Chapter II

The Novels of Early Phase

The second chapter of the present research work aims to discuss the main aspects of Margaret Atwood’s novels belonging early phase. These novels have been critically analyzed with reference to the title, story, structure, characters, theme, imagery, symbolism and view of life. The following first four novels have been taken for discussion:

2. *Surfacing* (1972),
3. *Lady Oracle* (1976),

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2.1. Introduction:

Margaret Atwood’s first novel, *The Edible Woman* was published at the same time the concepts of women’s liberation were in contrast with the actual experience in women’s day-to-day lives. It was written in 1965, but appeared only in 1969 at the beginning of second wave of feminism. It helped to establish Margaret Atwood as a prose writer of major significance. It does both entertain and present serious problems of personal identity in contemporary life. The novel is an imaginative transformation of a social problem into comic satire as one young woman rebels against her feminine destiny as the edible woman. It is not only
the revision of a traditional comedy of manners with its fixation on the marriage theme but also a very highly complex piece of realistic fiction. It has been read and interpreted in variously by several scholars and critics. Yet the deeper layers of the novel remain unexplored.

2.1.1. Title:

The title of the novel, *The Edible Woman* is a metaphor for a consumer society. It suggests that the central metaphor is that of woman as food and as an object. But the novel gives the message that women are not mere objects of beauty meant for carnal consumption of men. Except this according to Alan Dawe, “*The Edible Woman* is a novel about choices.”1 It lays bare the ruthless and hypocritical postures of patriarchy through the dramatization of identity crisis in the soul of the protagonist, Marian. All characters are trapped in their respective ego-cages. They are involved in power games. As a result of it none of them are capable of love in the true sense.

2.1.2. Story:

The novel, *The Edible Woman* deals with Marian MacAlpin’s predicament. The protagonist, Marian, recent possessor of B.A. works for a market research company, Seymour Surveys for consumer products in Toronto. She is an average young woman with a small circle of friends. She is also engaged to a handsome, upcoming young lawyer, Peter Wollander, whose hobbies are collection of guns and cameras. At some points after their relationship, Marian loses hold on herself. The fear that she is just an object creates in her mind. Then she realizes different male strategies of exploitation and causes of women’s oppression in her life. She picks up enough courage to turn the tables against men like Peter. Towards the end of the novel, she bakes a large cake in the shape of a
woman. She offers it to Peter to eat, as a symbol for his wish to assimilate her, symbolically refusing to be a victim. Recognising the symbolic meaning of the act, Peter refuses to eat cake and leaves. Having found an answer to her dilemma, Marian eats part of the cake herself and offers what remains of it to Duncan, an eccentric graduate student. Thus she refuses to be the edible woman trapped in domesticity.

2.1.3. Plot-construction:

The novel, *The Edible Woman* clearly displays the structure of a quest novel. Marian is, in a sense, the romantic heroine who searches for her identity through a quest which takes her on a dark voyage into the underworld and back. This novel’s traditional quest structure focuses on situating the aim of the quest at the subject’s self. The action takes place at Marian and Ainsley’s flat, revealing the heroine’s private life. Major scenes in the book involve either rooms, especially kitchens and dining rooms or long walks on streets, in parks or through the ravines.

The novel is also structured like a journey in which through her association with several male and female acquaintances and friends, Marian sees and assesses different ways of understanding what it means to be a woman. The various alternatives before Marian are dramatized in a series of scenes. They all are collected to build the main action of the novel. They are all connected with food and the position of the narrator. The story, in three stages is presented entirely through Marian’s eyes even when she speaks in the third person. It is a witty, sarcastic, urbane anti-comedy. Marian McAlpin provides amusing but devastating vigenettes of office life, courtship, motherhood, graduate school and as the title implies, consumer society.
The first section of the novel is told in the first person singular, past tense. It begins in the voice of the female protagonist, Marian McAlpin describing her hunger. Her eating seems often to be hampered, “I had to skip the egg and wash down a glass of milk and a bowl of cold cereal which I knew would leave me hungry long before lunch time.” For the first several chapters Marian describes her relationships to her roommate, Ainsley; her boyfriend, Peter; her pregnant friend, Clara and Duncan with whom she has an affair. She also describes her job.

In the first section, coming from a small town, Marian likes to live standard life. She is a normal office going girl working for a market research company. She shares an apartment with Ainsley. She lives in an adjustment. Marian is different from Ainsley. Marian is sedate and pliable while Ainsley is modish, short tempered and forward looking.

Marian experiences identity, crisis in her company Seymour Surveys — a highly formed into layers, three-tiered, hierarchic market organization where all responsible and respectable positions are held by men. At the lower level all are housewives. It is not easy to reach to Marian at the top and she does not wish to go at the bottom. Her dilemma arises out of this situation. She tries to discuss freely her feelings:

What, then, could I expect to turn into a Seymour Surveys?
I couldn’t become one of the men upstairs; I couldn’t become a machine person — as that would be a step down. Marian gets the place into the middle-point of the office structure for the whole of her life. Then Emmy, Lucy and Millie, the office virgins avoid sexual relations with men for different reasons. But all of them agree that the best thing available to a woman is to get married.
The married life of Clara represents Marian’s fate as a married marriage. She is not practical and sensible enough to manage and run a well organized marriage. Marian thinks about Clara that:

Clara simply had no practicality, she wasn’t able to control the more mundane aspects of life, like money or getting to lectures on time---- her own body seemed somehow beyond her, going its own way without reference to any direction of hers.4

Though Clara married for love, she has made a mess of her domestic life.

Marian is drawn to Peter, her boy friend because of his pleasing manners and impressive way of talking. She thinks that he is an ideal choice for her. When Peter proposes her, she accepts. She thinks that marrying him would be a release from the anonymous existence at her working in a company. But very soon Peter is trying to fit Marian into a conventionalized, passive and dependent woman. And she feels uneasy at the acceptance of his proposal. She tries to defend her choice,

I’d always assumed through highschool and college that I was going to marry someone eventually and have children, everyone does. --- I’ve never been silly about marriage the way Ainsley is. She’s against it on principle, and life isn’t run by principles but by adjustments.5

While Marian is doing a survey for Moose Beer, she has met Duncan for the first time. That time the period of romancing is over and she accepts the proposal of Peter. She realizes that her entire future is at stake if she allows Peter to make decisions for her. She meets Duncan again and not only is drawn towards him but allows him to kiss her. But it is like jumping into fire from the pan. She hopes to find some kind of shelter at
the place of Duncan. But he takes advantage of Marian’s being easily deceived nature.

The long second section which recounts her gradual refusal to eat and her flight from Peter is presented in a third person, past voice. The narration is entirely frank. The position of the narrator changes in the second section of the story. Marian tells the story; but she looks upon herself at a distance. The ‘I’ of the first section becomes a ‘she’ in the second. This section shows Marian’s deep psyche. She loses control over her mind and body. By agreeing to marry Peter, Marian has ceased to be herself. She fails to identify the real Peter.

After her relationship with Peter, Marian takes her flight to Duncan. In this novel’s climatic scene, Marian elects to run, escaping not only from Peter, but also from Ainsley, Clara, the office virgins and the soap wives. But she knows that with both of them she is being used and stops eating anything at all. Robert Lecker suggests,

Marian, stops eating for two reasons (a) her job with an advertising research provided by an artificial society and (b) she equates the consumption of food with her feeling that she has been assimilated and exploited as female object.\(^6\)

The foods accepted by her stomach become more and more limited. Marian’s loss of appetite is a symbolic turning away from the responsibilities of adult life. That time she manages to achieve some measure of personal growth and psychic integrity and go on to a happy ending. Marian thinks that Peter cleverly makes her a puppet in his hands in her engagement party. She recognizes her loss of identity and her edibility to Peter. So she leaves the party to Duncan. But Duncan also wants to seduce and sexually exploit her. She begins to see both Peter and
Duncan in their true colours. Then she bakes a cake in the shape of a woman. When Peter comes to see her she offers it as a woman-substitute to Peter to eat. But Peter refuses to indulge her. Finally Duncan and Marian eat the cake and she feels whole again.

The final section of the novel describes how the appetite returns and at the same time Marian comes back to herself. The stomach of the starving woman returns to normal. The edible woman can eat again and enjoy begins to enjoy taking food. Marian is restored to her normal physical and mental health. Marian partially reconstructs that new concept of self through a renewed relationship to food. She observes that the problems of others no longer interest her:

Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again I found my own situation much more interesting than his.7

This final chapter is once again in her voice because now she has begun to talk of herself in the first person singular. It is a new and confident voice of a distinct being. The return to first person narration signifies the return to position zero. Marian comes back full circle to where she was at the beginning. Marian is looking for another job also. George Woodcock calls it an “emotional connibalism.”8 Marian is finally able to defy Peter’s desire to colonize her and refuses to be a mindless body.

2.1.4. Characters:

Margaret Atwood often expresses her opinions through the words of her protagonist and depicts secondary characters in a way which includes comment on social constraints. Marian McAlpin, the protagonist of The Edible Woman is a sensitive, young graduate woman working for Seymour Surveys. Her function is to design questionnaires to test the
consumers’ reactions to products. She soon realises that her position as a woman prevents her from obtaining a better, more interesting and creative job within the company. This job never satisfies her totally. Salat, rightly says:

Marian’s problematic of ‘becoming’ constitutes and expresses Atwood’s feminist polemics against restrictive gender roles imposed upon women in paternalist society----The hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to being an in-between thing and a mind-less body.\(^9\)

Marian’s predicament is the example of the situation of women in male-dominated society.

Marian shares an apartment with Ainsley. They live together but they differ on the issues of marriage and motherhood. She develops hatred for marriage and plans to be an unwed mother. But Marian rejects that role model. At the same time she knows about a different concept of love and marriage by the married life of Marian’s friend from college days Clara and Joe. She married for love, but she has made a mess of her domestic life. Married to her childhood sweetheart Joe Bates, Clara is transformed into a baby making machine, churning out babies annually.

Marian has also a boy friend, Peter. She looks upon him as not only a rescuer from Seymour Surveys but also a “rescuer from chaos,”\(^10\) a provider of stability. But she soon realizes that Peter is using her for his own benefit. There is no thought of Marian in his life. For him she is always be there silent and solid. She thinks that Peter is monopolizing her both physically and psychologically. At the same period Marian meets Duncan a graduate student and has an affair.
Duncan deceives Marian through his appearance. Her meeting with Duncan is just like a jumping into fire from the pan. He takes advantage of Marian’s being easily deceived nature and attracts her into his bed saying that he is a ‘virgin’ who needs to be introduced to sex. Her encounter with Duncan shatters her completely. She decides to stop eating until she finds a way out to resolve the crisis. After she returns to her place, Marian bakes a cake in the form of woman and offers it to Peter as a woman substitute. Peter leaves the place with embarrassment. Marian feels hungry and eats the cake. She gives remaining cake to Duncan for eating. This shows the development of her vision and her refusal to be a victim.

Ainsley and Marian live together in an apartment. The name Ainsley was inspired to Atwood by Annesley Hall at Victoria College at the University of Toronto to which she belonged. Ainsley works as a tester of defective electric toothbrushes in a company. She develops hatred for marriage and plans to be an unwed mother. She says: “The thing that ruins families these days is the husbands.”11 Though against marriage, she does not deny motherhood. She wants children by choice rather than chance products of emotional entanglements. She thinks that motherhood satisfies one’s deepest femininity. Hence she hunts for a strong handsome, intelligent man as biological father for her child and then looks for a Father-Image. She finds Len as a perfect man who can fulfill her dreams of getting pregnant. She allows her to be entangled in the web of Len, a seducer and is pregnant by him. Marian rejects that role model because bringing forth an illegitimate child is a cold-blooded act which a woman has to pay her price. Later on, she reverses her views on marriage and marries another man called Fischer to provide a father for
the child she is carrying. She ultimately accepts the traditional role of a
wife and mother.

The second alternative available to Marian is Clara, Marian’s friend
from college days. She had fallen in love with Joe in her college time and
had been swept into matrimony and motherhood. She is not practical and
sensible enough to manage and run a well-organized marriage. Marian
realizes how Clara has become a victim of biology. She watches closely
how Clara gets involved in a succession of pregnancies. She feels sorry
for her and says:

The babies had been unplanned: Clara greeted her first
pregnancy with astonishment that such a thing could happen
to her and her second with dismay; now, during her third,
she had subsided into a grim but inert fatalism.12

Clara has not taken precaution to avoid succession of pregnancies. She
becomes no more than a child-bearing machine. She is totally dependent
socially and economically upon her husband, Joe. During her pregnancies
and after the children are born, Clara does not do any work. She finishes
her degree. She is Atwood’s anti-marriage and anti-children character.

A third choice for Marian is represented by the trio of perennial
blondes – Lucy, Emmie and Millie. They all want to travel extensively
before they get married and settle down. Lucy has a kind of public job.
Emmy is the typist and Millie is Mrs. Bogue’s Australian assistant. Lucy
is clever and cunning dressed elegantly and systematically visited all the
expensive hotels in town during lunch break in the hope of catching a
prospective husband. Like them every young middle class woman makes
a dream of being a happy housewife and mother. Marian rejects these
office virgins because they invite victimization. Their sole aim in life is
to be getting a husband. Marian realizes how Ainsley, scheming female; Clara, the earth-mother and Lucy, Emmie and Millie, the office virgins have allowed themselves to be victimized as objects of men both within and outside the legal framework of marriage. She accepts neither the radical feminist view-point of Ainsley, not the submissive earth-mother role of Clara nor self-destructive innocence and ignorance of the office virgins. Major and minor female characters in the novel – Marian, Ainsley, Emmy, Lucy, Millie, Mrs. Grot, Mrs. Bogue, Mrs. Dodge and Clara are used to present women’s painful realities and their suffering of life.

Peter Wollander is Marian’s boyfriend and later fiance. Cook argues that “the characters of Peter, Lucy and Mrs. Sims were drawn from people in Atwood’s life” — Peter being a fictionalized version of Atwood’s boyfriend and later fiance. Peter a young lawyer is prosperous, well-dressed and good-looking. Marian is drawn to him because of his pleasing manners and impressive way of talking. She thinks that he is an ideal choice for her. She looks upon him as a rescuer from Seymour Surveys. But very soon he takes all the major decisions related to Marian and himself. He likes Marian as she never demands anything from him. As he finds her meek and docile, Peter proposes to her and explains the reasons for wanting to marry her. The reasons sum up his strategy of exploitation. He says:

I can always depend on you. Most women are pretty scatterbrained 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.
In course of time, Marian understands the true character of Peter as manipulator and gets insights into the truth of her relationship with him. He uses her for his own benefit. There is no thought of Marian in his life.

Marian’s curse is her own meekness. As the date of her engagement approaches, Marian feels nervous and disturbed. She realizes that her interests and identity can never be safe in the event of her marriage with Peter. She begins to look at him as a destroyer of her individuality and identity. The male gaze of Peter dominates and influences her appearance. He looks upon her as an image of a salable commodity. She thinks that Peter is monopolizing her both physically and psychologically. She decides to do something about it. The plot reaches its climax when Peter arranges the cocktail party on the occasion of their betrothal. But Marian finds a confident voice of her ownself. She upsets Peter’s plans to control and dominate her by running away from her engagement. She takes her flight to Duncan.

Duncan used in the novel is as a foil to Peter. He is small, thin, unattractive and a neurotic. He is more dead than alive. Marian’s flight to Duncan is like jumping into fire from the pan. She hopes to find some kind of shelter at the place of Duncan. But Duncan takes advantage of Marian’s being easily deceived nature and attracts her into his bed saying that he is a virgin who needs to be introduced to sex. He says that sexual relationship with her “was fine, just as good as usual.”\footnote{15} Marian may not be the first one to become the victim of Duncan’s lust. Fraud is the very breath of his life and with this he exploits many women.

Duncan is full of self-pity. He and Marian exploit each other shamelessly in the matter of comprising pain to see who suffers more. He deceives Marian through his appearance. Indeed, he looks very young
and Marian assumes that he must be fifteen years old, an assumption soon corrected by Duncan who says that he is twenty-six. He is not only sexless but ageless as well. His roommates are surrogates parents who feed him:

I’ve been running away from understudy mothers ever since I can remember, ---- that’s what you get for being an orphan.16 Being cunning by nature, he enjoys manipulating the emotions of all those around him as it gives him a feeling of power over them. Duncan, his roommates — Trevor and Fish act as if they are family – Trevor, a latent homosexual, assuming the role of a mother, Fish, that of a father and Duncan of the only child.

As a realistic novel, character Duncan is vague. His role in the novel is ambiguous, as he seems to be more of symbolic than a real character. Although he is the opposite of Peter, he is not an alternative. He is most successful as a symbol of Marian’s inner life. He represents her fantasies, her attempts to escape as well as her sensible return to consumer reality. He is a man who offers Marian nothing and wasn’t threatening her with some intangible gift in return.

Joe, Clara’s husband is a little short of the American Dependent husband. He is always busy in cooking food and serving and changing the kid’s diapers. He is considered as a very good and kind husband. His philosophy is Atwood’s. According to him getting married attacks a woman’s personality and spoils the image of her. Once a woman gets marry:
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 anymore; her core has been destroyed.  

Joe, the wifely husband is appropriated for the feminist novel, but getting married is no way attacking the personality of the women. On the contrary it is making life meaningful. Her status and value in the family circle is usually higher than that of her husband.

Len Slank is a bachelor friend of Marian’s from college. He is a “self-consciously – lecherous skirt-chaser.” For the thematic purpose of the novel he is portrayed as a beast enjoying and discarding its prey. He is received into fathering a baby for Ainsley without marriage. Atwood used him for her point of view in making him an idealist.

2.1.5. Theme:

*The Edible Woman* is a quest for self-identity by Marian, the protagonist of the novel, “Marian is shaped first by her parents’ plans for her future and then by Peter.” Marian step by step loses her identity as an independent and active self. She does not want live life without her identity. She wants to live meaningfully. She likes to seek something different from life. Facing an identity crisis, firstly Marian has to face and overcome at her work place. In her company, Seymour Surveys all responsible and respectable positions are occupied by men. She has no freedom in her work therefore she feels forbidden to do what she likes. The dilemma of her identity arises out of this situation.
Marian believes that marriage is necessary in life. It is maintained by adjustments. But she realizes that only wives have to adjust. She hopes that Peter is an ideal choice. Soon she knows that Peter is manipulator. She realizes that her identity and interests can never be safe in the event of her marriage with Peter. She thinks that Peter is a destroyer of her individuality and identity.

Peter arranges the cocktail party on the occasion of their engagement. That time Marian does her make-up and dressing what Peter tells her. She looks her image in the mirror and feels that a woman’s primary market value in the marriage depends upon her charming image. Peter is expecting only her to assume the roles of a traditional wife and mother. J.Brooks Bouson says:

As a realistic novel *The Edible Woman* shows how female passivity and submersion in the traditional wife and mother roles can pose a serious threat to the very survival of the self. Marian does not want to be trapped in a decorative life where her identity is to be crushed. Her future image is clear to her. She refuses to be Peter’s edible woman. She refuses to marry him and runs away from the party to develop her personality.

Marian needs fresh air and the freedom to grow. Marian goes to Duncan with hope that she can find shelter. But Duncan takes advantage of Marian’s innocent nature. She becomes the victim of his lust. She recognizes both Peter and Duncan in their true colours. She evaluates how she has allowed both Peter and Duncan to use her. She rejects her passivity and refuses to be a victim. She bakes a cake and offers to Peter as a woman substitute. Peter leaves the place and Marian eats it, gives
remaining to Duncan. Thus the cake, that Marian bakes and eats, shows
the development of her vision and her refusal to be a victim. She claims
that she cannot be manipulated by the people like Peter and Duncan.

The novel, *The Edible Woman* is also about the rejection of gender
roles. Marian’s refusal to eat is viewed as her resistance to being coerced
into a more feminine role. One sexual role after another is presented to
the protagonist but she seems unable to accept any of them. She thinks
that if a woman makes herself edible, she will be consumed. As a woman
Marian has definitely changed from the meek, docile and traditional
woman to the bold conscious and rebellious feminist. She becomes a
representative of modern youth rebelling against the system of gender and
its oppression. She wants to become a woman who quests for a
meaningful human identity.

The novel is about social relations and the reproduction of culture –
dynamics of circulation, consumption and commodification, relations of
marriage, sex and signification in society. The novel makes a negative
statement about society. In traditional comedy, boy meets girl. There are
complications, the complications are resolved and the couple is united.
But in this novel couple is not united and the wrong couple gets married.
The complications are resolved, but not in a way that reaffirms the social
order. In the end it is more pessimistic.

The most obvious theme is that of consumption. From the title
through the images of food and eating to the symbolic cake lady, the
narrative presents the social, physical and emotional wide of
consumerism. Many of the best scenes in the novel take place at table.
Eating becomes a metaphor for economic and emotional cannibalism.
Either you eat or are eaten. There are no other choices.
2.1.6. Narration:

Renouncing both eating and voice, Marian ironically narrates the novel, with parts I and III in first person, II in a distance third person. It demonstrates Marian’s growing alienation not only from society but from her body. Significantly, part II begins right after Marian mentions her two dolls and decides to throw them away as she cleans and gets organized. Secondly at the company Christmas party, Marian looks around at the other women, thinking “You were green and then you ripened: became mature, dresses for the mature figure. In other words, fat.” Thus Marian refuses to become fat, which would transform her into a woman. She is also alienated from nature as she places herself outside the process of maturation.

Characteristic of Atwood’s narratives, *The Edible Woman* is written in a mixed style. It uses the conventions of realism, romance and caricature. Atwood has attempted to convey the theme of woman as an edible commodity for man through her image sequences. Emotional and psychological conditions are described throughout the novel in the imagery of food – The first chapter opens in the kitchen with Marian making breakfast. Before the end of this chapter, she is hungry and eating again. At the beginning of the second chapter, she is at work where she is being asked to sample more food. She also describes the company where she works in terms of food, such as it is layered “like an ice-cream sandwich.” Before the second chapter ends, Marian goes to lunch, where she talks to her friends about people who live in Quebec and eats too many potatoes. In the third chapter Marian is assigned the task of taking a survey about beer, is asked to write a letter to a woman who found a fly in her cereal.
2.1.7. Imagery:

The simple activities of Marian like drinking and sitting are expressed through animal imagery. She drinks tomato-juice “blood thirstily.” She sits like escaping from a giant squid. Ainsley’s baby is not going to be a chicken but a lovely nice baby. The consumption of Marian and her commodification are well imaged throughout the novel. Her engagement to Peter allows him to enjoy “private property rights.” In their relationship, Marian, like most women, is also subject to social forces that act to objectify her. Thus Atwood’s imagery in the novel is local and particular. It does not have deeper layers of meaning; it is situational.

2.1.8. Symbolism:

Food and clothing are major symbols used to explore themes. The cake is meant as a symbol of Peter’s destructive propensities. It is a substitute for Marian – “I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better.” In fact, she is testing Peter’s surface reality against the cannibalistic reality. As a symbol of Peter’s reality, the cake fails. He is horrified and flees. Marian eats this substitute self and comes back to consumer reality: “Suddenly she was hungry. Extremely hungry. The cake after all was only a cake.” Marian neither reassesses her opinion of Peter not appreciates the irony of her own appetite.

The central metaphor of this novel is food and eating. Living and eating are metaphorically equivalent. Eating is the means of individual identity. At the beginning of the novel Marian loves to eat the more and gradually she become incapable of eating the more. Atwood uses eating as a metaphor for power also. It is also used as an extremely subtle means of examining the relationship between women and men. The powerful are characterized by their eating and the powerless by their non-eating. Thus the novel, *The Edible Woman* has been shaped and unified by a central
image, the metaphor of eating that runs through the entire novel, from title page to final scene. The story begins with a breakfast and ends with Duncan arriving at Marian’s for tea. In between these two occasions there are dinners, lunches, coffee breaks, meetings for drinks and an office party.

2.1.9. View of Life:

The view of life reflected in this novel is revolutionary. The novel is about women and their relationship to men, to society and to food and eating. Through food and eating Atwood discusses a young woman’s rebellion against a modern, male-dominated world. The female protagonist, Marian McAlpin, struggles between the role that society has imposed upon her and her personal definition of self. Food becomes the symbol of that struggle. The protagonist creates a situation in which woman, burdened by the rules and inequalities of her society and discovers that she must reconstruct braver, self-reliant personae in order to survive. At the end of the novel, she reconstructs a new concept of self through a renewed relationship of food.

Women like Marian and Ainsley are in search of a destiny that should transcend and replace the domestic round. They are dissatisfied with man-made values. They are in search of their freedom and liberty. They are eager to break the balance between their public and private lives. They have dislike for their homes and hearths. They hardly recognize what women have to bring into the world of men to make their lives whole and meaningful. For them autonomy is the hallmark of their psychic health. To get married is to invite subordination and obligation. To get children by marriage is to make a mess of one’s life. The fear of divorce does not have heavily over their heads. Thus, they are portrayed as rebels of established norms.
2.2. Introduction:

*Surfacing*, Atwood’s earliest work of fiction is probed into the matter of artistic death of women and abortion. It was published in 1972 when the legal sanction to abortion was still debated in Canada. That time the second wave of feminism was affecting the lives of women at grass-root level. With the publication of this novel Margaret Atwood was regarded as a woman novelist who speaks especially for and to women. In it she shows how gender politics has relegated women artists to a lower order and how their history is subsumed into the dominant patriarchal discourse.

2.2.1. Title:

The title of the novel is better than accurate, “it is a well developed metaphor.”\(^{27}\) As the title implies, the novel is not about surfaces but about depths and the process of rising from those depths. Searching in the Canadian woods for her lost father, the protagonist makes journey to find herself. It is not a realistic search for a missing person, but the multi-leveled quest of a contemporary Persephone for a particular type of freedom. On the immediate narrative level of the search for her missing father, the narrator must acknowledge her ties to family and readjust her concept of that thrust for freedom from family that we all experience.

2.2.2. Story:

The protagonist’s father is indeed missing, so she begins to search for clues as to his whereabouts; he may be of in the woods, he may have gone mad or he may be dead. Her friends decide to stay longer than had
been planned and this gives the woman time to discover her father’s archeological activities and his drowned body. After a few days’ wandering the truth about her own life is revealed to her. Upset by her loss, she refuses to leave with her friends at the end of the week. She spends a few more days alone on the island during which time she undergoes some terrifying experiences. At the end she is about to answer her lover who has come back to look for her.

2.2.3. Plot-construction:

In *Surfacing*, Atwood is writing about a search for unity and wholeness in a divided person. The novel is divided into three sections. The story unfolds over several days. The readers follow the action from morning until night, day after day. Each section represents a stage in the protagonist’s search for her father who has vanished mysteriously as well as the search for her ownself. Dramatically, the novel is well-balanced in the three-part division — rising action, climax and falling action.

Part one introduces the characters and the physical background. It deals with the intense immediate experience of the unnamed heroine, the protagonist of *Surfacing*. The problem of the disappearance of her father, a tree surveyor and botanist, results in rising action. This part ends on a note of suspense and the narrator’s decision to stay at Northern Quebec Island. In this part, narrator’s false marriage, divorce and existence of her child, her abortion as a ‘sin’ shows her nature. The protagonist rejects her sin by constructing a network of deception and lies.

The second part covers a week and continues to develop the rising action. The search for the protagonist’s father goes on. She discovers that her father goes researching rock paintings. She also discovers the truth of her father’s missing and some shocking truth about herself. She accepts
the truth of her sin that is her aborted baby. In this part the narrator recalls her past events that happened to her in her childhood, vision of her child, her mother, father, etc. therefore this part is in past tense.

The climax is reached when Paul brings the news of her father’s death. Her reaction to the news is strange. In this part she has a night of violent love-making with Joe. Her confrontation with the manner in which her father’s dead body was recovered from the lake brings her back to reality. She also faces the trauma of her abortion and dives into the lake to purify herself.

The third part records the effects of the climax on the protagonist. She seems to have come out of her past. She is ready to confront reality in the present. The narrator has gone from rejecting her sin to admit it. The action begins to wind down as Joe’s final call implies a vague but possible resolution to the conflict in the protagonist’s mind. She is ready to love, to talk and to trust. She gets pregnant and thinks that her lost baby is surfacing within her, forgiving her. At the end of this section the narrator emerges as a total human being, complete with feelings. She feels her child is surfacing in her, forgiving her.

2.2.4. Narration:

The immediacy of the experience is conveyed through the use of present tense. But when the protagonist is recalling her past, there is a shift to the past tense. This part of the narrative covers the first two days of the journey. It is spread over eight chapters, presenting the protagonist as an alienated being. She is alienated not only from others but also from her family. So she calls ‘they’. She is depressed, disjoined and appears to be disintegrating. This part comes to a close with the protagonist’s realization that being in the air is more painful than being in the water and
she pushes herself into the lake. The voice is a first person singular through part one. We never learn her name or about her physical appearance. We must perceive her strictly through this voice that is important in several ways. Atwood’ use of the first person unnamed speaker draws both the novel and the frightening visual world of protagonist.

Atwood’s use of the tense also complements the three-section structure. The first part is narrated in the present tense – the protagonist narrating things as they are happening around her. It implies a separation between the past and the present events. It also helps to reinforce the idea of the protagonist as an individual cut off from her past. Atwood switches to the past tense in the second part, signalling a change in the protagonist’s perspective. She is re-entering her past, re-calling more events of her childhood. She examines evidences of her childhood: Scrapbooks, drawings and photo albums. In the process, she discovers the most important piece of her past — a vision of her unborn child.

Atwood returns to the present tense in the last part, signalling the return of the protagonist to the present. She has examined and explored her past. After experiencing a sense of timelessness while hallucinating, she re-enters the present. She is not isolated from her past. She is ready to confront the present reality. Thus Surfacing has an open-ending. But there is a glimmer of hope that the protagonist may return to the city with Joe, who has come back looking for her. She has compromised with the reality of her situation.

2.2.5. Characters:

In Surfacing the characters – major and minor – are very important. The protagonist is an unnamed young woman in her late twenties. No hero
but only heroine occupy the whole space in this novel. She is a woman with a strong will who has only painful experiences in the past. Contrasted to the protagonist, the others are two-dimensional or even flat. What one knows about them is through what the protagonist chooses to reveal. Only the protagonist has a fuller background, a complete personality and pattern of behaviour, which comes across through what she says—and what she doesn’t say. Looking at her background, we gradually learn some of the reasons for her alienation and her inability to feel. Although her father talked with her when she was a child, his conversation was usually about concepts of reason. It did not lead to a healthy interaction between them. Her mother, on the other hand, did not seem to speak much at all.

The protagonist’s alienation increases as she grows older. She is awkward and shy with her schoolmates. As she grows older, she begins to imitate the behavior of others and does not say or do what she really feels. Her art teacher feels nothing wrong in destroying her creativity as well as dignity as artist because power is centralized in his hands as her master. He exploits her obedience and tries to convince that she should not mind compromising her artistic integrity since “there have never been any important women artists” in history. According to him, her aspirations to become a real artist are cute but misguide.

She is prevented from developing into an artist. She listens to him and believes that he was right; there never have been any woman artist in history. She gives up the ambition of becoming a real artist. She starts believing that men ought to be superior. She experiences his success as her own, his glory is hers. She has an idealised image of him and experiences her own search for glory though him. Jaidev rightly says: “Atwood’s
*Surfacing* takes woman as an existential condition, the condition of being powerless.\(^{29}\) She is afraid to ask her teacher questions about morals and motives in life and in the history that has been taught. At last, the protagonist undergoes emotional and artistic death at the hands of her teacher following the imposition of restrictions on her art although the narrator loves her art teacher. He uses all his skill to seduce her. He gave a wedding ring and succeeds in creating the image of himself as her husband. But when she is pregnant, he uses all tricks to abort the child. For him it is “simple, like getting a wart removed.”\(^{30}\)

Joe is the protagonist’s – live – in partner. Like her he is also an alienated person. But unlike her, he is emotional. He has come with them to the lake and is filming Random Samples with David. He falls in love with the protagonist and proposes marriage to her. But she tells him of her failed marriage and abortion. Her relationship with Joe proves that she is not only aloof but devoid of all emotions. She does not find her behaviour unusual because she does not really feel emotionally drawn towards him. One learns a great deal more about the protagonist when she reveals her earlier relationship with a middle-aged, married man and her subsequent abortion to which she did not say No. This issue has emotional implications for the protagonist. The abortion is supposed to be necessary for the peaceful future of her fake husband. But it tears her to pieces and leaves a scar on her psych. As Malashri Lal says: “---- the pain of aborting life unhinges the mind to a degree that it creates an alternate ‘truth’ to the event.”\(^{31}\) She imagines in art teacher a murderer of her fetus and a destroyer of her identity as mother as well as real artist.

Unable to accept the truth about her past, she has been further alienated from herself because of the pain and guilt she has experienced.
She makes up elaborate, false stories to lessen her pain. When the protagonist is ready to face the truth about herself and her past, she unlocks her pain and confronts reality. By accepting her past the way it really was, she becomes less alienated; she also becomes emotional as she wants to give birth to her child and bring it upon her own with or without Joe. The protagonist marches forward to fulfill her objective as a new champion of the mute and inanimate objects as well as the wildlife in nature. She realizes that mere invisibility, in activism and withdrawal can never do any good to the society. She thinks that she herself will have to be courageous and face life squarely

David is the oldest of the group of friends who come to the lake in northern Quebec to look for the protagonist’s missing father. He, too, is an alienated person like the protagonist and Joe. He taunts and humiliates his wife, Anna at any given opportunity. He demands that she has to follow certain rules set by him in their relationship. To describe him as a shallow character, the protagonist says----

He was an imposter, a pastiche, layer of political handbills, pages from magazines, *offiches*, verbs and nouns glued on to him --- it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true.32

David is a fake husband. But he tries to pose himself as one committed to the equality of women. In the beginning David appears as charming and humorous but later reveals as vicious weapon used to hurt another person. He is possessive and oppressive. He thinks Anna as a salve and his private property and he can use her according to his needs. As Simone de Beauvoir says, “the male world is harsh, sharp edged, its voices are too
resounding, the lights too crowds, the contracts rough.” 33 David is a living fraud.

David himself is jealous. When he finds Joe and Anna missing, he tries to persuade the protagonist to let him enjoy sex with her not because he loves her but he wants to revenge upon Anna. He never wants to get Anna pregnant. He compels her to take pills for birth control so that he can enjoy sex without risk. Anna is often victimized by David.

Anna is supposed to be the protagonist’s best friend. In the novel she appears to be happily married to David, but her condition is pathetic. She keeps her face covered with makeup all the time and uses her body as the weapon to keep David married to her. The protagonist describes her as:

Rump on packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as bold as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone’s head. She is locked in, she isn’t allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth, nothing goes in, nothing comes out. She takes her clothes off or puts them on, paperdoll wardrobe, --- her face twists into poses exultation and total abandonment, that is all. She is not bored, she has no other interests. 34

Anna and David’s marriage is not based on mutual love and respect. There is lack of communication between them. Because of powerful and dominating David’s nature, Anna learns to control herself and her
appearances. To keep her marriage together, she immunes herself from his often brutal use of the language. She is unnatural. Her insecurities and weaknesses are revealed in her perilous marriage to David.

The other minor characters in the novel are – Mr. Percival, Bill Malmstrom, Evan, Claude, Paul and Madame. Mr. Percival is the protagonist’s employer. As a publisher of children’s books, he is a cautious man and avoids any book illustrations that he finds disturbing. Bill Malmstrom is a member of the Detroit branch of the Wildlife Protection Association of America. He appears to be a typical ‘American.’ The narrator distrusts him. Evans is the owner of the Blue Moon cabins. This old man works as a guide. The protagonist hires him to take them to and from the cabin. Claude is a son of the owner of the village hotel and bar. In addition to helping his father run the bar, he works as a fishing guide. Paul is the protagonist’s father’s best friend. Like her father, Paul represents the simple life. And like her mother, he is closely linked with nature and growing things. He is French Canadian but he speaks English. Madame is Paul’s wife. Unlike her husband, she speaks only French. This stout woman’s appearance is typical of wood carvings sold in tourist handicraft shops.

2.2.6. Theme:

The problem of establishing a personal and social identity is a theme in postcolonial literature. In Surfacing Margaret Atwood explores this problem in a very well manner. The novel presents the female quest for identity with reference to profession, marriage and motherhood. It depicts man’s imposition on woman in these matters. That disables her intellectually, emotionally and morally. It questions and challenges
woman’s place in traditional discourse and suggest a rejection of such discourse. It confronts:

---convention and ideology, questioning what the masculine tradition has defined as ‘right’ and ‘acceptable’, and work toward opening a space from which a woman can speak her desire---and in her discourse. 35

The novel seems to interrogate the notion of identity formation, nationality, culture, language, gender, sex, childhood, memories, the family relationships, human interaction with nature, etc. which are given one after another in the novel as the protagonist embarks on a journey to search for her botanist father who has mysteriously vanished from his cabin in the lake. From that the central theme is protagonist’s search for her real self, her true identity and her re-entering the world from which she has been alienated. She embarks on a quest at two levels — the search for her real self which is a psychological quest and the other is a social quest that lessens the alienation between herself and the real world.

The protagonist is a divided person. Her division is twofold —between her mind and her body, between the past and the present. “I can’t believe I’m on this road again”36 is the start of her quest. She is fragmented. The separation between her mind and her body begins to lessen when she becomes conscious of the child within her. So she undergoes complete purgation by fire by burning everything in the cabin that can be burned. Even the ring her fake husband had given her is put into the fire thinking it may not melt it will be at least purified. Then she goes into water after shedding all her clothes. There are the tests she must undergo in order to arrive at more revelations. She begins to return to everyday, normal world. She realizes that she loves and trusts Joe.
I watch him, my love for him useless as a third eye or a possibility. If I go with him, we will have to talk--- we will have to begin. For us it’s necessary, the intercession of words; and we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully. That’s normal, it’s the way it happens now and I don’t know whether it’s worth if or even if I can depend on him, he may have been sent as a trick. But he isn’t an American, I can see that now; he isn’t anything, he is only half formed, and for that reason I can trust him. To trust is to let go --- he won’t wait much longer. But right now he waits.\(^{37}\)

Thus the protagonist has completed her quest. She is a unified human being with reason and emotion working in her. She has accepted her past.

Except this the protagonist’s social experiences dominate *Surfacing*. There is also the issue of her relationship with other people – her parents, her brother, her fake husband, her present live-in lover, Joe and her best friends of two months – David and Anna. Her quest for her father provides her an opportunity to interact with others socially. In the beginning, the protagonist and her friend, Joe, David and Anna are alienated people, unable to communicate successfully with one another. They lead isolated and withdrawn lives. In this sense, novel relates a social theme.

The relation she sets up between herself and others can be evidenced in the use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ throughout the book; she remains nameless till the end. She never reveals the names of her parents, her brother or her fake husband. She keeps referring to them as ‘they’. Her world is divided between ‘I’ and ‘they’. Being nameless the protagonist
says to her friend Anna: “I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I’m not and I’m through pretending.”\textsuperscript{38} She knows very little about her best friends Anna and David whom she has known for just two months. She reveals the truth about her unborn child only to Joe towards the end of the second section of the novel, when he proposes marriage to her. She tells him:

“Look”, I said, “I’ve been married before and it didn’t work out. I had a baby too.” My ace, voice patient. “I don’t want to go through that again.” It was true, but the words were coming out of me like the mechanical words from a talking doll, the kind with the pull tape at the back; the whole speech was unwinding, everything in order, a spool.\textsuperscript{39}

But the relationship of protagonist and Joe suffers from a lack of communication and commitment.

Another theme of the novel is a plea for a balanced man-woman relationship. The protagonist grows up in a masculine world. She narrates her early experience, when she was in school.

The boys chased and captured the girl after school and tied them up in their own skipping ropes, --- I spent many afternoons looped to fences and gates and convenient trees, waiting for a benevolent adult to pass and free me; later I became an escape artist of sorts, experts at undoing knots.\textsuperscript{40}

She grew up in a system in which it was worse for a girl to ask questions than for a boy. Everyone is made to feel that men ought to be superior.

In her youth the protagonist realises that she could have been a great artist if she had not cared to listen to her fake husband. He told her that there have never been any important woman artists in history and she
believes him. That time she loves her art teacher who uses all his skill to seduce her. He gave a wedding ring and creates the image of himself as her husband. But actually he is middle-aged, average, second rate and a selfish person who has a wife and children. When she is pregnant, he uses all tricks to abort the child. For him it is simple like getting a wart removed. That is why he is not there when they are slaughtering the unborn child within her. He is celebrating the birthday of one of his children. Yet she realizes:

For him I could have been anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that’s where I learned. I worshipped him, --- I kept scraps of his handwriting like saint’s relics.  

Thus she is betrayed by selfish lover. She comes to know that men exploit the bodies of women for their needs. They can control the process of childbirth, which nature has assigned only to women. Anna, protagonist’s friend marries David. Even David also does not want to get Anna pregnant. He compels her for taking birth control pills so that he can enjoy sex without risk.

In accompany of each other, the protagonist and Joe loves each other. Joe proposes her but she refuses his proposal. She distrusts love and marriage as savage bonds even though she is fond of Joe and wants to attach with him. In the course of time, the union with Joe gives her a vision of her dead child. She realizes that motherhood would lead her to self-recognition. She thinks that the only way for her of expiating the sin of having killed the previous baby is to conceive again, to produce a baby and to mother it. To conceive, she looks for a male companion. She chooses Joe as an option and performed the sexual act with Joe. Actually there is no emotional involvement, she has actually used Joe. Because she
comes to know that the baby is necessary not only to her personal psychic salvation, but also the salvation of the world. She decides to struggle to free herself from the sense of victimhood. She wishes to give birth to a truly human child and a supporter of ideal society.

2.2.7. Imagery:

In *Surfacing*, the protagonist thinks in terms of images. These images do not belong to history, mythology, religion or folklore. They take their meaning and significance from the protagonist’s personal associations with them. They help to develop characterization, plot and themes of the novel. According to Woodcock no wonder “If among modern Canadian poets there is in spirit a true descendant of the imagist, it is Margaret Atwood.”[^42] Margaret Atwood portrays the pictures so minutely that it shows visuals image to the reader.

The image is vivid and detailed in *Surfacing*. The images of human get mixed with the images of animals. Joe is compared to animals. The protagonist wishes that he grows ‘more fur’; he is ‘half formed’ and may be trusted. She calls him “like the buffalo on the U.S.nickel.”[^43] The protagonist recalls her mother as a ‘bird’. David often refers to Americans as ‘pigs’. He wants Anna to look ‘like a young chick.’ He and Anna are machines. The protagonist refers to the baby to be born as “shape of a goldfish now in my belly.”[^44] She recalls her aborted child as an imprisoned frog. She also thinks that it has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother’s stomach like a frog in a jar. She visualises it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at her like a cat pickled and it had fins instead of hands, fish gills. Thus in the vision of the protagonist, animals and human beings are interlinked.
Next image in the novel is to be a victim. Females are victimized by males. The protagonist herself is a biological victim of a man who exploits her. Her unborn baby was killed for no fault. She feels guilty that she could not save her baby. In her childhood she has been a victim of school bullies. In youth she is victim of her fake husband, a selfish person who exploited her sexually and when she became pregnant, made her undergo abortion. In this process, not only the protagonist, her fetus has also been victimized. She later realizes this is her own guilt. Then David is a victim of Americanism. He enjoys victimizing others. Anna is a victim of David. Most of time, Anna is worried about her look and his ever changing rules. All time she uses her body as the weapon to keep him happy.

The image of death and disease is associated with the death of protagonist’s father, he aborted unborn child, her mother, animals and nature. She says that ever since her abortion, she had carried the death inside her. She sees Americanism as a disease. Most of the time, she is disturbed by the images of tarps. The protagonist uses image of colours. Red colour is associated with feelings and emotions. She is emotionless. So the red colour seems to be missing from her life. She says that Green is associated with Nature. It is cool and comfortable which associated with the protagonist’s parents. Pink colour is associated with city life, power and evil things. She dislikes it but Anna loves it. In the novel journey of the protagonist is from colour-lessness to colours.

2.2.8. **Symbolism:**

Symbolism in the novel supports the main theme. This is represented by the appearances of the fish. For protagonist the fish is the symbol of wholeness, the unity between the mind and the body, emotion
and reason. Like frogs and snakes, fishes have heads that extend directly into the shoulders. It is very difficult to see their heads and their bodies as separate. The second section of the novel begins with:

The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I’m not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong, it shouldn’t have different words for them. If the head extended directly into the shoulders like a worm’s or a frog’s without that constriction, that lie, they wouldn’t be able to look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets; they would have to realise that if the head is detached from the body both of them will die. \(^{45}\)

Another symbol in the novel is the heron. It, as a trophy of power is hanged with wings outspread in crucifixion position. She sees it as symbolic of her own psychological death. Then two aspects of the Natural world — water and air, work together to provide powerful symbols. Air is associated with consciousness and reason. And water is associated with unconsciousness or feeling. On a symbolic level, the protagonist leaves the conscious world. When she returns to the air, she returns to the conscious world. The symbolic journey of the protagonist realizes her that she must give up her passivity. When she returns to society, there is a great transformation in her personality for the better. She returns to struggle and survive with dignity.

2.2.9. Language:

The language of the novel is cool and impersonal. It presents the narrator’s cool approach of life and her inability to feel. The protagonist
argues that the common definition of sanity is, “To have someone to speak to and words that can be understood.” She knows that language helps to maintain mutual interdependence of self and world. For her a language is everything. Thus the language of the novel becomes less complicated and more direct, less intellectual and more emotional for the protagonist.

2.2.10. View of Life:

The novel opens with an ordinary journey and ends with the journey of self-realization. It revolves around the relationship between the man and woman. There are two types of relationship, one is between the married husband and wife and another is without marriage relationship. The females are with loss of identity, the muteness and uncommunicative. But at last they understand the power of women. The protagonist chooses the path of isolation and back to the city to face life. Emerging as a New Woman, she is not only aware of her status but also challenging traditional notions of being treated as a decorative piece or a commodity. She is concerned with arguing that she is a normal human being struggling with her imperfections to establish her identity. She desires to organize all the weak victims to protest against the oppression of strong victimizers. Thus she wants to be a leader for all exploited and weak person. The battle is not only between two sexes but also between the strong and the weak. She ends up as an activist. She says:

They’ll mistake me for a human being, a naked woman wrapped in a blanket: possibly that’s what they’ve come here for, if it’s running around loose, ownerless, why not take it. They won’t be able to tell what I really am. But if they guess
my true form, identity, they will shoot me or bludgeon in my skull and hang me up by the feet from a tree.  

For a male dominated society, a natural woman is powerless and exploitable. Women are burdened by the rules of their society. They have to struggle to overcome that for the social change. Narrator’s journey ends off discovering about herself and her relation with the world.

In *Surfacing* protagonist’s view of life is not only revolutionary but also optimistic. In the end she has a new hope that a woman can emerge as a New Woman with a new courage to lead happy life. In Rigney’s words, “possibility of self-actualization for woman despite the psychologically divesting effects of the male supremacist societies in which they live.” She realizes that she cannot turn away from society. Hence she returns to the city with new courage. She is prepared for challenges of life. She wants to be a brave new woman who is capable of establishing her own identity. She wishes men to understand that death of woman is the death of mankind, “if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me---- it must be born, allowed.” In fact, two sexes are complementary. Neither is complete without the other. The protagonist’s return to human existence at the end of the novel is, Rigney says, “To live, she decides, is a responsibility to her parents, to society, to herself.”
2.3. Introduction:

_Lady Oracle_, Margaret Atwood’s third novel, published in 1976 is a comic masterpiece in its parodies of literary forms. Atwood creates a new genre in the fictional area. The novel is the portrait of the writer as woman who kills her own identity into fantasy and romance. As a female writer, the protagonist of the novel, Joan Foster plays the part of a metaphorical sibyl, an oracle, for whom writing is a visionary experience. Commenting on the significance of oracle Howells says:

An oracle is that it is a voice which comes out of a woman’s body and is associated with hidden dangerous knowledge ---

The voice of the Delphic Oracle was the voice of the god Apollo, or earlier the voice of the Earth Goddess.51

Joan Foster unfolds her oracle to reporter about the politics of gender.

2.3.1. Title:

Like the protagonist of _The Edible Woman_ and _Surfacing_, Joan, the protagonist of _Lady Oracle_ understands the most perfect need for escape. But unlike those previous heroines, this new one is much better, much more successful in that real romance of her life. The protagonist in _The Edible Woman_ only learns to live meaningfully but she does not try to change her society. But Joan wishes to transform society through her writing. So the title of the novel, _Lady Oracle_ signifies about Joan as a woman writer. It seems that elements of Atwood’s life as an artist which have disturbed her are explored through the career of Joan. Atwood
affirms woman writer’s autonomy and individuality in the novel by depicting male-female relationships in the contemporary society.

2.3.2. Narration:

*Lady Oracle* deals with a multi-named narrator, Joan Foster. The narrator-protagonist finds herself lost in a self-created maze of impersonation and suffers an identity crisis. Joan Delacourt becomes Joan Foster when she marries Arthur and pretends not to have a mind of her own. She is Lousia K. Delacourt, the author of Gothic fiction and also the super-poet and overnight celebrity who wrote “The runway best-seller *Lady Oracle.*” In private life, she is Arthur’s wife, the Royal Porcupine’s lover and the Polish Count’s mistress.

The novel, *Lady Oracle* goes through five drafts and requires two years to complete. It is first case as a second person address to Arthur and is to end, tragically with a real death. The novel grows and changes immensely in the process of writing, until it becomes the autobiography of Joan Delacourt, wife of Arthur Foster and writer of costume Gothics. Joan tells her story to the reporter who has discovered her in part.

2.3.3. Plot-construction:

*Lady Oracle* is a story about storytelling, both the stories themselves and the writing process. The novel is structured through a series of interlocking frames. First, there is the story of Joan’s real life in the present, set in Italy where she has escaped after her fake suicide in Toronto, Canada. The story begins with the narrator’s startling announcement: “I planned my death carefully.” Joan has indeed staged her drowning in Lake Ontario and is hiding in the small Italian town of Terremoto – the town of earthquakes. The brief first part of the novel takes place entirely in the present at Terremoto and quickly introduces to
Joan’s personality, her need for escape, her imagination and her writing. Why she is hiding out or has staged her death and left her husband, only unfolds slowly in the three subsequent parts of the novel that cover, in chronological order. She wants her death, unlike her life.

As a slim, attractive adult, Joan conceals her former life, her unhappy childhood when she was chronically overweight. She also conceals her secret identity as Louisa K. Delacourt – the name under which Joan publishes her books like *Love, My Ransom*. Joan composes a best-selling poetry collection, *Lady Oracle*. The success of the book causes her to become prey to a blackmailer who threatens her to her identity. Therefore, Joan works out a plan to fly to Rome. Joan takes an accidental drowning and escape to Italy under another false name. There she writes the truth about her book and emerges as a serious writer. The change from fat child to a stunning young woman represents the magical transformation.

Part two of the novel is about Joan’s private memory narrative of childhood. It is filled with shame, pain and defiance centering on her relationship with her mother. There is the continuous conflict between them. During one of the stage shows Joan wants to be a butterfly in the ‘Butterfly Frolic’. She is eager to wear coloured wings while performing the group dance. But she is compelled to be a ‘mothball’ in the middle of the colourful butterflies. The greatest loss is not wearing the wings. Joan is aware that she cannot wear a butterfly dress because of her fatness. This incident takes a deep-root in her psyche. Then Joan tries to live out the suggestions of her mother.

Joan’s mother always attempts to shape Joan into her own notion of female identity. She rejects to let Joan develop on her own. Joan does
everything to fit into the identity her mother chooses for her. Her mother is a dominating woman who makes Joan feel that she is not the master of her own life. These thoughts are well-expressed in her outbursts “I didn’t like her. She was always trying to tell me how to run my life.” Thus Joan is an unfulfilled woman.

In part three Joan escape to London and becomes a writer of popular Gothics. Mistress to a Polish Count, her marriage to a Canadian, her celebrity as a poet, followed by the threat of blackmail and her second escape from Canada to Italy are the main incidents which took place in this part. Joan discovers Polish Count as a conventional Edger Linton beneath his Heathclif pose. She leaves him and becomes involved with Arthur who feeds her pride by showing respect for her intelligence. Joan makes all efforts to fit into a new image that of a loving and dutiful wife. But with every change in Arthur’s social concern, Joan has to adjust her views.

There is a fourth narrative thread, the curiously mythic Lady Oracle poems. Joan believes that this production is automatic writing when she looks into a dark mirror in her bedroom in Toronto. When Joan decides to do something for her own satisfaction, her book of poetry Lady Oracle is published. She assures that Arthur would be humiliated by her success. Joan’s act of doing something for her creates static in her relationship with Arthur. Actually Joan has an affair, asserting her own needs and identity, instead of Arthur’s. Throughout her life Joan has to transform her identity to please someone.

In writing Gothic fantasy, Joan has shared the guilt of those writers who assure women that conventional female virtue will receive tangible rewards. She has helped to keep the house haunted with romantic fears.
Thus Joan is untrustworthy narrator. The whole story may be a fabrication. If Joan fabricated story, at least she has made up for herself neither an unrealistic happy ending nor a dramatic tragic one, but an ending which is ambiguous yet hopeful. The novel is open-ended. There are chances that Joan may go back to save her friends from embarrassment or she may stay in Italy. The novel’s plot within a plot interrupts the chronology of the main narrative creating different temporal levels, with the inter-textual references offering alternative temporal dimensions. The novel does not end on heroic note. Atwood does not allow her heroine to redeem herself in death, nor does she allow her heroine to fall into the arms of her true lover. Instead Joan will return to Toronto to clear the friends who are charged with her murder and to confess all.

2.3.4. Characters:

The fictional characters in the novel are all projections of Atwood. Lady Oracle is the lady within the mirror, alias the Great Goddess, alias mother, alias Joan. The complex personality of Joan Foster is the central figure in this brilliant, funny and sad novel. She is the daughter of an insensitive and irresponsible man. Her father goes to war leaving his wife pregnant and does not return home until Joan is five years old. The main influence in Joan’s life during her teens, apart from her mother, is her Aunt Lou. Joan is practically brought up by Aunt Lou.

Joan does not wish to be “an ideal drone” sitting at home. With her new shape and fortune, Joan leaves Toronto and goes to London. There she gets involved in the first of her affairs with Polish Court, Paul. But very soon she realizes that he is a threat to identity as a writer. He considers her far inferior to him in respect of intellectual pursuits. So she
leaves him for Arthur. She is trapped in the confusion of incomprehensive, unresponsive and apathetic marriage with Arthur. The indifference of Arthur drives Joan to get involved with Chuck, the Royal Porcupine. She escapes with a lover, Chuck. He wants her to leave Arthur and move in with him. She never feels safe and secure in the presence of her husband. She flies to Italy. She shows independence and courage and relates her story to a reporter. Always she tries to search for a new identity.

With her new shape and fortune, Joan leaves Toronto, her family, her carefully concealed past behind and goes to London. She begins her adult life in England as a versatile writer. By chance she meets Paul when she falls off a double-decker bus in London as her money is running out. Paul is a polish count and forty-one years old. He is married. He has a daughter back in Poland well as a mother. In England he obtains the job of a clerk in a bank. He is working in the foreign exchange department. Except this Joan finds that Paul poses as Mavis Quilp, the writer of Nurse Novels. He is a compulsive and romantic liar.

Paul offers her Nurse Novels, which are useless, books dealing with illicit relations between doctors and nurses. His attitude towards Joan indicates that he has got the ideas of womanhood. She explores the personality of him as a liar. She soon realizes that he is a threat to her identity as a writer as well as he is a manipulator. She gives reasons for not being able to strike a meaningful relationship with him. Firstly, she detests him because he considers a woman as an empty vessel and sewing; secondly she resents that he categorizes women as ‘wives’ and ‘mistresses’, a derogatory word. She says:
It’s an odd term, “mistress”, but that was how he thought of me, there 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. Thirdly, she learns that he believes in ‘cataclysmic’ relationships. Fourthly, she discovers that he claims man superior to woman and declares: “---- the mystery of man is of the mind, whereas that of the woman is of the body.” He considers a woman far inferior to a man in respect of intellectual pursuits. Because of these reasons she leaves him for Arthur.

While Paul represents conventional male models in contrast Arthur is a radical who champions the cause of the oppressed. Atwood attacks in the novel not only the conventional patterns of thinking which show woman as inferior to man but also exposes the shallowness of the pseudo-radical among men. Besides Paul, another man whom Joan encounters is Arthur, a graduate student from the Maritimes in Hyde Park, London. By chance she meets him while 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 as a leaflet man. His father was the judge, his mother, the religious nut. He changes his theories constantly. He is seen as a multilayered personality with various colourful revolutionary costumes. He shares his flat with two other men, a New Zealander named Slocum who is studying at the London school of Economics. His second partner is an Indian.

Arthur 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 become better acquainted. If it didn’t work out, well, it would be a learning experience. Most importantly, we could live much more cheaply together than we could separately.\textsuperscript{58}

Arthur expects her to be a cook and domestic servant to serve him for years. She changes her right attitude and obeys him only for the sake of her love for Arthur. But very soon she realizes that her failure as a cook is his enjoyment.

Arthur also imposes restrictions that Joan should not wear long fashionable dresses in public because he feels that she may attract the exploiters. He becomes sadistic in the bedroom. She proposes that it is time for them “to settle down somewhere, a little more permanently, and have children.”\textsuperscript{59} But Arthur dislikes her suggestion. He festoons their bedroom with every known form of birth-control device and compels her to take the pill. Joan gets bored and frustrated in her marital life with Arthur because he does not understand her ideals and aspirations. At that time she publishes \textit{Love Defied} and \textit{Lady Oracle} on male-female relationships and hides her identity as a writer from her husband. He is confused by the sudden status of Joan as a writer. Her interview on T.V. is a terrible humiliation to Arthur. He behaves as she has committed some unpardonable but unmentionable sin by giving an interview on T.V. because it attacks his woman-hatred mentality. He begins to look at her as a betrayer. Life becomes difficult for Joan. She sells her piece, \textit{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. His theories and ideologies make her restless.
The indifference of Arthur drives the simple Joan to get involved with Chuck, the Royal Porcupine, a non-create poet. He meets Joan after her T.V. interview. 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 and drags her into sexual immorality. He wants her to leave Arthur and move in with him. He is not only a blackmailer but also a fake researcher. Once he cites an incident from the private life of Joan to blackmail her for sex and money. When Joan refuses to marry, he frightens her. He has his black notebook which is a collection of data about the lives of women – his clients. He knows about the private and secret identities of several authors including Joan. She seizes his black notebook and runs away when he is drunk. She lets him know that she is possession of his notebook. She also encloses a note that if anything happens to her the book is in good hands. Thus Joan pays Buchanan in his own coin.

Except these main characters there are some minor characters – Joan’s father, mother and aunt. Joan is the daughter of an insensitive and irresponsible man who is an anesthetist at the Toronto General Hospital. 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. He suspects his wife of infidelity. Yet Joan Foster’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 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. I had to make the best of a bad job – 61

She is trapped into marriage by an undesired pregnancy and be left helpless in domesticity – “a plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit”62 for her. Joan’s mother feels much oppressed by her joyless life. So she commits suicide by throwing herself down the cellar stairs. After death of the mother, Joan sees her father as the one who murdered her:

My suspicions began the next day, when my father said to me at breakfast, looking at me with his new, shy eyes and sounding as if he’d rehearsed it. --- I began to hunt for motives, another woman, another man, an insurance policy, a single overwhelming grievance. I examined my father’s shirt collars for lipstick, I sifted through official looking papers in his bureau drawers, I listened in on the few phone calls he received ---- 63

Joan’s mother is a victim of the soul-damaging stereotype created by patriarchy. Thus as a doctor her father has two sets of costumes namely ‘healer’ and ‘killer’.

Joan’s obesity as a young girl is a matter of much concern to her mother. She advised her daughter to make slim and thin, but Joan fails her mother’s plans and enjoys secretly her demonstration:

---- I had developed the habit of clomping silently but very visibly through rooms in which my mother was sitting; --- it was a display, I wanted her to see and recognize what little effect her nagging and pleas were having.64
Instead of accepting Joan’s appearance as a fat girl, her mother tries to transform her. She also transforms self-face by putting on layers of make-up. By projecting her shadow on her daughter, Joan’s mother tries to avoid a confrontation with her own inner darkness. Joan regards her mother as a detached observer of her traumas. Joan thinks that she is an ‘accident,’ the unwanted daughter of an insecure, unhappy woman and carries her sad story around her neck.

The main influence in Joan’s life during her teens, apart from her mother, is her Aunt Lou. She came into contact with Aunt Lou who is Chief Public Relations Officer in Toronto. Practically Joan is brought up by Aunt Lou. She opens the world of stories to Joan. She regards her as her savior. Joan uses her name in her career as gothic novelist. Aunt leaves Joan two thousand dollars in her will on the sole condition that her niece loose one hundred pounds. For this she diets in earnest until, transformed into a slim red-haired beauty. Then Joan researches into the details of Aunt Lou’s unhappy marriage. At the age of nineteen, Aunt Lou is married to compulsive gambler. She tries to reform her husband by resisting his gambling habits. Her so-called gambler husband is also a great liar who has least concern and love for his wife. She says 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 begin tied down. It was very sad, really. One day he just never came back. May be they shot him for not paying. I wondered if he’s still alive; if he is I suppose I’m still married to him.65

Thus utter casualness in which she reports their relationship points to its artificiality.
After her frustrating experiences with her husband, Aunt Lou settles down as the Head, Department of Public Relations of a firm in Canada. There she comes into contact with Robert, her boyfriend who is an accountant. He has wife and children. He comes to her apartment on Sunday evenings for dinner. He watches Aunt Lou as if she is the most beautiful woman. In church Joan meets the Reverend Leda Sprott. She is the spiritualist. Her messages seem to come from inside her head. She helps Joan to develop her great power, the automatic writing. She performs Joan’s marriage ceremony to Arthur.

2.3.5. Theme:

The novel, *Lady Oracle* explores the problems faced by female writer in making an equal place with man in the realm of literature. Joan’s work is discriminated against on the basis of sex. Atwood says:

A man’s work is reviewed for its style and ideas, but all too often a woman’s is reviewed for the supposed personality of the author as based on the jacket photograph. When a man is attacked in print, it’s usually for saying what he says; when a woman is attacked in print, it’s often for being who she is.

Joan’s literary reputation spreads and she receives phone call from all sorts of people. Her identity as a writer is distorted. This new fame makes her more open to an attack on her life. Like all celebrities she visualizes it as a threat to her life. So Joan dyes her hair, puts on dark glasses, a printed dress and flees to Rome in disguise with the help of her friends. Joan’s search for a new identity is the main theme of this novel. It is met with a stiff opposition from the patriarchal order. Commenting on this Roberta Sciff Zamaro observes:
In *Lady Oracle* Joan’s concealment clearly symbolizes the feminist writer’s imprisonment in canons dictated by society in which art has been the domain of men; and her quest for a new self represents the woman-writers quest for a new identity as an artist, an identity freed from the traditional stereotypes imposed by a patriarchal culture.

The novel concludes saying that life is as struggle and strange as fiction which is about the growth of a girl to maturity who wishes to transform society through writing.

The relationship between men and women in society is the central theme of the novel, *Lady Oracle*. Joan realizes different male strategies of the exploitation and oppression of women. She unfolds to a harmless reporter this politics of gender such as condemning female writers to kitchen, devaluation of their creative work and narrow categorization of women as wives and mistresses. The novel raises its voice against the imposition of sexual and gender roles upon women in a paternalist society. It is feminist writer’s frontal attack on the dominant pattern of gender relations in contemporary society.

The novel’s minor theme is the resolution of multiple personalities. Joan, the protagonist of the novel does not succeed in forming an integrated adult self. Joan tries to escape the tangled web of her relationship with men from several different backgrounds. She doesn’t find her ‘true’ self through her art but instead acquires an increasing number of identities, one completely different from the other. The novel analyzes the relationship of popular woman’s fiction to the actual lives of woman through the quest of the narrator-protagonist, a writer of Gothic romances. The connection between life and art explores in its
examination of the growth and development of the woman-as-artist and artist-as-woman in a society where both these roles are marginalized. The conflict between the person, the artist and the social environment is particularly acute for the woman, for whom the quest for selfhood itself is problematic.

2.3.6. Imagery:

Joan’s many inspired identities are derived from mirrors. Even the fat lady image is one she sees reflected in fun-house mirror as a child. Mirror becomes symbols of the fragmented self, providing a distorted image of the self, stealing one’s sense of real or complete self, robbing one of an identity. Mirrors symbolize not the moral and psychological limitations of the female protagonist but the emphasis the society places on the female image as consumer items. The satire in it is directed against stereotypical images associated with women writers. For example, reviewers tend to devote a lot of attention of the physical appearance of women writers rather than their works. Joan says that every reviewer of her book had mentioned her red hair in their reviews and concludes, “hair in the female was regarded as more important than either talent or the lack of it.”

2.3.7. Symbolism:

Then in Joan’s case, symbolic death is not able to free the heroine from her phantoms. She is imprisoned and the ghost of her mother, which is a reflection of her former self, will continue to haunt her even in Terremoto. Her imprisonment symbolizes also the feminist writer’s imprisonment in canons dictated by a society in which art has always been the domain of men and her quest for a new self represents the woman-writer’s quest for a new identity as an artist.
**Metaphor** — In *Lady Oracle* metaphorically, Joan’s life is a bewildering maze, which meanders along from one thing to another. In addition to her frequent transformations and her longing for new lives, Joan actually undergoes a rite of death and rebirth surfacing from the waters of Lake Ontario reborn! The humour also lives both in the fantastic situations of Joan’s life, whether as fat child dressed in a butterfly costume or as desperate culture heroine confronting an interviewer and in the verbal wit of her narration. Joan is a master at self-caricature. When she remembers herself tied in the ravine for the bad man she admits, “I can’t have been a very exciting sexual object, a fat, snotty-nosed eight-year-old in a Brownie outfit.” Joan’s witticisms are largely unconscious.

**Satire** — The satire in the novel is also more cutting. Atwood pokes fun at traditions in Canadian writing including her own:

> Why in *Lady Oracle* is the can-create artists form squashed animals? It’s a direct reference. To my own book of Criticism as well as the whole tradition of Canadian animal stories. In Italy the animals come in rococo poses---- But for Canada they have to be squashed and frozen.

Thus, Atwood satirizes many aspects of her own writing as well as of her public image. Providing humour and satire, the novel is a sustained double parody of the realist novel on one hand and of the Gothic romance on the other.

**Irony** — The irony of the novel lies in the fact that it is a double parody. The irony is a function of the dualistic structure of the narrative. The novel reflects Gothics. It reflects Joan’s life. Arthur becomes angry because the poetry apparently reflects their marriage. The treatment of duality in novel is more than an object of satire or the subject of
“funhouse-mirror reflection.” Atwood has once again explored the duplicity of life on several levels. Throughout her life Joan struggles to plot events to achieve happy endings and typecast her friends. Her men must be heroes or villains. But she longs to be a heroine in a romantic scenario.

2.3.8. View of Life:

Throughout *Lady Oracle*, Margaret Atwood expects through the mouthpiece of Joan that both men and women are equal. They have same human capabilities. Therefore, gender-based injustices should be fought against in the society. The novel is the portrait of the writer as a woman. It shows how the identity and individuality of woman writer is destroyed behind the mask of anonymous authority of male writers and her writing is gendered and classed by sex status. Ultimately, the protagonist emerges as a serious writer in Rome and leaves an optimistic note to 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 towards the sun.

This comic novel contributes to the subject of feminine identity quest through the protagonist’s search for integration in her sense of self and also in her style of writing. Joan suffers an identity crisis, because she has too many identities. She is Joan Foster who pretends not to have a mind of her own because Arthur, her husband, does not like to have a woman with a mind of her own. But she hopes to win his love some day as she is an optimist, with a lust for happy endings.
2.4. Introduction:

Atwood’s fourth novel, *Life Before Man* (1979) marks the beginning of a new stage in her artistic evolution. Apparently, the novel focuses on the life of three characters namely, Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje and their day-to-day problems. At one level, it is Atwood’s first attempt at social and domestic realism in which modern urban society is depicted. Stouck calls it a “Sombre novel of social realism” and adds that “this familiar tale of urban infidelity is Atwood’s examination of the moral torpor of her generation in the late seventies.”73 It is a social chronicle tracing a web of invented lives so that the role of the novelist is close to the role of social historian. The novel is not only a social vehicle which reflects society but also a late twentieth-century multi-voiced novel.

2.4.1. Title:

Atwood, interpreting the title of *Life Before Man* says that “for Elizabeth, it means that her own life is given priority over any relationship with a man.”74 The Eliza-Chris affair is significant for Chris who is a compliant person with low self-esteem and depends on Elizabeth for a sense of identity. The word ‘before’ of the title reverses its direction to point not backwards to the distant past but forwards to the future. All three characters – Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje find they must bring face to face the life before man by ceasing to hide in elaborate fantasy worlds or blaming of the past. Except this the early working titles for *Life Before Man* were *Notes on the Mesozoic*, and then *Notes from the Lost World.*
Both novels set their inquiry in relation to scientific and social doctrines of evolution. Atwood’s scientific frames of reference are natural history, geology and astronomy with the principal setting for the novel being the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto where both the female protagonists works. Lesje is a paleontologist. Elizabeth is in charge of Special Projects and publicity. Both women are engaged in translating science into popular language for the general public.

2.4.2. Story:

Atwood regards *Life Before Man* as her most domestic novel, with its triangular plot where a wife takes a lover and later that lover commits suicide, the marriage breaks up and her husband goes to live with another woman. Atwood is credited with saying that she wrote *Life Before Man* as a homage to George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, which is generally acknowledged to be the classic Victorian realist novel. In response to an interviewer’s request to discuss that claim, she replied;

In *Middlemarch* everything is middle – it’s the middle of the nineteenth century, it’s middle class, it’s the middle of England ---- It’s about life as lived by the middle and that’s what *Life Before Man* is. It’s the middle of Toronto, it’s somewhat the middle of the twentieth century, the people are middle-aged.75

The action of *Life Before Man* is set at a particular historical moment in a socially and geographically specific location. The characters act in ways with which most readers can readily relate. This is Atwood’s Life as lived by the middle. Atwood has taken for her subject-matter the near-terminal impoverishment of the human. The novel covers two years from ‘Friday, October 29, 1976’ to ‘Friday, August 18, 1978’ in the lives of
three ordinary middle class people where a wife, Elizabeth takes a lover and later the lover, Chris commits suicide, the marriage breaks up and the husband, Nate goes to live with another woman, Lesje – “charting the development and deterioration of their relationships within the context of daily routine, miscommunication, tawdry affairs and gray emotional struggle.”

Elizabeth’s ruthless and intimidating nature, Nate’s indecision and malleability, Lesje’s struggle for status and the dynamics of power play contextualized as they are within a network of romantic intrigues between bedfellows. The novel combines the story of evolution with the story of a domestic triangle which looks backward to prehistory and forward to the future. The act of storytelling itself is regarded as positive but the contents of the story are not. The story does not stop with the presentation of social problems. It goes deeper and probes the psyche of three characters affected by their social and familial problems.

2.4.3. Narration:

*Life Before Man* differs from Atwood’s previous novels in its narrative structure. The novel is presented through the viewpoints of main three characters – Elizabeth, Mate and Lesje. Toronto’s natural history museum, the Royal Ontario Museum serves as a central point for three protagonists, two of whom Elizabeth and Lesje are employed there. Nate, the third protagonist is married to Elizabeth at the start of the novel and becomes involved with Lesje as the novel progress. Events in the outside world are shown indirectly. The impending separation of Quebec and Canada is related to Nate’s and Elizabeth’s disintegrating marriage. Canada and the lives of the protagonists are seen at points of rupture; the small-scale domestic drama of *Life Before Man* works as a microcosm of
global change. Atwood contrasts the pessimism of the plot with the optimism of the act of writing it.

The temporal and spatial documentation is very specific, giving details of date, location and speaker for every section, rather like the form of a diary. For the first couple of days there is a tight pattern of triple voices per day, where the protagonists are named, though by the third day the rigid structure begins to break down. With the novel, the time period is nearly two years during which time, circumstances change for all the characters. The novel is characterized by unsettling shifts of focus, with radical changes of perspective within every section as a character’s attention moves between intense preoccupation with present issues and the wider spaces of memory or prehistory.

2.4.4. Plot-construction:

This complex social narrative contains three different narratives of survival. The first section opens out into the vast spaces of the universe with the report of a suicide. There are frequent flashbacks of memory and the crucial event of the suicide of Chris Beecham, Elizabeth’s lover has happened one week before the narrative action begins. At the first three chapters all occupying the same time slot in 1976 and the same Toronto location, two of the characters being inside the same house, the novel opens with Elizabeth’s interior monologue:

I don’t know how I should live. I don’t know how anyone should live. All I know is how I do live. I live like a peeled snail. And that’s no way to make money.77

With this outcry of a subject the human dimension is given priority over the vastness of prehistory signaled in the title. The characters go through the motions of everyday life and stick to their civilized routines. All the
three are occupied with identical problems of everyday life. They have their emotional needs, fears and difficulties.

In second part of novel, Atwood introduces many minor characters and the world of Elizabeth’s childhood. She is the product of contradictions in the past of her family. She grows up in unhealthy and joyless family surroundings. As Elizabeth is brought up by Auntie Muriel, she becomes a part child, part prisoner, part orphan, part cripple and part insane. In an interview Atwood describes Elizabeth’s relationship with her aunt: “she absolutely hates loves and detests her Aunt – which gives her a lot of energy. Her hatred drives her on.”

She is caught between the predicament of her mother and the bad upbringing of Auntie Muriel, “the wicked witch.”

The third part sweeps back via Lesje’s imagination into the primeval forests, occupying dimensions of fantasy. Her fantasies exemplify the monstrous nature of man-woman relationships based on the ethic; the strongest sustain themselves by eating the weakest. Besides, her fantasy is that of a professional scientist whose job is to classify fossils and to educate the public. Her fantasies are more exotic. She may be a scientist. She dreams of a better life before man. Fantasy provides her a means to escape the dreary present. She admits that “All she wants is a miracle, because anything else is hopeless.”

In the fourth part of the novel, Elizabeth marches on the path of self-glory and becomes her proud self. In her own words, “I’m a mother ---- and I take that seriously. I would never leave an image like that behind for my children. I’ve had that done to me and I didn’t like it.” She becomes aggressive. It is the impact of her culture. She knows how to survive in a consumer society as she is a 20th century Canadian woman.
She does not worry about Nate’s relationship with Lesje. Though she does not love Nate any longer, she sticks to the home. She holds on to this marriage because her pride system and glorified image cannot tolerate breaking away from Nate.

By the end the domestic plots of Elizabeth and Nate and of Lesje and William have re-formed into different patterns: Nate and Lesje are now living together and Elizabeth is alone in the family home, no longer a wife but a divorced mother with her two young daughters. The novel ends with a sense that Elizabeth’s identity will remain firm, while Lesje will positively assert a new sense of self through the conception of a new life. Elizabeth is poised on the borderline between realism and fantasy in the knowledge that the paintings represent optimistic illusions and such illusions are necessary for survival. As a ‘pregnant paleontologist,’ Lesje discovers that not only has her perspective on life changed but also her perspective on prehistory. She has become significant to herself. Nate’s position leaves unresolved and William’s role distinctly peripheral. All three major characters have survived by the end of the novel their perceptions as well as their circumstances have changed.

2.4.5. Characters:

Elizabeth Schoenhof is a product of a home which does not have a congenial atmosphere. She grows up in unhealthy and joyless family surroundings. Her father is mostly absent and finally disappears. He has abandoned his wife and children for a mistress. The cruelty of such a father leaves the entire family as a state of desolation and destitution. Her mother is on the verge of neurosis. She gets herself lost in dark and becomes a victim of alcohol. In a cold-blooded act, her mother sells her children to tyrannical Auntie Muriel, for a regular allowance to spend on
alcohol. Ultimately, she commits suicide by setting fire to her body. Elizabeth is aware that her mother has been “entirely destitute, a wronged party, a saint under the street lights ---- like clouds or angels, lived on air ----”82 Thus her mother leaves Elizabeth and her sister, Caroline to not-so-tender care of their Auntie Muriel.

The world of Elizabeth’s childhood is dominated by a ‘dinosaur’, Auntie Muriel. She is both “the spider and the fly, the sucker-out of life juice and the empty husk.”83 Being a victim of patriarchal society, the aunt exercises a damaging influence on the early life of Elizabeth. As she is brought up by Auntie Muriel, she becomes a part child, part prisoner, part orphan, part cripple and part insane. Childhood is not a period of fun for Elizabeth. She is caught between the predicament of her mother and the bad upbringing of Auntie Muriel. All these circumstances drive her to proclaim a war against patriarchal structures of power and domination.

When Elizabeth marries Nate against the advice of her aunt, she shows her strength to embark on her journey alone, despite her aunt. This reinforces the sense of her uniqueness and independence. She gives forth self confidence:

She has backbone. She has money in the bank, not enough but some. She does not have to depend, she is not dependant. She is self-supporting.84 This gives her a semblance of a positive attitude. She experiences herself as a superior being. She tends to be more or less openly arrogant, ambitious, demanding. She treats Chris the way men treat women. Her male-like treatment leads Chris in a reversal of roles to commit suicide. She also sets rules which Nate follows. “It is the rule that when Elizabeth cooks, Nate does the dishes. One of the many rules, sub-rules, codicils,
addenda, errata. Living with Elizabeth involves a maze of such legalities, no easier to understand because some of them are unspoken.” She is not only in control of her life and Nate’s life but also the love lives of Nate.

In the struggle for social and psychological survival Elizabeth has been narrated. Within her roles of life, lover, mother and niece, she has survived Chris’s suicide, separation and divorce from Nate and the death of her Auntie Muriel. When Elizabeth invites Lesje and William at the dinner party, she suspects that her husband is falling in love with Lesje. Then she admits that “Living with Nate has been like living with a huge mirror in which her flaws are magnified and distorted. Fly-eyes. She’s been forced to see herself measured constantly----” next to his suburban middle class values. Her pessimism is a consequence of her unfulfilling relationship with Nate, who by now has moved out of his marital home and has established a new life with Lesje. Her final view of looking at one of the Chinese paintings represents an imagined space outside the limits of the everyday, offering her an image of otherness.

Next of Elizabeth asocial and isolated character in the novel is Lesje Green. She is a straightforward, narrow and unadorned scientist. Like Elizabeth, Lesje’s mother could not provide proper nurturing to the child Lesje. She was a working woman and before Lesje is old enough to go to school, she left Lesje under the care of her two grandmothers – paternal and maternal, half the week with each. Her grandmother Etlin is Jewish while Grandmother Symski was Ukrainian. If the grandmothers love and have shown consistency and care, Lesje will have grown into a healthy person. But they fight and show anger at each other. If one will give Lesje decorated eggs to play with, the other will smash them with her boots. The result is that Lesje can not develop a distinctive identity.
Lesje is a young paleontologist who is caught in the web of self-contradictions. She has fantasies in which she is wandering in prehistory. Fantasy of Lesje is that of professional scientist whose job is to classify fossils and to educate the public. She is alienated from real life. She can neither respond to nor understand love between man and woman. She finds it difficult to communicate with people, “She was much happier among concrete things.”

She lives in Toronto’s heart which seems frozen. The brilliant colours of Lesje’s fantasies suggest suppressed emotions, desires and ethnic identity. She spends her time cataloging fossils, hiding not only her teeth but her appetites and needs by wearing protectively coloured clothing. She settles for the appearance of being happy with a person, William.

Lesje has loved William, an environmental engineer. The crux of their marriage is that of the issue of his children. Their love affair ends as William does not want to have a child by her. When William attempts to rape her, Lesje wonders whether his “turning into someone else” is her fault. They live together and admire each other. The relationship with William is a matter of routine for her. Her affair with William is simple-minded and joyous. Therefore, Lesje has ‘seedy’ or ‘even tacky’ affair with Nate. She lends Nate money as he is perennially short of money for his needs. For her, Nate is absolutely necessary to get pregnant. She is an expert at the entrapment of husbands. She has transgressed the sacred bonds of marriage. Positively she asserts a new sense of self through the conception of a new life.

Nate occupies multiple identities as husband, father, lover, son and finally father to Lesje’s child without knowing it. He does not completely fit into any of these social identities. He is always in restless
motion – running in circles as he jogs around Queen’s Park, cycling furiously between houses owned by the four women in his life – his wife, his former mistress, his mother and his lover. Atwood described him as a man facing a moral dilemma about “whether to leave the kids because the marriage is rotten or whether to stay with the marriage for the sake of the kids ---- he’s actually the nicest person in the book.”

Elizabeth marries Nate, an unemployed law graduate, with the hope of getting safety and shelter for her life. But she soon discovers that Nate is emotionally weak and dependent, who requires security. Elizabeth becomes “a cage, Nate a mouse, her heart pure cheese, --- Earth-mother, Nate her mole, snouting in darkness while she locked him.” He is an idle drone who depends completely on his wife for money. Being very mechanical Elizabeth and Nate do not know what ‘love’ means between them. They have never lived together as a real wife and husband, yet two children are born out of their wedlock. He is afraid of Elizabeth always. He feels constantly manipulated by her. He is unethical with Martha but soon discards her. Nate behaves like a guest in his own house. His children feel as if he is an uncle or a new school principal. Elizabeth wishes to lead a harmonious life with her husband, Nate. But he is determined to leave both Elizabeth and children for Lesje. His plans to divorce shatter Elizabeth’s dreams. Her faith and love in him are reduced. They both agree to go in for divorce and Nate lives with Lesje happily.

There are other minor characters such as Chris, who has shot himself before the narrative begins, Martha now discarded by Nate for the apparently more sensitive Lesje, Lesje’s boyfriend William and a number of relatives. The secondary characters provide something of a
particularizing context for the three main characters. Elizabeth becomes involved with Chris who works in her office because of her wronged and betrayed husband. She keeps up her relationship with Chris within its limits without touching either her house or her children. Chris demands her to give up her job, leave her home and her two children. But she refuses to live on his mercy as a dependent woman. Elizabeth’s strong and decisive bond with her children and family humiliates Chris. She says: “I treated him the way men treat women. A lot of men, a lot of women; but never me, not on your goddamned life. He couldn’t take it.” As a result Chris kills himself violently due to the anger and the fear of being nothing.

Auntie Muriel is a victim of patriarchal society and who is more pathetic than ironical.

Auntie Muriel was thwarted in youth. She had a domineering father who stunted her and wouldn’t let her go to college because college was for boys --- Auntie Muriel had a strong personality and a good mind and she was not pretty, and patriarchal society punished her. These things are all true. Instead of making an educated woman, she is compelled to sit at home doing embroidery. Thus she becomes an enemy of another woman unknowingly and a victimizer.

2.4.6. Theme:

Moral codes of society are essential for satisfaction is the main theme of novel, *Life Before Man*. Atwood feels the freedom of right to equality in marital relationships does not mean that the wife or husband has a right to do anything that brings her or him satisfaction in an
immoral way. To Atwood, sexual immorality of either partner is a violation of the moral code established and respected by society. She thinks the act of adultery in the institution of marriage would lead to a complete deterioration in social relations. By depicting present marital struggle in novel, Atwood forces to contemplate “the black hole of the future from the point zero of the present.” Thus the novel derives home the message that both wife and husband be faithful to each other. They must show respect for the regulated social conduct which is essential for the maintenance of social stability and the sanctity of conjugal relationships. To save human relationships from disintegration, people have to work hard at emotional communication. Lack of communication leads marriage to its end. The importance of inter-personal fusion in human relationships should be respected by all.

The great status of Maternity in woman’s life is the central theme of the novel, *Life Before Man*. The novel discusses women’s recognition of the power of the mother figure and the depth of her pain in the institution of marriage. Though she does not love Nate any longer, Elizabeth sticks to the marriage only for her daughters. She feels responsible for her children. Married Lesje decides to love Nate only to get pregnant not for physical satisfaction. The women in the novel are torn between the past and the future, between the mother’s frustrations and her extravagant hopes for the daughters. The novel refers to the “uncertainty of women poised between past and future, between mothers and daughters, frustration and hope.” This sense of transition is reflected in the marital life of Elizabeth’s mother and her own life. The women are the stronger characters. Their more strengths and imaginations are connected with maternity.
Next, necessity of survival is also the minor theme of this novel. Loneliness forces Elizabeth to live through the traumatic experiences of her life again – the death of her mother, the suicide of her sister, Caroline in the bathtub of an asylum, the strict puritanical education and finally her aunt’s death. While taking a bath, she toys with the idea of committing suicide but she decides against it. “I know I have to keep on living and I have no intention of doing otherwise.” She counters her dilemma by finding within her an ability to survive, not to go on living but to change and to move into new areas of life. Though she makes a regressive choice after Nate’s moving and goes with William and goes with the salesman, she saves herself from harm. She struggles to survive and commits herself to life. For her freedom without a sense of responsibility is incomplete.

2.4.7. Imagery:

Modeling the transformational structure, supplying images and motifs are the details of plot. All of Atwood’s protagonists initially have the problem. Atwood describes as characteristic of Southern Ontario. As portrayed in the novel’s characters, settings and symbols, the Canada of *Life Before Man* is an encircled museum. The novel simultaneously satirizes Toronto’s museum specimens in their fossilized social strata. Without being limited to Canadian levels of meaning, the novel also portrays colonizing touch. It tells the stories of contemporary decay through shifting point of view. Atwood presents her characters from outside through a limited, third person narrative that shifts point of view from Elizabeth to Nate to Lesje as they go through the motions of daily existence.
In novel, *Life Before Man* one of the characters, Lesje Green, constructs a life of fantasy by daydreaming of a prehistoric world. The images are almost hallucinatory into her ordinary life positions Lesje’s subjective identity as being on the Imaginary threshold between image and reality. During a game of cribbage, Lesje “permits herself a walk by moonlight, along a path trampled by the giant but herbivorous iguanodons.”96 On another occasion, when she is walking hand in hand with William along a city street, in the middle of a conversation a dinosaur suddenly bursts in on the scene: “agorgosaurus, pushes through the north wall of the Colonnade and stands there uncertainly, sniffing the unfamiliar smell of human flesh, balancing on its powerful hind legs.”97 Then Lesje’s secret belief that her grandmother should have been placed in the museum on her death connects her matrilineal ancestry to her imagined prehistoric one, as does the caricaturing of both her grandmothers in a way that they come to resemble dinosaurs: “they’re fixed, mounted specimens in her head, cut from their own wrecked and shadowy backgrounds and pasted here, Anachronisms, the last of their kind.”98

2.4.8. **Metaphor:**

An angle of approach in discussing *Life Before Man* paves the way for discussion of the novel’s dominant metaphor of prehistory in both personal and mythical psychic structures. The organization of an individual psyche with collective unconscious history allow Lesje’s recalcitrant fantasy life to be seen as being prehistoric in form as well as in name. Then metaphorically the house functions as cradle or womb. It characterizes the motif of the house as signifying the realm of matter. It is the world into which one is thrust. That given inhabited space becomes
a home or the subject’s first world. For Elizabeth, all that is conscious and necessary for maintenance of her identity seems to be contained within the domestic sphere. After all it is marked by human intention.

Atwood’s male versus female dichotomy is a metaphor rather than a literal distinction between men and women. The ‘male’ for Atwood becomes a metaphor for all dehumanising and despotic attitudinal and behavioural patterns. In novel, therefore, it is not Nate, the man but Elizabeth, the woman who in her overpowering desire for a rule-bound and logo-centric life, represents patriarchal power structures. In Atwood’s value system, Elizabeth’s belief in control and definition both for herself and others symbolise male attributes. Lesje’s decision to stop using the pills and bear Nate’s child is symbolic of her new found will to act and signals her altered self-perspective and a new beginning. Lesje discovers her power to act positively for herself and not to commit suicide. Thus Lesje moves from passive acceptance to active participation.

2.4.9. View of Life:

The view of life presented in the novel is optimistic. Through the character of Elizabeth, the novel envisages that marriage as the social institution should help the personal growth and evolution of both wife and husband. They should live with dignity complementing each other. It provides possibilities for the moral and social evolution of human beings. She seems to say that:

That married people should not be viewed as each other’s property but as living, growing organisms---- personal growth is commendable. You ---- have the right attitude and be honest with yourself.99
Elizabeth hopes for a ‘mutual salvation’ and ‘peace’ between the wife and husband. If everyone helps in building each other’s houses, society as a whole will marches forward. She opens eyes of immoral people to ways in which they think and behave irrespective of sex. She succeeds in conveying the message through the novel that ‘social change’ is possible when the institution of marriage is strengthened.

As it has been mentioned earlier, the novels of Margaret Atwood belonging early phase have been critically discussed with reference to their titles, stories, plot-constructions, themes, narration, imagery, symbolism and view of life in this chapter. The study of these novels shows that Margaret Atwood is a budding novelist with some limitations of a beginner. It is the base of a prolific and versatile novelist. Her feminist voice is clearly heard in her first starting four novels’ surfaces. But at the depth of these novels, there is Atwood’s cry for balanced man-woman relationship. There is a struggle for self-identity. Atwood has presented woman’s individual and social problem in these novels.

Next chapter will explore Atwood’s novels of middle phase.
Notes and references:


10 *The Edible Woman*, p. 89


14 *The Edible Woman*, p. 108.
15 Ibid., p. 264.
16 Ibid., p. 175.
17 Ibid., p. 304.
18 Ibid., p. 19.
19 Fraser, Wayne. The Dominion of Women: The Personal and the Political in Canadian Women’s Literature (Contribution in Women’s Studies), p. 124.
21 The Edible woman. p. 115
23 Ibid., p. 83.
24 Ibid., p. 293.
25 Ibid., p. 352.
26 Ibid., p. 353.
30 Surfacing, p.145.
31 Lal, Malashri. “Canadian Gynocritics: Contexts of meaning in Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing,” Perspectives on Women:


36 Surfacing, p. 3.

37 Ibid., pp. 198-99.

38 Ibid., p. 173.

39 Ibid., p. 87.

40 Ibid., p. 69.

41 Ibid., pp. 149-150.


43 Surfacing, p.4.

44 Ibid., p. 197.

45 Ibid., p. 75.

46 Ibid., p. 196.

47 Ibid., pp. 189-90.


49 Surfacing, p. 198.


52 Atwood, Margaret. *Lady Oracle*. Canada: Random House, 1999, p.237. All the references are taken from this text.

53 *Ibid*, p.3.


70 Struthers, Essays on Canadian Writing, p. 21.
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