arthur, who later becomes her husband. She runs from the Royal Porcupine when he proposes to settle down with her. She runs to Terremato from everyone in her life including Arthur, when her situation finally becomes more than she can bear. "I'd sometimes talked about love and commitment, but the real romance of my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and locked trunk; entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again. What else had I ever done?" (**LO** 335).Her departures are always sudden and her disappearance complete, leaving nothing but a trail of ingenious deceptions behind her.

Joan here is shown to will and create her own traps, her own illusions in love and life. With each escape, she assumes a different name until she becomes multinamed. Joan has recourse to extra - marital affairs. This dramatic choice affects her life. The consequences of these affairs are painful to her. Her names multiply until she is cornered. The central theme of the novel, from here becomes the resolution of these multiple personalities. Joan has to learn to acknowledge the various personalities she has always kept separate. She begins to think of ways and means of improving and reforming her life. Her steps to survival start with her speculations about her mistakes. She decides to be pragmatic and face life head on.

Political Survival:

Rennie Wilford of Bodily Harm is a more mature version of Marian and Joan. Several of the interiorized fears of Marian and Joan are here externalized through plot line in a manner which suggests that Atwood is trying to create a different kind of synthesis of private and public worlds. There is a new concern with questions of public awareness and social responsibility. Personal adjustment, compromise and resignation are no longer sufficient.

Male aggressiveness and violence treated in The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle become a darker matter in Bodily Harm. The fear has explicit, not imagined causes and it is permanent in its scars. In addition, Rennie's fear takes on more than simply a personal meaning in her life. The novel is explicitly a feminist novel in that its subject is violation. Violation of the female by the male becomes a principal metaphor, although not merely as the expression of narrow feminism. Violation is not limited to women victims. Barbara Hill Rigney observes:

> Atwood's point in this story is that we are all somehow guilty of being human and that malignancy is, quite possibly a metaphor for the human condition. Atwood argues […] for a recognition of and a commitment to that human condition, no matter how brutal or absurd.[6]

'Massive involvement' is for Atwood a term which reflects positive action. Thus, Atwood forces her readers to see beneath surfaces, to confront a kind of reality that is revolutionary.

Rennie who had been proud of her liberated and independent existence becomes aware of the still traditional attitude once she steps into the Caribbean. She

realizes that women have not progressed at all, and also that men are basically dangerous: "She's afraid of men ; and its simple, its rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening" (**BH** 290). Women, she finds, be it in Canada or Caribbean in the 1980s are still physically mutilated, as Lora is, just for the pleasure of men. In the Caribbean chopping up or beating one's wife or woman is forgiven, for it is seen as a crime of passion and so pardonable. Rennie is totally disappointed and distraught, her single aim, like the traditional woman, being to save herself.

It becomes obvious that the theme of victimization and survival that are replete in Bodily Harm are not just feministic concerns but that they are also the political issues that determine the survival of their country. As a woman writer, Rennie draws the reader's attention deliberately towards the issues of suffering and survival as conditions of both the Canadian experience and female experience.

Atwood portrays three successive generations and the gap between each generation which reflects the gradual change in Canada. Rennie's grandparents are strict disciplinarians who stick to old values. The relationship between Rennie's mother and father reveals a state of degeneration and the abandoning of old values in favour of the new. Rennie is paralyzed with a kind of fear which threatens her from within and without. Canada's inherited traditions and customs are seen in Griswold where, "the standard aimed at home was not beauty but decency" (**BH** 54). Rennie, a modern woman, drinks and smokes much against her tradition. Her generation reflects Canada under colonialism. Lacking a common racial, religious, linguistic or political heritage, the people of Canada find it difficult to achieve a Canadian unity. Through

Bodily Harm, Atwood reveals that despite these differences, it is a lack of interest and self-confidence, and a lack of patriotism which make the Canadians fail in their endeavour to find a Canadian identity.

Lora, who has resorted to prostitution for her own and Rennie's survival and who has been brutally beaten, directs her: "Tell someone I'm here […]. Tell someone what happened" (**BH** 289). To tell, to report, to bear witness, then, is Rennie's politics of survival. By the end of the novel, Rennie realizes that she is "[…] a subversive. She was not once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report" (**BH** 301). The same necessity, the same indication of political commitment, also validates the experience of the heroine of The Handmaid's Tale.

Surviving Theocracy:

In The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood expands her political view to encompass a world in which both men and women are caught up in the struggle to see "who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death" (**HT** 144). Oppression in all its manifestations, both physical and psychological is Atwood's subject in Bodily Harm and The Handmaid's Tale. Both novels are profoundly political. Both represent the confrontation with power and to universal forms; dictatorship, tyranny, torture and the reality of violence.

To 'pay attention', to look beneath surfaces, to touch and to tell are also imperatives of Offred of The Handmaid's Tale. Not paying attention, in fact, is the great fault of Offred's entire society and the price exacted is the loss of freedom. By remaining uninvolved, by maintaining innocence, the people of a nation have

forfeited human rights and become slaves in the near future society of Gilead, a dystopia dominated by the horrors of theocracy.

What was true for Rennie in her non - involvement, is here true for an entire society:

> There were marches, of course, a lot of women and some men […]. But I didn't go on any of the marches […]. I had to think about them, my family, in him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking (**BH** 189).

Offred and other women have waited too long, have protested too little. They are reflections of Atwood's basic concern that victimization, in a real sense, is at least partly a matter of choice.

There is one heroic woman in The Handmaid's Tale, an equivalent to Lora in Bodily Harm who does rebel. Moira protests repeatedly, escapes periodically, is tortured, but presumably survives. She represents an ideal for Offred. Like Moira, Offred too survives, perhaps not at all in control of her world, but atleast in control of herself, and certainly with the recognition that "political confrontation is not merely a choice, but a human responsibility".[7] Her responsibility is to report, to warn another world. Reporting validates her own existence. It gives her a sense of control over her life. Narrating a story thus becomes an active strategy of survival for oneself and others in a patriarchal universe.

Surviving Childhood Victimization:

Atwood turns from the life of the buried, smothered women to examine the other side of the coin, the woman who has fought her way to freedom as an artist. Elaine Risley in Cat's Eye**,** Atwood's semi-auto biographical novel, can escape the situations that entrap her, like Joan Foster, and like Rennie and Offred she is driven to bear witness to what she knows and feels. Unlike any of the previous narrators, Elaine finds the means to shape her most painful memories into works of art.

Elaine is like Rennie in Bodily Harm in that she feels quite in control of her career and her relations with men. Elaine is thus a feminist in a popular sense of the term . However, she is bewildered by her relations with other women , until she reunites with the central figures in her youth : her mother, her friend Cordelia , and another friend's mother , Mrs.Smeath. Having existed for forty years only as unconscious and profoundly compelling subjects for her art , these women must enter Elaine's conscious memory in the novel's climactic moments. As always in Atwood's fiction, such moments reconnect the central character with her feelings, especially her emotional bond to other women.

As Elaine's mother is dying, Elaine reveals her feelings: "I'm aware of a barrier between us. It's been there for a long time. Something I have resented. I want to put my arms around her. But I am held back" (**CE** 397). Then, at the opening of her show, Elaine admits frankly: " I am swept with longing, I want my mother to be here"(**CE** 351).Soon after that admission, Elaine begins to believe, for the first time since her youthful trauma, that perhaps another woman "really does like me"(**CE**

411). One of the organizers of the Retrospective tells Elaine : "We're all very proud of you" (**CE** 410), and Elaine perhaps begins to believe that.

The malicious, unfeeling aspect of Elaine's personality seems clearly linked to the figure of Mrs.Smeath, and it is this aspect that, ironically enables Elaine to survive her young adulthood and indeed forsters her success as a painter. But its harmful effects are also shown in Elaine's judgemental treatment of her associate Susie, a young woman who becomes pregnant by the lover whom she and Elaine share, their art teacher, Josef. When Elaine answers Susie's desperate call and finds Susie near death as the result of a self-induced abortion, Elaine echoes thoughtlessly the words of Mrs. Smeath once directed at her: "It serves her right" (**CE** 321). Only when Elaine has fully accepted the legacies of the other two powerful figures from her youth, her mother and Cordelia, can she temper the harshness of her attitudes toward other women, attitudes learned through Mrs. Smeath's treatment of her.

Cordelia has "power over" (**CE** 113) Elaine. "This power lies in the wonderfully imaginative quality of Cordelia's girlhood plots, a quality that helps to shape Elaine's own imagination and contributes to Elaine's decision to pursue a career as an artist". [10] She muses in the end upon what she has just been able to acknowledge as lacking in her life. Having finally brought to consciousness the repressed memories of her childhood traumas, she can again feel the full range of her emotions. On the airplane enroute to her Vancouver home after the retrospection, Elaine realizes her loss, looking at the people in the seats next to hers, "this is what I miss, Cordelia" (**CE** 421). Elaine had been successful and in control, but at the

expense of denying her connection with other women. She will revise her views of Mrs. Smeath, her own mother and Cordelia.

The Unheroic Survival of Victimization:

Thus, the dominant theme in Atwood's fiction is survival. Atwood theorizes that the dominant image in Canadian fiction is survival, the unheroic survival of victimization:

> […] the main idea is the first one: hanging on, staying alive. Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed: the aim is not to see whether he will live at all. Our central idea is one which generates, not the excitement and sense of adventure or danger which The Frontier holds out […] but an almost intolerable anxiety. Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience – the North, the snow-storm, the sinking ship – that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of this survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life. [9]

The novels discussed in Chapters II, III, IV, V and VI, however, do provide a series of portraits of women, each of whom achieves an appreciable level of self-realization, despite the psychologically devastating effects of the male supremacist societies in which each protagonist lives and in which women are often victims and lunatics – losers in the war of sexual politics.

Atwood condemns these social systems, both political and private, which deny individual freedom and contribute to psychological fragmentation, alienation and madness.

> Atwood indicates that women in particular suffer from more or less obvious form of schizophrenia, being constantly torn between male society's prescriptions for female behaviour, their own tendencies towards the internalization of these role, and a nostalgia for some lost, more authentic self.[11]

How to prevail as an authentic self against such role prescriptions, how to survive psychologically and assert individuality, is the major consideration of Atwood.

For the female individual to survive, she must recognize or reject not only the social arrangement, but her own participation in these arrangements as well. Atwood's protagonists ultimately achieve such a recognition. Each affirms, at the end, a superior sanity based on personal order and the discovery of at least the potential for an authentic and integrated self. Atwood spells out what is new in her protagonists: "In a novel I'm interested in seeing characters put in position in which they have to make choices. I mean choices that really affect them, not like what they're going to have for breakfast". [12]

According to Atwood, society limits the choices of women, and she prefers to portray women who make clear-cut dramatic choices. What is different about these women is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. "They are constantly engaged in the dialectic of survival".[13] It is essential for them to redefine

the term survival, which is not a mere continuance of life in the same old traditional fashion. It is for them a challenge to better their own personal existence.

The new woman who has been explored in this thesis reveals that she is not the 'ideal' or the 'best' woman. She is new by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society and in exploring her true potential, along with "the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs". [14] The survival theme thus establishes a Canadian woman's voice and vision.

Her new identity would help her to survive patriarchy neither as a victim nor as a victimizer, not even as a victor, but as an equal. Thus Atwood's focus is based on emancipatory practices on creative non-victim positions, on the articulation of alternatives and opposition. Her novels offer less negative visions of female futures from similar pasts, through a mature acceptance of the pain of living and of having lived. Atwood's feminist thought is positively pro-woman and not anti-man. It seeks to offer a life-affirming, survivalist, and human rights approach for placing women on equal footing with their male-counterparts.

Scope for Study :

The available critical materials also show other areas of study that can be attempted in Margret Atwood's fiction. Postmodernism, Ecofeminism, Nature, Images and Metaphors, to name a few. She is a renowned poetess and hence a comprehensive study of her poems can be made. Her short stories are challenging too.

To revert to the novels once again, the tone of Atwood's novels as a whole is, of course, dark. A reader must face the fact that, to a large extent, the tone is

undeniably sombre and negative, and that it is both a reflection and a chosen definition of the national sensibility. That is, the artist takes her colouring from her environment, though she may intensify it by adding a little mark of her own. However, there are elements in her novels, which, although they are rooted in this negativity, transcend it. The characters make a halting but authentic breakthrough from their almost hopelessly trapped environment. The moments of affirmation neither deny the negative ground, nor succumb to it.

"Twentieth century writers have produced more dystopias than utopias".[15] Atwood, true to the spirit of the age and the reality around her portrays a post-traumatic stress disorder, common to so many people in today's society. Nevertheless, these stresses in the life of the women characters in her novels have turned out to be lessons to be learned in order to realize the strength they never knew they had. Their victimization has become their empowering gifts of life. Through the losses of their lives, they have found the honour of their lives and have learned the all important lesson – the first person you need to love is yourself. Margaret Atwood has always believed that the artist is a responsible citizen and not a passive victim. She has based her characters with a formidable drive and determination to survive. This thematic study establishes the thesis that though the protagonists of Atwood experience outward defeats, they gain inward victories.

Notes

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