In the preceding chapters we studied the characters of Margaret Atwood in the light of Horneyan tenets and saw how they suffer from neurosis and how most of them try to get over their trouble. The discussion points out to a significant fact that Margaret Atwood is a great analyst of the human mind and profound interpreter of life. She has presented a myriad of realistic portraits. When we probe her characters' psychology, we see them as human beings with their weaknesses and potentialities. They are caught in the web of their own compulsions. When they are understood psycho-analytically we begin to visualise their ambitions, disappointments and loneliness as real. They reach to their troubles with tragic intensity. Margaret Atwood's rendering of their neurotic behaviour, their interaction and their solutions help us to fathom human nature and to grasp the subjective inner reality intuitively.

Atwood does not create characters independent of social or political issues or realism. She concentrates on the psychological intricacies of the behaviour of her protagonists who while living in society and facing the common problems struggle to find the meaning in life.
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." Her characters also show the concern of the modern man with the external human situation. Her narrative skill with its satiric or ironic content, its spontaneity and freshness indicates her rich creative faculty. Her characters hold the attention of readers when they tell their tales and embody their creator's vision of life.

Atwood's protagonists whether men or women, are living individuals, not case studies. They are interested in life with its hopes and disappointments. Their trouble is that they, at times, take a wrong path and perpetuate their neurosis. The narrator of Surfacing becomes divided self; the narrator of Lady Oracle is the multiple self; Elaine is the fragmented self of her twin self; Rennie suffers from fractured identity and Marian becomes the mirrored self of Peter. These characters are not heroes or heroines devoid of human weaknesses, they are ordinary human beings with normal limitations. The strength of her fiction lies in the mimetic presentation of her experiences.

Atwood's characters are moved by the aesthetic of existence. In studying works of art in the light of Horneyan psychology we do not detach characters from their aesthetic
and thematic patterns. From this point of view a majority of her characters, for example, narrators of *Lady Oracle* and *Surfacing*, Lesje and Rennie-live either in illusions by retreating into fabrications and fantasy or are unwilling to face reality. Then there are characters who compromise with life: Elizabeth and Marian. Although her characters have their conflicts, they manage to transcend their personal problems. Elaine affirms life, she accepts her past and looks forward to future. In Rennie and Elizabeth, there is a resolution to affirm life. Elaine is able to separate life from illusions. Her art liberates her. The growing urge for self-discovery of Atwood's characters shows their growth potential. Marian resolves not to become a consummable commodity but a person who can make choices about her life. The narrator of *Surfacing* endeavours to link herself with past by discovering her father and accepting her complicity in abortion. She displays her resolve and strength to face life. *Lady Oracle's* protagonist though a fantasizer by nature does not give up the human hope of being a good wife to Arthur. She discovers her weaknesses and ultimately her essential nature. Elizabeth is torn when she loses her lover Chris and when her husband leaves her for a younger woman but she discovers her freedom and strength to accept life's responsibility to raise two children "single, alone." Lesje who has been evading reality of the lived present, also
decides to opt for life instead of being co-opted. Her decision to stop using the pills and bear Nate’s child indicates her new-found will to act. Rennie sees life with open eyes in the prison and resolves to be a reporter.

Atwood analyses the inner working of the mind of her characters. She displays the psyche of a woman who has to abort her child against her wishes in Surfacing. In Surfacing and Bodily Harm she probes the essential loneliness of a woman. Elizabeth is alone when Chris commits suicide and her husband Nate leaves her. Marian’s basic problem is how to exist in consumer society and maintain her individuality. Atwood’s primary concern in all her works is not how one gets along with others but with oneself. Elaine’s fears are psychological. She has taken her revenge, she walked on Caroline in her time of need but instead of feeling triumphant, Elaine feels unhappy with her callous self. Atwood presents action through the minds of these people shifting their mental time backward and forward. Virginia Woolf calls it the “tunnelling process” by which she recasts the past.

A scrutiny of Atwood’s art shows that the novelist is growth-oriented though she, in her article on W.D. Valgardson’s fiction, refutes the idea of “growth” and "development" of a writer. She says that "writers are not
"radish" that they can grow. "If you look at what most writers actually do," she says, "it resembles a theme with variations more than it does the popular notion of growth. Writers' universe may become more elaborate, but they donot necessarily become essentially different." The development from her first heroine Marian to her latest creation Elaine is the story of evolution towards self-realization. Some of her characters are independent of spirits. Being dissatisfied with routine world they break away from ordinary life patterns to realise that human ties cannot be substituted. By thus running away from routine of their boring world they seek some kind of fulfilment in their lonely existence and are drawn to their environment to realise that individual freedom must create some kind of relatedness or a new kind of relationship. Rennie who has run away to Caribbean islands reaches out to Lora whom she initially hated. Lesje who seeks fulfilment in a world of dinasours makes a move towards Nate. Elizabeth holds the hands of her dying aunt. They realise that escape, or showing apathy or indifference are not the answers to life. They find meaning in their lives in their relatedness. They respond to human situation naturally rather than reacting neurotically.

The study reveals that Marian, Rennie and Joan Foster are very sensitive and are pitted against their insensitive partners. In case of Lesje, her partner is too sensitive to
hurt anyone, either Lesje or Elizabeth. Then there are Elaine and Elizabeth who are themselves too insensitive to their partners. Under the first category falls Marian, narrator of *Surfacing*, Joan Foster and Rennie. They are compliant. They value love and sex beyond everything in the world. When lover/fiance/husband does not stand up to their expectations, they turn self-destructive in their fits of self-hate. Morbid dependency of Rennie and the narrator of *Surfacing* and the compliance of *Lady Oracle* are the outcome of their social or familial environment. We realise later that their alienation and troubles are not due to disturbances in their relationships but they are the results of their own inner conflicts. There are cases of neurosis: the narrator of *Surfacing*, though she does not drown herself in the lake, Joan Foster fakes suicide, Elizabeth goes temporarily astray. Chris's suicide works havoc on her psyche. The fear of losing Nate's love disturbs her. Lesje's death-wish owes to the failure of self-effacing solution. Joan Foster's self-hate tears her apart. In case of Rennie, the destructive effect of self-alienation is almost neurotic.

Though Atwood's characters appear morbid, they are not insane. We may not term them self-actualizing, but, we cannot disregard their brief moments of self-discovery. Their affirmation gives us hope that they can be spontaneous
in their feelings if they donot oscillate between one neurotic solution to another. We find clarity of perception in Elaine. Her vision acquires authenticity. She finds her lost twin self in Cordelia and achieves self-realisation. Elizabeth has also an affirming faith in life. Lesje shows the same affirmation when she opts for life and is resolved to create. The narrator of *Lady Oracle* and Rennie reveal self-strength and show a tendency to emerge out of her self-alienation, insecurity and anxiety, and opt for life. Joan Foster is ready to nurse the man whom she has hit on nose. Thus, these characters, in the process of individuation, reveal strength and gain a kind of integration and closeness. Elizabeth, Lesje and Rennie compromise with life after recognizing their self. In *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*, the protagonists accept to fight the battle of life. After much agony they recover themselves. The presentation of struggle of such individuals is Atwood’s forte.

Atwood, by portraying a variety of characters, plumbs deep into the secret recesses of the human psyche which eludes comprehension. Except for Nate, her protagonists are women. She understands their mental, moral, aesthetic domains and struggles. The totality of human experience imports a deep perspective to her fiction. Her characters are questers. Marian’s endeavour is to attain humanity and a human identity in a consumer society which literally and
metaphorically traps her. Marian's quest is for a meaningful identity, at socio-political level, her quest is to become neither a man nor a machine but a woman with an absolute as against a relatively defined identity. The narrator of Surfacing is searching her roots, Joan of Lady Oracle is finding out what she has become after multiplying her selves. Elizabeth is trying to seek whether she can become a "good mother" after wrecking matrimony with fangs of infidelity and her neurotic needs. Rennie is probing through Caribbean islands how to get back to life and reporting. Elaine goes to her home town in search of her lost childhood. Some come out successful, others have reached the banks. In projecting life, Atwood has displayed excellent ability of narrative art. It is art-painting in case of Elaine and writing in case of the narrator of Lady Oracle that restore their faith in life. It is life seen in itself in the light of sordidness which intensifies Rennie's wish to explore the outer and physical world. Lesje's fantasizing ends when it clashes with reality. Her comprehension of everyday reality opens her up to the joys of living personal relationships. She and Rennie experience emotional and social wholeness by experiencing a relationship with human life.

Atwood's characters have their psychological compulsions and fears. They go through the hell of self-
condemnation. They run from themselves, some reach the edge. But all of them come out of this alienation. In The Edible Woman, Marian bakes a cake and takes a decision. In Surfacing, the narrator visualizes herself coming to Joe. Something in them, some force or drive, momentary collision with reality and illusion bring them back to life. Rennie wills herself to hold Lora’s hand and affirms her will to participate in the deep processes of human intercourse. She regains her identity as a whole human being as against her earlier incomplete self.

In sum, the aesthetic pleasure in Margaret Atwood is derived from a perfect co-relation between technique, art and content. Her technique re-inforces her artistic vision of life. Technique, according to Mark Schorer, is the means an author has "of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning and finally evaluating it."³ Atwood’s technique covers the entire range of her experience on which she paints her subject matter. It gains in meaning and completeness of expression through the use of narrative devices, such as symbols, dreams, linguistic methods, plot structure to give shape to her thematic contents. Thus her main concern, that of portraying the troubled psyche, is perfectly geared to depict the conflicts, dependence, aggression, neurotic pride, withdrawal and alienation of her protagonists. The conflict
in her characters, their defence mechanism and their psychic life, all are objectified in the novels in a disguised form. Atwood’s vision displays a kind of formal unity. She creates a fictive world in which her characters live, struggle with life and try to come to grips with the lived reality. This world is as real as the world we inhabit and the tensions of the personages living in this world are also as real. It is a triumph of Atwood’s art as a novelist that she weaves the rich experience of life with her rich artistic material and produces mimetic pictures. The characters are highly distinctive in their motivations, conflicts, manners and methods and lend depth to her art.
Notes and References

