Chapter I

Concept of ‘Self’ and ‘Society’

in the Novel: A Brief Résumé
The study of a literary artefact requires knowledge of context as well as the text. What forces acted upon a writer, when he wrote? What were the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic and the cultural background of the time? Was the writer affected by contemporaries or isolated from them? All such questions lead the reader beyond the reading of set texts in order to develop a sense of action and reaction and varying relationship between writer and society. They guide us to gain a deeper insight of human life itself.

The importance of the self as representative of human consciousness in the novel is immense. It is the fine balance between the ‘society’ and the ‘self’ or human consciousness that makes the novel great. All great novels of the world e.g. War and Peace, Anna Karenina, Crime and Punishment, Middlemarch or Ulysses testify to the fact that the importance of the ‘self’ and the ‘society’ in the novel has been of seminal significance. Mark Schorer has very rightly pointed out:

The problem of the novel has always been to distinguish between these two, the self and the society and at the same time to find suitable structures that will present them together. Isolate one from other and the resulting fiction will flow away from the novel to another genre. Isolate the individual consciousness and we will have lyric or informal philosophy, isolate the social being and we will have chronicle or history.
The novel seems to exist at a point where we can recognize the intersection of the stream of social history and the stream of the soul.\textsuperscript{1}

Right from the inception of this genre scholars and critics have been arguing that the novel is a picture of human life in a historically verifiable society. Percy Lubbock, in his book, \textit{The Craft of Fiction}, writes:

A novel is a picture of life and life is well known to us; let us first of all ‘realise’ it, and then using our taste, let us judge whether it is true, vivid, convincing-like life\textsuperscript{2}.

In fact, the phrase the ‘picture of life’, according to the writer, does not necessarily mean picture of man’s social life. The novel gives us picture of man’s inner life, his soul, spirit, feelings, emotions, his intellectual and philosophical awareness and so on. Thomas Hardy once wrote that “novelists of social minutiae” with their photographic consciousness “presented only life garniture and not life”.\textsuperscript{3} The novel does not give us a photographic reality but an imaginative rendering which is almost a recreation of reality. But the society that is recreated must be historically verifiable and the picture of the dimension of society that is represented

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Thomas Hardy, “The Profitable Reading of Fiction” \textit{Hardy's Personal Writings} Hareldord (ed.). London: Macmillan, 1967. p. 43.
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in the novel must also be representative one. Henry James, the greatest American novelist, also says:

The novelist has to stay all the time in the novel he is writing about. Not only that he must also have first hand experience of the boredom, vulgarity, filthiness human society is afflicted with the wrongs from which man has been suffering, as also of the justice and rectitude that still stay in the conscience of at least some men and women.4

Walter Besant gives the “authorial experience” pride of place among the laws of fiction and writes in his famous essay “the art of fiction” that “before every thing else there is the rule that everything in the fiction which is invented and is not the result of personal experience and observation is worthless”.5 Mathew Arnold writes in the same vein:

…. in the novel one prefers, I think, to have the novelist dealing with the life which he knows from having lived it, rather than with the life which he knows from books or hearsay6.

The novel, however, is not just a depiction of society that existed at a time, although, as a critic rightly observed long ago in the Saturday Review, “The condition of really enjoying a novel is that we should have

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a kind of provisional belief in its historical truth…”

Society is one side of the novel and the other side being the character. The concept of a human society means a theme dealing with humane problems, with men and women acting out the little dramas of their lives in it. Regarding the significance of the character in the novel, Virginia Woolf makes the following remarkable observation:

I believe that all novels…deal with character…. To express character, I have said, but you will at once reflect that the very widest interpretation can be put upon these words .....besides age and country there is the writer’s temperament to be considered. You see one thing in character and I another. You say it means this and I that.

However different the characters may be, due to ‘age and country’ and the writer’s temperament, they may be said to possess one thing in common: a basically discriminating and value-oriented human consciousness. No doubt, this consciousness in many men and women is perverted and, therefore, against social norms, but the idea of elevated consciousness is a prerequisite in a tragic character. According to Aristotle “tragedy is the imitation of an action” and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess “certain distinctive qualities

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both of character and thought”. Aristotle ascribes certain qualities to tragic characters: “character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing which kind of things a man chooses or avoids.”\(^9\) The tragic agents possess distinctive qualities of character and thought; and through them alone the moral purpose of the tragedy is revealed. In fact, the tragic consciousness is the highest ethical human consciousness as is exemplified by the Antigone in Sophocles *Antigone* and by Michael Henchard in Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. However, it is important to note, that only tragic vision cannot represent the self in the novel because even comic consciousness, can create great novels like *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, and *Dead Souls*. The novel gives us the accurate picture of the society in which it is written. It is also true that the “circumstances of all human lives are social in the sense that they are within society and are the result of relations with other human beings”, although “they are not necessarily sociological in the sense that they are determined by or even related to larger social units or general social conditions”.\(^10\) Also society is mirrored in the novel in and through human consciousness which appears to be autonomous. But there can be different attitudes to, and depending on these attitudes there can be different pictures of society.

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Rejus Global in *A History of Canadian Literature* emphatically asserted that all art is ‘intrinsically linked’ with social attitude. Even the contemporary research in psychology and sociology has enabled us to know that the influence of external society on the human psyche is unavoidable. As Eric Fromm makes it clear: “the understanding of man’s psyche must be based on the analysis of man’s needs stemming from the conditions of his existence” and “the most powerful psychic forces motivating man’s behaviour stem from the conditions of his existence, the human situation”.\(^\text{11}\)

Literature can never be written in a vacuum and without focussing on writer’s response to the varied pressures of society of which he/she is a part. In *The Canadian Postmodern* Linda Hutcheon observes that literary history can never be separated from other forms of history: it encompasses not only genealogy of authors, works and movements but it reflects endeavours of scholarship which chronicles, narrates, analyses, demarcates and contrasts. It is a narration which satisfies our craving for sense, for sense means connections, an idea of causes and effects, including their influences of historical and social background. A pattern is imposed on bare facts “literary history demonstrates how literary development mimes the social, political, and cultural progress of a

nation”. Hutcheon’s observations clearly underline the tangible links between history and the nation. Earnest E. Renan in “what is a nation?” clarifies the link between society, nation and history when he writes:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle: two things constituted this…one lies in the past, one in the present. One is possession in common of rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received.13

A natural corollary of the concept of the nation is the emergence of nationalism which has to be understood “by aligning it not with self consciously held political ideologies but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which as well as against which it came into being”.14

Nationalism or a nation’s coming into being symbolises a system of cultural signification, which embodies a portrayal of social life rather than the representation of social policy. Literature is one avenue of cultural signification and its modern day significance lies in its ability to assume an anxiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance. The societies can be better understood through the forms and subjects of their imaginative literature. Atwood says “The poetic eye

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13 Earnest E Renan, *What is a Nation*.  
14 Ibid.
sees its own world, a world which both reflects and transcends the formlessness of the finite world outside, and reality becomes internal”.\textsuperscript{15}

The society of nation-literature relationship is two-sided one: nationalism directs literature into distinct national literatures, while literature directs the formation of society of nations through the creation of national print media like newspaper and the novel. The nation thus emerges as a ‘powerful historical idea’ in which merge ‘the traditions of political thought and literary language’. It is through the society that this merger comes about and even Homi K. Baba in \textit{Nation and Narration} emphasises their role, saying that it is they who provide the internal and external landscape of the nation. The ‘recurrent metaphor’ of this landscape, writes Bhaba is its ‘image of national identity’ which underlines ‘the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalise the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective ‘expression.’\textsuperscript{16}

In \textit{Butterfly on the Rock: A study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature}, D. G. Jones, taking his cue from Frye’s conceptualisation of a garrison mentality, argues that the Canadian way of life and Canadian temper are given to manifesting themselves in a


variety of literary patterns. The common thread that runs through these is sense of exile and estrangement from the land, and a division of self within a garrison culture confronting a hostile wilderness. These contentions rest on and “reaffirm the two poles of the irrational, the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit”. He believes that wilderness of place has to be allowed to seep into man’s consciousness in order to sublimate the life of the flesh into full life of the spirit. Given these assumptions, Jones’s formulations are based on an acute consciousness of the link between imaginative experience and the question of identity. He perceives identity to be:

...a question of nationalism ... of an imaginative stance towards the world, towards nature and culture, past and present, the life of the body and the life of the mind, the fact of death. It’s a question of finding a satisfying interpretation of these fundamental elements in human life so that one can take a stand, act with definitive conviction, have an identity.17

Jones is a humanist whose ideological convictions are apparent in “a letter on poetry and belief” written for Delta in April 1958. Here Jones confessed that he is

...sceptical that the universe has any purpose; it seems to me it just is ...

[it is] an amalgam of the darkness as well as the light, of the lethal as well

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as the vital implications of all life, love or action …..Which springs from
the acceptance of suffering as in eradicable as part of the essentially
sacrificial process of life.  18

Jones perceives contemporary writers like Isabella V. Crawford and John
Newlove abandoning the garrison of an exclusive culture in favour of
experimentation with an imaginative construct of a wilderness in which
identity has to be realised through commitment, not to a cause or doctrine
but to a sacrificial view of life. This view of life stresses the desirability
of a metaphorical dying into life which all great art affirms and
celebrates.

In Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, Atwood
attempts to see Canada stricken by monster nature and a monster
neighbour. 19 In the face of these insurmountable odds, the Canadian
society is obsessed with a spirit of survival, the essence of which Atwood
sees reflected in its literature. Her efforts are aimed at articulating
sharable human concerns and situations while responding to their
‘situative anxiety’ and ‘situative tendencies’ as a versatile genius.
Atwood explores the various interrelated physical, psychological and

18 D. G. Jones, Butterfly on the Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian
19 Margret Atwood, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature. Toronto Canada:
social anxieties of the people of her land. She deals with problems that are not just of the national concern but also social, political and traditional. As a woman writer she draws attention to the issues of suffering and survival as conditions of both the Canadian experience and female experience.

Atwood sees a survival instinct pervading in Canadian writing. Identifying certain recurrent patterns of theme, image and attitude, she builds the whole edifice of Survival on the generalization that every country/culture has a “unifying and informing symbol at its core… be it a word, phrase, idea, image or all of these”. In her opinion Canada’s central symbol is ‘survival’ in the grim, hostile and cold northern hemisphere. Emanating from such a world is a superabundance of victims which its literature reflects. Writing is rooted not only in the harshness of the land but also in the exploitation of colonialism. Atwood firmly believes that one notion of Canadian writing is the sense of victimisation which she classifies by defining basic victim positions. The first kind of basic victim position denies one’s victimhood, implies a suppression of anger and bestows a sense of superiority on its adherents for having risen above victimhood. The second position is to acknowledge oneself as the inevitable victim of Fate, God, Biology, History, Economics or the Unconscious. The third basic victim position implies awareness of the
cause of oppression and the ability to mobilise into constructive action. The fourth position is to be a ‘creative non-victim’ and accept individual experience for what it is and does not seek to distort it like the other victims.

Atwood’s purpose in elucidating ‘victim positions’ is to classify literary works on the basis of their authors as victims. She shows us the way people feel physically injured and the way their wounded psyche works on their behaviour in its various forms. In fact, the behaviour of most of her people seem to be the manifestation of their wounded psyche which is the result of living in a colonised society. Atwood’s texts are richly tapestries, woven with strands of symbol, implication, metaphor, allusion and image. She places women in the centre of the society and uses strategies like parody, irony and satire to expand the limits of different literary genres. She explains the most interesting thematic and stylistic concerns in her works of art by either crossing or stretching the boundaries.

Atwood’s fiction shows a wide range of concerns, including the marginalized positions of women and Canadians often cast as victims. Her female protagonists experience a duality of power and victimhood, for they are all simultaneously victims and potentially powerful. The
protagonists are poised to achieve some measure of psychological awareness and personal transformation. In this context Stein has very aptly stated:

Atwood maintains that she records actuality and she offers her readers hope. Yet the hope may be paradoxical because her texts propose and interrogate a counter narrative of optimism and mythic renewal.\(^{20}\)

In her collected essays she defines the Novel as “a moral instrument” and explains that ‘moral’ implies ‘political’ and by politics, “I mean having to do with power: who’s got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who’s allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how”.\(^{21}\) At another place, during a talk (in 1994) Atwood referred to writers as tricksters, stating that in many cultures the trickster is a messenger, a shape changer, a figure in touch with the life force. Tricksters delight in fabricating and expose hypocrisy and pretension. As a writer she claims these roles for herself, sometimes posing a naïve innocent who laid bare social ills.\(^{22}\)


George Woodcock, in *Introducing Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing* sums up her position cogently:

Whereas even novelists with a politically revolutionary intent tend to proceed from the assumption that what is wrong with any modern society can be righted by… a more rational and scientific ordering of society…. Atwood proceeds from the assumption that the society which has emerged from a reliance on logic, and which defies the natural instinctual urges will be a sick one.23

*Survival*, according to *Atwood*, was important tract against cultural colonialism. For her, it was first declaration of the Canadian Nationalism that has remained as important factor in her attitudes as a public personality. Atwood does not believe that in our age a writer can be other than actively engaged, in writing ‘a public genre of fiction’. In her fiction she is inclined to be didactic and considers art as a “re-exploration of life” with a view to bringing men and women closer to an understanding of the evil. She is an intensely moral writer and even if she has written nothing so openly propagandist as Hug Mac Lennan’s early nationalist novels, *Barometer Rising* and *2 solitudes*, an argument is always worked out in her novels in terms of human experience.

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What made Atwood’s fiction remarkable is her anti-social realism. She proceeds from the assumption that a society, which emerges from a reliance on logic, and defies the natural instinctual urges will be a sick society. It will produce emotionally sick people who will only be able to cure themselves by challenging and defeating its manifestations within themselves. In *Surfacing* and before it in the *Edible Woman*, the social situation is not accepted; it is liberation turned self understanding and self realization that the individual is led towards, and this of course produces a new attitude towards the character that is seen from within rather than in a constantly changing dramatic relationship with others. In this pioneering rejection perhaps lies Margret Atwood’s importance as an innovatory influence in the Canadian fiction.

Atwood brings in concerns that troubled her and other Canadian writers at the beginning of the 1970s, which include the position and role of women in society, the aspects of colonialism and particularly the way American intrusion have shaped the attitudes of Canadians. She also deliberates upon the difficulty of reconciling the fact of being human with the reality of what humanity has done to other creatures and to earth itself, the mother to whom it owes its existence and its increasingly problematical survival. She stresses the “descriptive” and the “moral”
aspects of fiction because authors to her are not only private people but “transmitters of their culture.”

Writing in her book of essays, *Second Words*, Atwood discusses her “growing involvement with human rights issues,” and remarks that for her these are not “separate from writing”. She continues “when you begin to write, you deal with your immediate surroundings, as you grow, your immediate surroundings become larger.”

There’s no contradiction when a writer begins to write because she is in love with the language, with the act of creation, but once she goes on she comes across places which one never intends to go and sees what one the writing would never otherwise have seen: “I began as a profoundly and political writer, but then I began to do what all Novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me.”

Atwood examines the role of fiction as one of the ways in which society and the interaction of people within it can be honestly scrutinized. In an essay written in 1980, she says,

Especially now that organized religion is scattered and in disarray and politicians have, Lord knows, lost their credibility, fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its

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particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves.

She defines the task of writer and also illustrates the socially established role of fiction:

I have implied that the writer functions in his or her society as a kind of soothsayer, a truth teller ‘that writing is not mere self expression but a view of society and the world at large, and that the novel is a moral instrument…. The novelist, at any rate, still sees a connection between politics and the moral sense, even if politicians gave that up sometime ago.” Atwood believes that writers cannot work as “totally isolated individuals” and they need to be judged as “inescapably connected with their society.”

Again, she argues that the prerequisite of a good novel is that it should be rooted in the visible “real world” which implies, a basic pre-requisite of respect for the actuality of the world is necessary: “the world exists; the writer testifies” she adds, “she cannot deny anything human.” In an essay “The curse of eve”, she remarked:

There’s no shortage of female characters in the literary tradition and the novelist gets her or his ideas about women from the same sources everyone else does; from the media, books, films, radios, television, and

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newspaper, from home and school and from culture at large, the body of received opinion. Also, luckily, sometimes through personal experience which contradicts all of these.  

The comment made by Philip Howard in the times reviewer of *Life before Man* (1980) talks about the Atwood’s appeal as a writer:

“In spite of the triple handicap of being a Token “feminist” author, a Canadian and a poet, Margret Atwood manages to be a true novelist. She opens our eyes to ways in which we think and behave, irrespective of sex and nationality.”

Atwood’s Novels challenge her readers to see more by seeing differently. She once remarked that “ways of going crazy are culturally determined.” She also says that “you aren’t and can’t be apart from nature. We’re all part of the biological universe; men as well as women.” Again, while talking about her involvement with political issues, she confessed that political issues were “not separate from writing. When you begin to write, you deal with your immediate surroundings; as you grow your immediate surroundings become larger. There’s no contradiction.”

In fact, she has maintained an active engagement with cultural politics and human rights issues not only in Canada but also on international

29 Ibid. p. 114.
scene. According to an American interviewer Margaret Atwood feels a
great sense of responsibility as a writer: “Atwood: No, not as a writer, as
a human being.” 31 She firmly believes that a novel is “a vehicle for
looking at society – an interface between language and what we choose to
call reality, although even that is a very malleable substance.” 32 According
to her, the social function of art and the writer’s responsibility to her
readers are of paramount importance:

If you think of a book as an experience, as almost the equivalent of having
the experience, you are going to feel some sense of responsibility as to
what kinds of experiences you are going to put people through. You are
not going to put them through a lot of blood and gore for nothing; at least I
am not. 33

According to Kathleen Wheeler Margret Atwood’s:

Fiction are often organized thematically around images of both cultural
and individual issues of survival, as she has sought to portray the
entrappedment of women in patriarchy, and of men and women in suffocating
social cultural imprisonment. 34

By taking hold overtly of the ‘art as mirror’ convention, Atwood
reveals that art is not a mirror or representation of nature, but a reflection

32 Margret Atwood, Conversations. p. 246.
33 Ibid. p.151.
of processes of writing, reading and interpretation. Her novels, very convincingly, delineate on the conditions of enslavement in the external world that leave deep impressions, and consequently repercussions on the individual’s internal world. These internal-external resonances are so profound that one is supposed to do things which are unnatural.