Conclusion
In *Second Words* Margaret Atwood outrightly declared that a writer can express his or her point of view in the novel by presenting two kinds of world: one which the writer can see around him/her, and the other which the writer can imagine. If the writer depicts only the latter (the imagined world) she/he will be *unrealistic*, and if only the former, despairing. Accordingly, Atwood argues that the best way is to deal with both because “it is by the better world we can imagine that we judge the world we have.” Following this perspective, Atwood not only deals with an exploration of the intensely traumatized Canadian society and the people living in that society but also explicates the contribution of subconscious drives by linking the distortions of her characters to social and emotional causes. Throughout her novels, she projects protagonists who dismantle the doctrines of the *unified self* and presents the discordant aspects and open-endedness of human conflicts – be it the nameless protagonist of *Surfacing*, Marian of *The Edible Women*, Joan of *Lady Oracle* or Offred of *The Handmaid’s Tale* – with no satisfying solutions but just a realization that the social set-up can not easily be challenged or changed; and its impact on the individual ‘self’ or psyche can never be underestimated. Her humanistic concern is revealed by the fact that

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though very few of her characters approximate to the desired goal of self-fulfilment, most of them reveal a positive self-reflective tendency, to deal with the crucial relationship between the ‘Self’ and the ‘Society’, though in their distinctive individual way.

Atwood’s protagonists initially display an ‘escapist tendency’, and evade reality by putting on public masks, as a protection against social constraints. They keep on changing their identities and escape from one ‘self’ to ‘another’ until they get trapped in the very surfaces, which they strive to evade and come to realize that the deceptive way of life cannot last and their recurrent behaviour evolves into a search for selfhood. Feeling unable to cope with the demands of the society, they pretend that they fit in looking for a version of themselves which incorporates part of the requirements of life in a patriarchal society. But neither their former personality nor the totally socially adopted self solve their identity crisis: being hybrid they remain split and recognize their alienation.

Since Atwood believes art to be “a revelation of the full range of our human response to the world”\(^2\), she displays a great skill in building up certain perspectives and then turning them around so as to provide new insights into a given situation. Her writing achieves what Wolfgang

Iser, the reception theorist, regards as the essential function of literacy work:

Rather than merely reinforce our given perceptions, the valuable work of literature violates or transgress these normative ways of seeing, and so teaches us new codes of understanding.\(^3\)

Atwood shows the fragmented psyche of her protagonist seeking a link to harmonize their lives and in an interview asserted:

I have a hope … that people will … think through the consequences of any action that is proposed to them. Think not just in the abstract, not what it will look like in general terms but how it would be moved and lived out on the everyday physical level.\(^4\)

In her novels, the protagonists initially display varied views and misconceptions which cause multiple problems but their journey in the narrative proves to be a pilgrimage from ignorance to knowledge: the knowledge and realisation about their perceptions of the society and their own selves becomes the basis for their self realisation. Her characters gain this insight and use it to assimilate themselves with the society, substantiating the argument that the nature of quests has to be modified.


\(^4\) Margaret Atwood, *An interview with Margaret Atwood*. Elizabeth Muse. Black Warrior review 12.1 (Fall 1985)
within the parameters of human existence. Sara Seats very rightly states that in:

Atwood’s writing there are no simple answers – the ending is open, emphasis on possibility rather than solution.\(^5\)

Atwood’s fiction upholds the dignity of individual consciousness and assertion but affirms the undeniable paradox that self-fulfilment can only be achieved by going outside the self and by establishing bonds between the ‘self’ and the ‘society’. Her fictional world reveals the stresses and traumas faced by sensitive protagonists in their intense desire to carve out meaningful patterns of existence: in the search for self-fulfilment each individual faces a unique pattern of adjustment demands. Atwood explicates various situations of internal distress and external threat; and defines the individual’s ability to survive and get adjusted in the society and social setup. In other words, she is interested in not only enumerating different fictional conflicts but also concerned with outlining a practical philosophy that can enable her confused protagonist to find their bearings in an unpredictable society.

As a novelist Atwood has carved a special niche for herself by her fictional representation of the reality that seems most significant to her — the human psyche, questions of identity crisis, inner conflicts of characters outcome of their dreams, wills and actions. Atwood believes “action…is a kind of power” and says “every time you act you’re exercising power.” In her fiction there is little external action, and she concentrates on the inner realms of characters psyche, which is vindictive of the fact that there is very few things in the outer world that these characters feel are meaningful and they can relate to. In all the four novels — Surfacing, The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle, and The Hand Maids Tale — the external world gains ascendancy and threatens to overwhelm the sensitive, pressurised individuals, particularly the protagonists. Thus the cultivation of a balanced approach that synthesises the inner and outer reality becomes essential to survive in the society.

The novelist’s humanistic approach emphasises the significance of the individual’s subjective experience and the impact of this perception on their consequent actions. Her fiction reveals the strong influence of naturalistic conditioning of the undeniable effect of heredity and

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environment on the formulation of the individual psyche and in an unconventional emphasis shows the negative influence of man-woman relationship on protagonists. Her protagonists imbibe confusing messages about the man–woman relationships because of their limiting understanding. Engrossed in their own lives, men in Atwood’s fictional world curtail the development of women in a way that would enable them to grow into an assertive and self-confident individuals whereas all her female characters reveal their inability to grow into healthy individuals because of the strong or indifferent male influence that eroded the base of their secure existence and retard their natural growth. This presentation is a characteristic of Margaret Atwood’s approach to reality, because her attempt is to highlight those factors that are not apparent on the surface but nevertheless exert a strong influence on personality formation and individual behaviour.

The conflict between the inner and external demands is concretised by Atwood in terms of the conflict between desire for individual autonomy and the inevitable involvement in society. She has presented this ambivalent situation in a way that allows us to appreciate the individual’s psyche by the need to confirm to socially reinforced roles to certain extends. Atwood’s treatment of the feminist aspirations is placed
within the context of Canadian society and reflects the characteristic psyche of Canadian woman. Talking in an interview, she explained her views:

My characters are not role models. I don’t try to resolve the problems of living, deal out the answers, and I’m not dealing with my female characters as members of a special species.  

In another essay she says:

The demands placed … for women … are frequently crushing: for every demand you satisfy, ten more come forward, and when you reach the breakdown point and say you just can’t do it, the demanders get angry. Women are socialized to please, to assuage pain, to give blood till they drop, to conciliate, to be selfless, to be helpful, to be Jesus Christ since men have given up on that role, to be perfect and that load of language is still with us.

It is interesting to see that within “love relationships” her women characters want to acquire meaningful and romantic relationships. She shows her protagonist to be defiant individuals whose expectations from life do not fall in socially approved roles. However their tragedy stems from their inability to reconcile their ambivalent feelings into life and a life-oriented compromise. The nameless character in Surfacing takes a

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7 Atwood, Margaret, An interview with Margaret Atwood. Elizabeth Muse. Black Warrior Review 12.1 (Fall 1985) p. 54.
positive step towards living by realising the great courage required in saying ‘Yes’ to life. She recognises the inevitability of disillusionment and accepts her responsibility towards society. Offred the protagonist of *The Hand Maids Tale* becomes the epitome of a self controlled individual who is able to combine emotional engagement with her lover Nick and psychic detachment in her relationship with Fred. The fact that she controls her relationships may be seen as the novelists comment that ultimately no relationship provides meaningful support and individual is presented as a solitary figure whose aspirations for achieving a perfect bond and understanding are unrealistic. Atwood has been able to portray perfectly in her fiction that “The literary culture…acts as a mirror of the society.”

The strength of Atwood’s fiction lies in the rich quality of her imaginative world and her artistic ability to realise intensely felt experience through authentic image and symbols — be it the symbol of Fat lady, Wall or Cake woman, she has used them perfectly. The almost poetic quality of fiction is conveyed through subtly powerful language that leaves everything open to interpretation. Fiction for her is the preferred mode of writing because it provides her opportunity to use “old

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language, but making new patterns with it.”

Writing for her is a means for imposing order on the vast and chaotic regions of experience and her vision suggests the same activity of consciously imposing order through a synthesising vision that accommodates the outer and inner needs of life because she believes in harmony:

The ideal would be to … achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is productive or creative harmony, rather than a destructive relationship towards the world.  

The conclusions of her novels reinforce her ironic vision that nothing is finite but human existence moves through different cycles of search and achievement in an unending movement. While talking of her fiction she confessed that her first novel, Surfacing, has a “circular structure; the woman at the end is essentially back where she started” but in The Hand Maids Tale she shows how the forces of the society have a strong impact on individual’s ‘self’ and how these forces interact with the people living in that society. In fact, she was attempting to create a social and political awareness and convincingly argued that the present society is rapidly shrinking and causing a threat to the world dominated and suppressed by human aggression. It is virtually a Dystopian world —

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11 Ibid. p. 17
12 Ibid. p. 136.
devoid of freedom, choice, and opinion — where individual’s self identity is consciously erased and the human spirit is crushed. The only recourse to an individual in such a world is to establish a bond between the ‘self’ and the ‘society’, between the individual consciousness and the social environment around us.