Chapter III

The Novels of Middle Phase

After considering Atwood’s novels of early phase in chapter second, it has been proposed to consider the novels belonging to the Middle Phase. They are —

1) *Bodily Harm* (1981),
2) *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985),
3) *Cat’s Eye* (1989),

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3.1. Introduction:

*Bodily Harm*, published in 1981 is Atwood’s best known post-feminist novel to date. The novel shows that the legal, economic, political and social conditions of women are still bleak. Though women have become conscious of their rights, they are sought to be exploited and oppressed and deprived of their basic human rights like all the weak and powerless in the world. The novel draws attention to the horrifying status of women in contemporary era. In novel, gender politics are contextualized within “the brutal injustices of modern global politics.”¹

As an active member of Amnesty International Atwood is interested in gender power politics and demonstrates in this novel how power operates and who has power over whom. The novel succeeds both as a profoundly humanitarian text and a powerful political feminist novel.
It addresses itself to the violation of human rights in the process of dealing with the nature of violence, human cruelty and victimization of women. It presents poignantly the abuse, torture, mutilation and finally the destruction of female body in hospital beds and prison cells for purpose of male sexuality. It appears to be a novel concerned only with the fine detail of domestic and social realism. There is a kind of stillness informed by inactivity in terms of plot, annotation, time scheme and narrative structure which faithfully reproduces the ordinary life of an ordinary person.

3.1.1. Title:

The Title of the novel concerns with bodily harms in true stories of women. The novel develops a passionately committed moral stance towards political issues relating to gender and colonial oppression which is epitomised in the title *Bodily Harm*. The bodily harms done by other people are victimized by those who have power. Women are treated as object and humiliated by men. Being powerless and abuse, the condition of women is not very different from common people. Then the novel’s second title ‘Rope Quartet’ hints at the connections between all the men in protagonist’s life – Jake, Dr. Daniel, Paul and the faceless stranger who left the coiled rope lying on her bed.

3.1.2. Story:

In *Bodily Harm*, the protagonist Renata Wilford is a ‘lifestyle journalist’ as well as a ‘Life-Tourist’ writer who just had a mastectomy. Atwood traces her internal torment in dealing with this, her troubled childhood, her relationship with men and a violent society at large. Rennie tries to escape the traumatic experiences of her own past but unfortunately she escapes to an area that is politically abandoned by the
British. As a journalist she always carries with her a camera to take snapshots of life around. It has become a symbol of “her tourist vision and identity.” Once she was commissioned to write a travel piece on Caribbean island for a male magazine called Visor. There she gets entangled in local political activities and gets imprisoned by the corrupt politician.

Rennie writes her travelogue in the prison cell. She titles the narrative as ‘Bodily Harm’ at the instance of the fellow-prisoner, Lora. Her travelogue includes all sorts of bodily harm perpetrated on women such as the pornographic violation of women as shown in the Toronto Policemen’s Pornography museum; Jake, her lover’s sadism and the situation of rape; the humiliations she suffers in the prison, the torture she witnesses of the people crusading for human rights and civil liberties in the Caribbean island; Rennes’s mutilation by cancer; Lora’s non-violent rape by her vicious step-father. The most pathetic of all bodily harms is the brutality, torture, rape and heartless mutilation of Lora, Rennie’s fellow prisoner in the Caribbean jail. Thus, the novel is concerned with issues such as body image, female sexuality, male-female relationships and male brutality, in a patriarchal society.

3.1.3. Plot-construction:

Margaret Atwood’s work illustrates the degree to which her own language derives Bodily Harm Caribbean setting. Its main concern is the restraint imposed on political articulateness of the small town in Canada. The plot of the novel is not complicated, although some efforts must be expended to reconstruct chronology of events in structure of the novel. Emphatically the novel is not about bodily pleasures but about bodily harm. Through the wide range of epigraphs Atwood rehearsed different
emphases for her narrative. In the first holograph version entitled ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ there is no epigraphs at all. Through the draft typescripts with titles varying from ‘The Robber Bridegroom’ to ‘Rope Quartet’ to ‘Bodily Harm,’ play with a range of sixteen different prefatory quotations arranged in six patterns.

The novel opens with the promise of a very specific location and a distinctive narrative voice: “This is how I got here says Rennie,” who proceed to tell her life story. It’s a story that begins with a crisis and an enigma, for she returns home to find two policemen sitting in her Toronto kitchen waiting to tell her that an intruder has broken into her flat and has left one sinister clue, a coiled rope lying on her bed. Taken together with the title, this could be the beginning of a detective novel, whose plot would be, “Who is the faceless stranger?” In a sense it is a detective story, but the narrative sequence soon begins to disintegrate as the focus shifts from ‘I’ to ‘she’ and time and space become dislocated with the introduction of numerous memory fragments and the protagonist’s flight away from Toronto to the Caribbean as she tries to sidestep the problems of her real life.

In Caribbean she finds herself in a political situation where she is really in danger of physical violence. By the end this is in fact a prison narrative but a sense of unease and awkwardness is there from the opening section. Sections are separated from one another by large graphic dots, which create the effect of a peculiarly fragmented novel. Despite the shift from first to third person a technique familiar from The Edible Woman, this account is being focused through Rennie’s disturbed consciousness, for it is a subjective narration refracted through her
dreams and memory flashbacks, distorted by her fears and pervaded by her precarious sense of unreality.

Rennie herself has difficulty in negotiating between what is going on inside and outside her own head as her narrative shifts from one crisis point to another, insistently trying to figure out connections yet baffled by the opacity of surfaces and threats of imminent collapse. The epigraphs do not give any indication of the fragmented structure for this novel nor of the dislocated female subject through whom the story is focused. They merely serve as another set of clues, outlining the range of discourse through which reality might be reconstructed as narrative.

Besides Bodily Harm is best analysed under the perspective of a journey novel, whose travel will develop on the wheels of a systematic break of its constants, until finally protagonist faces the phantom of her circumstance, that is herself and contradiction begins playing a positive role in her life. Three dominant co-ordinates generally structure this novel type:

i) Physical change of place / Leaving from / arriving to / adventure, surprise.

ii) Moment of purification / darkness.

iii) Transformation / light / encounter.

Surprisingly enough, the novel, Bodily Harm follows all these steps. There is a major difference which distinguishes it from the classics: Rennie is not intentionally searching for anything; indeed, there is no such ‘quest’. The place to which she is travelling is even indifferent to her. She is searching unawares even without intending it, perhaps even without wanting it. Another difference is present in the ‘tempo’s’. The first step is very fast – departing from Canada and arriving at St. Antoine
— in just a matter of hours. Her interior move to an authentic change begins when she arrives. The purification process lasts, apparently, very little time — her stay in jail. For her this is an endless period. The author leaves the third aspect — transformation — just barely opened, ready for another novel. Here it is not described, but rather begins when Rennie is on her way back home.

The background paradox is that everything happens to Rennie against her will. She has freely chosen every movement. Rennie’s motive for her trip is simply half-tourism, half-escaping, putting distance between reality and her. By going to another place she thinks “She is invisible, she is safe.” She does not want to waste any minute choosing. She is too much in a hurry. This time she is flying blind. She thinks that being a tourist there is nothing to worry about, nothing can touch her. She’s a tourist. She is exempt.

In her well accomplished study on Mysticism, Rennie goes inevitably through an unwanted purification process. Following the paradoxical path, Rennie’s journey beings when her trip seems suddenly to have come to a deadly end, she is inexplicably put in jail and with the person whom she dislikes, Lora, the most well-known woman in the island. They are too much alike. The difference between them is that Lora struggles and tries to make the best out of a situation; Rennie tries to escape, to ignore situation. Spending many critical hours together both, the process of gradual change first appears in Rennie’s thought and in her relationship with Lora.

Her trip back home on the plane, the very end of the novel, would be the beginning of Rennie’s transformation period. From now on she will look at situations, people, life, from another dimension. She will not
look with anguish or fear. Even how long she will live has become irrelevant, also her scar which she remembers only when she touches it. Rennie’s first worry in the story comes back at the end.

3.1.4. Characters:

Margaret Atwood explores the inner life of the protagonist, Rennie Wilford, a young journalist in *Bodily Harm*. The novel gives a peep as it were into the life of a tiny isle of St. Antoine with its politics, pathos, comedy and tragedy. But the focus is on the protagonist’s life of tensions and conflicts. Renne is brought up in the, “Sterile, hypocritical, sexless” Southern Ontario small Town called Griswold by her grandparents. Her childhood is suppressed by her grandmother’s rule of do’s and don’ts. She is never allowed to think and feels independently. Rennie says:

As a child I learned --- how to be quite, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them ---- According to her, it was bad manners to ask direct questions.7

Rennie feels hurt all the more from such an unhappy state of affairs in Griswold. She also realizes that women relished sacrificing their lives, serving others, being subordinates. They are used in a negative way against their own selves. Her grandfather was a doctor, seeing her grandfather hero-worshipped by town; Rennie says that as a young child, she too wanted to be a doctor like him. But after a few years at school, she gave up the idea for by then she had become aware that “men were doctors, women were nurses; men were heroes, and what were women? Women rolled the bandages.”8 Her grandfather is both the mixture of the heroic and kind doctor as well as the violent and brutal man.

Rennie’s father was an irresponsible man who leaves his family for a mistress. Her mother has sacrificed everything—husband, home and
family to look after her aged parents. She is modest, and she gives her
the necessary courage and confidence to negate her own existence,
individuality. She feels hurt as she is badly neglected by her mother. So
she chooses to break away from such an environment:

I didn’t want to be trapped, like my mother. Although I
admired her – everyone was always telling me how
admirable she was, she was practically a saint – I didn’t want
to be like her in any way.  

Thus, Rennie leaves for Toronto to free herself from the oppressive
environment. She begins her adult life in Toronto as a versatile writer.
She writes articles for Pandora, a women-oriented magazine and for
Visor, a male-oriented magazine. In the course of writing a piece called
The Young and the Solvent for Visor, Rennie comes in contact with Jake
who works as a designer for a packaging company. He tries all his tricks
to use and pack her just as he does things, as Dorothy Jones says: “Jake,
Rennie’s foxy, saturnine lover is a trickster.”

When Rennie is diagnosed
of breast cancer, she seems like a faulty package to Jake. So she decides
it is time for them to part.

At the same time, Rennie develops a crush on her surgeon, Dr.
Daniel Luoma, but that too ends badly. Dr. Daniel, a male gynecologist,
has performed a partial mastectomy on Rennie. According to his wish,
Rennie has to choose between sexual mutilation by the surgeon or death
by cancer in the hospital bed. She agrees to have an affair with the doctor
to “save her life” by allowing him to touch her with his life-giving
hands. Taking advantage of his patient’s emotional state Daniel indulges
in sex and violates the professional ethics. Symbolically, to Rennie’s
mind her surgeon’s knife is both the sword of justice and a phallic symbol associated with sexual violence.

After Jake’s departure and the dead-end relationship with Daniel, Rennie comes in contact with Paul, a tourist guide in the Caribbean island because of his impressive manners and ideals. Her relationship with Paul is also not satisfactory, she realizes that falling in love with Paul, a mysterious stranger is “the biggest cliche in the book of her life.” She does not enjoy being in love but she requires being with a man to satisfy her bodily needs. Thus she fails to establish a meaningful relationship with men and does not want another relationship which is meaningless.

Then Rennie is ordered to do a travel piece for Visor. It takes her to the Caribbean Island. There she lives in the actual world. She detects that the political scene on the island has no room for love, decency and humanity. Soon Rennie is accused of massive involvement in the island’s current revolution and in the political affairs. Amid the confusion and danger of the revolt when the newly elected prime minister is shot in the back of the head and Rennie is thrown into prison on charges of suspicion. She suffers incarceration for about two weeks in the Central America Prison, where she comes in contact with Lora Lucas, a fellow prisoner. In the travelogue, Rennie includes the tales of Lora’s woe and brutality which Lora narrates in the prison. By the end of her journey Rennie has become “a sadder but wiser person.” She becomes subversive and bold enough to narrate and publish her experience in the form of a travelogue called ‘Bodily Harm.’

Jake’s existence is first signaled by his absence – “It was the day after Jake left,” and his love affair is recapitulated through a series of vividly remembered fragments. When Rennie begins her adult life in
Toronto as a versatile writer and writes a piece called The Young and the Solvent for Visor, she comes in contact with Jake who works as a designer for a packaging company. Soon she realizes that Jake is very clever and a subtle exploiter. He is smart and keeps up with the latest trends in fashions. He lives according to the male images in the magazines he reads. He tries all his tricks to use and pack Rennie just as he does things. He disguises sexual desire as ‘love’ and wields love as a weapon rather than bearing it as a gift. For him love is not an emotional experience but a crude game decided to hurt women as much as he could. In one such encounter, Rennie feels that Jake is out to strangle her:

Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked to hold her so she couldn’t move. He liked that, he liked thinking of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat and she really did stop breathing.¹⁵

This strangulation is a method of male domination. He imagines love with Rennie as pretended rape. For him, she is only an object of sex. He furnishes Rennie’s apartment with naked pictures. When Rennie is diagnosed of breast cancer, she is shaken to know that Jake is now uncomfortable with her and she now seems like a faulty package to him. She decides it is time for them to part. Rennie cannot acknowledge that Jake leaves because she has rejected him and that neither of them is capable of imagining a new structure for a loving relationship. Like David in Surfacing and Peter in The Edible Woman it would take a long time to scrape Jake down to where he was true. Tragically he is alienated from his inner self is a classic waste Lander figure and not at all the hero.
Rennie’s failure of imagination is again evident in her brief affair with Dr. Daniel Luoma, a male gynecologist when she is diagnosed of breast cancer. He has performed a partial mastectomy on Rennie. Daniel takes his job very seriously and is earned in his effort to help his patients recover both physically and psychologically. Then Rennie engages in an abortive love affair with Daniel to save her life by allowing him to touch her with his life giving hands. She admits it is difficult to have an affair with her doctor: “It would be unethical, he said. I’d be taking advantage of you. You’re in an emotional state.” When she finally does persuade him to go to bed with her however, what she discovers is that they have switched roles:

The fact was that he had needed something from her, which she could neither believe not forgive. She’d been counting on him not to: she was supposed to be the needy one, but it was the other way around ---- She felt like a straw that had been clutched ---- She felt raped.

Thus, Daniel violates the professional ethics by taking advantage of her in her emotional state. In her relation with Daniel, Rennie wants something ‘definite,’ the real truth, one way or the other. Ultimately, Rennie realizes that Dr. Daniel is a victimizer who exploits women in the guise of medicine and surgery. She says:

Maybe I’m not the only one ---- there’s a whole line-up of them, dozens and dozens of women, each with a bite taken out of them, one breast or the other ---- he tells us all he loves us. ---- Anyway he gets off on it, it’s like a harem ---- he’s the only man in the world who knows the truth, he’s looked into each one of us and seen death.
Rennie compares Daniel with her grandfather, a physician of violent temperament.

Paul, the enigmatic American seems to provide the ideal holiday romance, the biggest cliche in the book, though it is through her affair with him that Rennie finds herself involved in a revolutionary coup and thrown into prison. He is a good substitute of Jake or Daniel as he shows extreme tenderness and is not repelled by the scar on Rennie’s breast. Unlike Jake, who tries to make her over into something else, or Daniel who sees her as the answer to his emotional needs, Paul accepts Rennie for what she is. She feels grateful to Paul, for it is he who restores her lost confidence in her sexuality by his gaze as much as by his love-making:

He reaches out his hands and Rennie can’t remember ever having been touched before ---- this much is enough. She’s open now, she’s been opened ---- She enters her body again and there’s a moment of pain, incarnation --- She’s still here on the earth, she’s grateful he’s touching her, she can still be touched.19

Her love experience with Paul gives Rennie a new meaning of life. He helps Rennie to get rid of the political situation on the island and warns her against getting involved with Dr. Minnow. In his attempt to save Rennie, his mission fails and she remains imprisoned. For the rest of the novel nobody knows what happens to him, just as nobody knows where he had come from.

All minor characters help to develop the story and to make plot sound among them Lora Lucas is a fellow prisoner when Rennie is
arrested for about two weeks in a Central American prison. She tells Rennie the story of her life – when she was a child, her stepfather raped her. So she stabs her stepfather and escapes from home, starts working in a boat, shocks to know that all men around expect her to sleep with them and the condition is either to comply or to lose the job. Jocasta, Rennie’s friend, is a feminist activist in Canada. As a liberated woman her theory is that “they don’t want love and understanding and meaningful relationships, they still want sex, but only if they can take it.” Dr. Minnow is Rennie’s mentor. His physical appearance resembles Christ. He is known for his rebellion against the tyranny of the government. As a journalist he reminds Rennie “Look with your eyes open and you will see the truth of the matter. Since you are a reporter, it is your duty to report.”

3.1.5. Theme:

As Bodily Harm is written in the aftermath of an over-conscious women’s liberation it presents the horrifying status of women. In the novel, Rennie refuses to be a victim and to acknowledge the fact that you are victim. She rejects her submissive role as a woman. But she is prepared to speak out the truth, the disturbing truth both about all the exploited people and women in particular. She becomes subversive and bold enough to narrate and publish her experiences in the form of a travelogue called ‘Bodily Harm’. She uses her pen as a ‘weapon’ to depict her experiences devoting her life in the service of the weak and women. The novel is what Rennie projects to the world as her novel. She envisions an ‘organized society’ where human beings are united and organized.
Rennie refuses to be a victim although she has “her scar, her disability, her nibbled flesh, the little teethmarks on her.” Rennie’s body which has been maimed, dismembered, altered and fragmented stands as a testimonial to the depravity and decadence of the society that is predominantly patriarchal. In the words of Rubenstein: “In Rennie’s case, cancer of her body is a disease not only of the breast, but of the chest – the heart; and not only of her body but of social body.” Rennie awakens to the fact that human malice is as dangerous as cancer. Fear of death by a disease like cancer is weighed against those treats to life which results from human malice-poverty, malnutrition and political violence.

The novel, through its portrayal of a society in which democracy is failing, represents the threatening elements upon which sociality rests and which civilization tries to exclude “What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible, right? So you can see it.” This comment by male porn in novel connects with Atwood’s own comments on the social function of the novel made in an interview:

I do see the novel as a vehicle for looking at society – an interface between language and what we choose to call reality, although even that is a very malleable substance. Atwood’s formulation is more sophisticated than her visual artist’s taking in both the space of fictional representation and the social myths through which people construct their images of reality. Rennie’s activity is the mirror of society in Canada and Caribbean island.

3.1.6. Metaphor:

Atwood’s preoccupation with the idea of survival becomes noticeable in Bodily Harm which projects a metaphoric relationship between the protagonist, Rennie and the country, Canada. Politically and
socially Canada is disturbed by fear and resentment of America. Similar fears posses Rennie who feels menaced by an unnamable intruder. Her survival under the shadow of a deadly disease is bare survival like that of Canada on a continent where it barely manages to have cultural, economic, geographical and political survival under the ever-threatening presence of the United States.

Then female body becomes the metaphor for the weak and suppressed. Margaret Atwood says that a novel is “a vehicle for looking at society – an interface between language and what we choose to call reality ----”\textsuperscript{26} and Rennie’s cancer is a metaphor for a malignant world. Her disease results her journey to the Caribbean. The disease really to be feared, Rennie comes to realize, is the capacity to take pleasure from another’s pain. Atwood points out that we, all are somehow guilty of being human being and that malignancy is quite possible, a metaphor for the human conditions.

In the fictional world of Atwood ‘victim’ is an operative term to record the Canadian experience. Atwood believes that “Canada as a whole is a victim.”\textsuperscript{27} The notion of victimhood often finds expression in Atwood in the form of a feminine construct. While reacting against the Canada – US Free Trade Agreement, seen by many as the beginning of the end of Canada’s cultural autonomy, Canada – separate and dominated country has done about as well under the US as women, worldwide have done under men. In the victim-victor equations, Atwood always makes Canada ‘the victim’ and ‘the victor’ often America, gets the image of a male aggressor. Atwood makes the protagonist personalize Canada’s position in \textit{Bodily Harm}, which is very much a story of gender oppression. Here women are asked to try for the slave-girl effect; men
need to act as rapists in order to get turned on and Black leather and whips, that’s next.

3.1.7. View of Life:

The name ‘Renata Wilford’ implies “born again.” She takes in her strides all her ugly and unpleasant encounters of her life. In this process, she is born a new and lives in the present with a meaningful message for future. She rejects her submissive role as a woman and is ready to speak out the truth about the exploited women. It is Rennie’s new optimistic view of life, which dictates the ending:

She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued.
She is not exempt. Instead she is lucky, suddenly, finally,
she’s overflowing with luck, it’s this luck holding her up.\(^{29}\)

With this, the novel concludes on a positive note whereby a return to familiar territory accompanies a reclamation of the self, a self that is no longer subject to the same threat of bodily harm because now a new position has been found in which to exist. Her life story emerges as a warning that negative innocence is the most appalling characteristic of evil when it appears in the actual world. Thus the novel shows Rennie’s feminist consciousness and her struggling into a new awareness of herself as a morally responsible human being.
3.2. Introduction:

Margaret Atwood’s sixth novel, published in 1985, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is more overtly political than her previous work and an international bestseller which won the prestigious Governor General’s Award. It has been made into a film directed by Volker Schlöndorff in 1990, with a screenplay by Harold Pinter. A great deal of critical attention has been paid to the novel as dystopian science fiction and as a novel of feminist protest. Certainly Atwood’s abiding social and political concerns are evident in her scrutiny of structures of oppression within public and private life as well as her concerns with the environment and her nationalist engagement with Canadian-American relations. Like most of her novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is also a canon of feminism. It is neither exactly science fiction nor a sort of travelogue of the future, but the story of one woman told in a very personal way in her own voice and viewpoint.

With this novel, Atwood’s vision has not essentially been changed but has been deepened. It is a dystrophic novel in the tradition of George Orwell’s *1984*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* besides Lucy M. Freibert calls it, “political--science fiction”\(^\text{30}\). It is set in 21st century in the U.S.A. which is now the Republic of Gilead. This is Margaret Atwood’s first novel set in future that is written from a woman’s point of view and predicts the horrors of a culture very frightened by normal sexuality. In the present postmodern feminist novel the novelist explores
how the protagonist offered react to, “oppression in all its manifestations, both physical and psychological.”

3.2.1. Title:

The title of the novel seems to suggest an experience of a whole particular class of women in Gilead. The word Handmaid is given to a substitute sex object required by the elderly barren wife to facilitate the continuation of her husband’s lineage. In this sense Offred, one of the Handmaids is a spoke person for all the Handmaids of Gilead. The state cancels the original names of the Handmaids in order to erase their former identity and labels them according to the names of their Commanders. In the face of state repression and domestic tyranny Offred manages to tell her witty dissident tale about private lives, not only her own story but the stories of other women. Appropriating their remembered turns of phrase in her telling, Offred’s voice doubles and multiplies to become the voices of ‘women’ rather than the voice of a single narrator.

The novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is dedicated to Margaret Atwood’s ancestor Mary Webster and Perry Miller — her teachers whose books on the puritans have informed American history and who taught her to read national literatures when she was a student at Harvard. Webster was a rebellious colonial American, hanged for a witch in Connecticut. Like her, the protagonist in the novel, Offred also escapes from Gilead.

3.2.2. Story:

The story of the novel is set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the early twenty-first century, after Christian fundamentalists have transformed the United States into a fascistic theocracy called Gilead.
Birth rates are down in the post-nuclear age of Gilead, so Handmaids — women who are fertile — are designated as sexual slaves to produce offspring for childless couples considered morally fit to raise children. The novel is narrated by a young Handmaid named, Offred who is the main character of the novel and a victim of theocracy. While narrating her own tale, she concentrates on the fate of women in Gilead who are seen and used as mere means of procreation.

Offred lives with the commander, Fred and his wife, Serena. Her job is to get pregnant by the Commander, give birth to the child, then give it up so that the wife can raise the baby as her own. The novel follows the thoughts of suicide, scandal and betrayal that Offred has throughout the journey. As Mario Klarer says, “In Gilead, being a woman means to become preliterate and to follow the prescriptions of men.” The other subplots include memories of her boyfriend and daughter, her feminist mother and her lesbian friend, Moira. During the course of her assignment with the Commander, Offred gets away with many infractions, including a secret liaison with the chauffeur and covert chats with another handmaid who is a member of the underground. The various narrative strands give a fairly complete sketch of the social parameters of Gilead society.

3.2.3. Plot-construction:

*The Handmaid’s Tale* in its present form is not the only possible ordering of the some thirty tapes that have been transcribed. Forty-six untitled chapters are arranged in fifteen labeled sections, with the heading ‘Night’ used seven times. All such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research. The novel begins with the chapter entitled ‘Night’ and ends with
‘Night’. Every alternate chapter is entitled ‘Night.’ Paradoxically, Night is the only time during which the protagonist is free to think, recollect and crystallize her thoughts and memories. It is finally in the night that she perhaps escapes.

Offred’s perturbing narration does not comprise the whole of The Handmaid’s Tale. Appended to the fifteen titled sections that constitute her account and the bulk of the novel is a final part not numbered as another section nor even designated as a separate chapter. These Historical Notes give both a second future and the genealogy of Offred’s account. Offred’s tale is enclosed within an elaborate structure of prefatory materials and concluding Historical Notes. Her treasonable act of speaking out in a society where women are forbidden to read, to write or to speak freely affects a significant shift from ‘history’ to ‘herstory’. Her tale claims a space, a large autobiographical space, within the novel which is the main focus of interest. In the process of reconstructing herself as an individual, Offred becomes the most important historian of Gilead.

Offred describes her narrative as limping mutilated story using that metaphor to refer both to its structure and to the violent social conditions out of which it is told:

I’m sorry there is so much pain in this story. I’m sorry it’s in fragments like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it. Composed of isolated scenic units with gaps and blanks in between where the episodes drift free of present time, the fragmented narrative represents the mental processes of someone in Offred’s isolated situation as her mind jumps between vividly realized present details and flashbacks to the
past. She tells her story in order to survive by seeing beyond the present moment and she believes there is still someone outside Gilead who is listening to her: “Because I’m telling you this story, I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.” Thus her storytelling becomes a substitute for dialogue. It takes a couple of hundred years for her letter to be delivered and to complete novel.

The unequal division of the novel serves several narrative functions. On the most immediate level, the second part provides the history of Offred’s history and an account of how her private record has become a public document, the object of future historians’ attention. That attention supplements Offred’s story by the very act of subjecting it to academic scrutiny. A retrospective symposium attests that Gilead was survived and as such constitutes a distinct note of hope for the future. Offred’s story was originally spoken onto audio tapes, presumably after her escape from the Republic of Gilead.

The novel is Offred’s transcribed speech, reassembled and edited by male historians and not by her. Really the tale is its structure, which may account for some of the disruptions in the narrative. Her story is cut short and lacks the conventional happy ending. The romance plot is put to a crucial test when one day Nick, her lover burst into Offred’s room accompanied by a party of Eyes to take her away in the dreaded Black Van reserved for dissidents. Her narrative ends with Offred laying herself open to all risks and all possibilities as she departs from the Commander’s house like a criminal under guard and climbs into the van. Her dark story of female exploitation concludes with an ambiguous event. The novel by inverting both, demonstrates the “broad outlines of the moment in history” in which we live: the inhospitable environment in
which female identity must discover it. Appropriately, the narrative ends with the interrogative, “Are there any questions?”

The historical notes with which *The Handmaid’s Tale* ends provide comic relief from the grotesque novel of Gilead. This final frame of the novel introduces several crucial shifts in perspective. They offer an interpretative view of Offred’s tale which has truly been given over into the hands of strangers and it can’t be helped because Offred is long since dead. Two hundred years later Gilead has become ancient history and knowledge of it is buried in the past. With historical Notes, the novel may be viewed as Margaret Atwood’s strategy for creating female space out of patriarchal structures at the structural level. She becomes successful through the novel’s structure, the narrative mode of oral reconstruction and the use of language and symbols. It is not presented as history but as Offred’s story narrated by herself. The whole novel is supposed to be orally narrated by Offred because reading and writing is forbidden in Gilead. She says: “It’s also a story I’m telling, in my head, as I go along. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden.”

This is Margaret Atwood’s first novel, which is entirely outside Canada, in the United States of America. The Americanization of Canada as a result of its colonial outlook has been of great concern to nationalist like Atwood for whom imperialism in any form is offensive. Atwood regards the United States of America as, “a tragic country because it has great democratic ideals and rigid social machinery.” It is to be noted that Gilead has a specifically American location, for Offred lives in the heartland of Gilead in a city that was formerly Cambridge,
Massachusetts and Harvard Campus has become the site for the Rachel and Leah Women’s Re-education centre, the setting for public rituals.

Set in a futuristic United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century after a military coup has wiped out the President and the congress, Gilead is a totalitarian regime run on patriarchal lines derived from the Old Testament and seventeenth-century American Puritanism plus a strong infusion of the American New Right ideology of the 1980s. Individual freedom of choice has been outlawed and everyone has been drafted into the service of the state, classified according to prescribed roles: Commanders, Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Eyes, down to Guardians and Econowives. There is strict censorship and border control.

The novel is an exposure of power politics at their most basic. Women are worst off because they are valued only as child-breeders in a society threatened with extinction where, because of pollution, AIDS and natural disasters, the national birthrate has fallen to a catastrophically low level. This essentialist definition of women as “two-legged wombs” works entirely in the interests of a patriarchal elite, denying women any freedom of sexual choice or lifestyle. Most men are also oppressed in that society: there are male bodies hanging every day on the Wall. Male sexual activity is severely restricted as well. Offred’s tale challenges essentialist definitions, showing not only how state sexual regulation criminalises male violence against women and suppresses women’s sexuality but how it also militates against basic human desires for intimacy and love.

3.2.4. Characters:

Offred, the protagonist of The Handmaid’s Tale, aged 33 at the time she tells her story, must have been born in the early 1970s. She
would have been at university with Moira in the late 1980s. She is actually very far from the wilderness, being situated in a city and living in a house with a walled garden in a neat-lined street. Her husband and daughter have been lost to her in the bush of the borderland territory between Gilead and Canada. In Gilead she suddenly finds herself as nothing more than a child-producing machine. Love, romance and emotion are all taken over by single-minded obsession with the physical act of sex performed with the sole purpose of producing child.

Offred knows that in Gilead women are treated as things and for her as a Handmaid only the inside of her body, which is important for reproduction, is essential. The Commander, who attempts to impregnate her once in a month, has no interest in her face. Her red dress covers her fully in many layers. It is specially designed to hide body contours and veil is meant to prevent her from seeing and also being seen. She lies almost fully clothed in red dress between the open things of the wife and the Commander does his duty to impregnate her. She says, “Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved.”

There is no sense of privacy since appearance is unimportant, she is not given face cream or hand lotion and like other Handmaids, she also steals butter from her food tray, as substitute. Around her ovulation time, on the night before the ‘Ceremony’, she is given bath by Maratha. After that she waits for the ceremony, feeling completely dehumanized. She is fed only with what the authorities regard as healthy food. She is forced into pregnancy tests every month. She is forced to do everything what the authorities wanted. She surrenders, “I resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object,”
Being a Handmaid, Offred is allowed to do is to go shopping with a neighbouring handmaid and buy only those things for which she has been given tokens. The rest of the day she is supposed to do nothing. She is not allowed to knit, sew, read, write, embroider, smoke, wave and listen to music. Her dead routine is very boring. This is the time when she remembers her past life, memories of her husband Luke, her daughter and her mother. She thinks that the Commander’s wife is more fortunate, she can do all these things. Like prisoners, she is constantly watched and guarded, allowed going for a walk only in twos and lives in a room like a prison cell. Speaking freely is a capital offense like most other things. She is aware that she is in danger and not even free to die. She decides to end up by hanging, “I could noose the bedsheets round my neck, hook myself up in the closet, throw my weight forward choke myself off” but she has faith and it feels a sense of hope. She considers suicide, a timid action.

In Gilead, only ruling class has right to read books. Generally women are denied books, papers and pens. The shops of Gilead are identified by pictures and there are no written signs for public, all are replaced by pictographs. But Commander invites her to play a word game Scrabble with him. The game of scrabble, a symbol of reading and writing is forbidden for women. For Offred playing scrabble has all the excitement of a forbidden pleasure. Besides, Commander and Offred meet several times in the greatest secrecy and do many forbidden things together. He takes her out to his private club. Commander really wants friendship and intimacy but Offred experiences mixed feelings towards him and she doesn’t feel love for him. When Commander asks her to kiss
him she says, “I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my hands.”

Offred falls in love—not with the Commander whose image is irretreivably tainted with patriarchal authority, but with Nick his chauffeur. She turns a situation of coercion into a love story during her secret meetings with Nick, which are arranged by the Commander’s Wife solely for the purpose of making her pregnant. Their love story follows the pattern of traditional female romance with its strong undercurrent of sexual magnetism which leads the heroine into dangerous forbidden territory and finally results in her rescue by the hero. Offred knows that she and Nick would be shot if they were discovered in bed together. Their love story is fraught with so many difficulties that Ofred has trouble in telling it.

Offred’s story is about love with a strong traditional female romance component and she does the very traditional thing of becoming pregnant through her lovemaking with Nick though not through state-regulated sex with the Commander. Thus she finally defeats the Commander’s assurance of male superiority. Her love story is cut short and lacks the conventional happy ending. The romance plot is put to a crucial test when one day Nick bursts into Offred’s room accompanied by a party of Eyes, secret police to take her away in the dreaded Black Van reserved for dissidents. Her role in the novel ends with her departure from the Commander’s house like a criminal under guard and climbs into the van.

Commander’s background is never officially described as Offred does not have a chance to learn of his past, although he does volunteer, in one of their later meetings, that he is a sort of scientist and was previously
involved in something like market research. He might have been one of the architects of the Republic and its laws. His name is presumably Fred. Though hungry for power he is pathetically human. Previously he regards Offred as nothing more than his official Handmaid but soon he makes use of her as his unofficial scrabble partner and club companion. He plans private meetings with Offred and supplies her books, magazines and hand lotions, which are banned for the Handmaids. At times he looks at Offred sheepishly while at other times he appears as a caring human being. The thinking Fred and the feeling Fred appear to be two different persons.

Offred’s lover, Nick is the Commander’s chauffeur who lives above the garage. On Serena Joy’s, Commander’s wife’s suggestion and arrangements, Offred starts a sexual relationship with him to try to increase her chances of getting pregnant and saving herself from being shipped to the colonies in disgrace. Subsequently Offred starts to develop real feelings for him, even going so far as to tell him her pre-Gilead name, June a revealing act of trust. He is an ambiguous character and Offred does not know if he is a party loyalist or a member of the resistance, until near the end of the story and her time in the Commander’s household. He is also a passionate one and seems to genuinely care for her he does not part with any information about himself and remains as good as stranger to her. He redeems all men by his act of saving Offred, although it may mean his own death. He shifts her from, “being a helpless victim to being shy, subversive survivors.”

Offred’s husband, Luke, her daughter and mother are only depicted through her fragmented memories. Luke was the narrator’s husband prior to the formation of the Republic. Divorce, which is illegal in Gilead, is used as an excuse to annual subsequent marriages, take custody of any
children, and kill the partners or force them into labor. When her marriage with Luke is decreed invalid because of Luke’s prior marriage, she with her husband and daughter try to escape to Canada. But at the border crossing the guard suspicious behavior convinced them that their plan has been discovered and they fled back into Gilead and separated from one another. She constantly expects to see him hanged at the displaying Wall but never sees him there and never learns his fate. Actually Luke is shot; her daughter is given away to needy woman in the upper circle and Offred captured. She mournfully remembers her love and attachment with them.

Nobody dies from lack of sex. It’s lack of love we die from. There’s nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or else where ---- where there are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person. From time to time I can see their faces, against the dark, flickering like the images of saints--- I can conjure them ---

What sustains Offred in the darkest hours of hopelessness is the lingering memory of her family. It is the hope of meeting them some day that keeps her alive. In the worst of her nightmares, Offred can still see her daughter, “--- holding out her arms to me, being carried away.” She never sees her daughter again, nor does she know, whether her husband is alive or dead. When Offred regains full consciousness, she is at the Leah and Rachel center, the training center of Handmaids.

Offred’s mother is the kind of old woman who won’t let anyone but in front of her in a supermarket line. She was independent, rebellious and strong-minded. She was an active feminist of the early days of the
women’s movement. She denies the power of the feminine in Offred by encouraging her individualism and independence from men but Offred’s response, to her mother shows both her rejection of her mother’s value. She makes a proclamation:

I didn’t want to live my life on her terms; I didn’t want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that---

Serena Joy is Commander’s wife. In pre-Gilead she was known as Pam. She is neither Serene nor joyous. She was a lead singer in Church choirs and later appeared on T.V. shows giving speeches on “the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home” and presented her failure to do so “as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all.” Sitting in her beautiful enclosed garden in her blue gown, Serena appears to Offred like an ageing parody of the Virgin Mary, childless, arthritic and snipping vengefully at her flowers. Because of her infertility, in new Gilead her life as the wife of a Commander would seem to be the enviable leisured life of the high class society. She is forced to take part in the impregnation ceremony and she has to accept the extra-marital affairs of her husband. So she arranges Offred’s affair with Nick in the hope of freeing Commander from Offred but when she comes to know her relationship with Commander she is deeply hurt.

Offred’s storytelling voice multiplies to become the voices of ‘women’ rather than the voice of a single narrator. There is the story of Ofglen, a neighbourer of Offred’s and fellow Handmaid Offred’s shopping partner and member of the secret Mayday resistance, who finally hangs herself. The narrator also speaks about Moira, — Offred’s close friend since college who seems to keep her real name. She is taken
to be a Handmaid shortly after Offerd, but both women arrive at the center at the same time. While at the center, Moira manages to escapes, while the more passive Offred declines. The narrator tells of her escape, in which Moira steals an Aunt’s clothes and leaves the center wearing them. Her escapade does not inspire other Handmaids instead they frightened.

3.2.5. Theme:

Gender is the essential theme of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the regime of Gilead, people are bereaved of their individual freedom and ordered to serve the state in different types and functions. Men are chiefly divided into six categories: the Commanders, the Eyes, the Angels, the Guardians, the Doctors and the Workers. Women are also divided into eight groups: the Wives, the Handmaids, the Aunts, the Marthas, the Econowives, the Unwomen, the Widows and the Prostitutes. Atwood expands her political view to encompass a world where both men and women are caught up in the struggle to see “who can do what to whom and get away it, even as far as death,”49 Oppression is always Atwood’s subject in her novels. But this novel is profoundly political----it represents the confrontation with power and its universal forms: dictatorship, tyranny, torture and the reality of violence.

In the novel, Margaret Atwood offers a perspective on the relationship between men and women. She expresses the complex relationship between sexuality and power and argues how power dominates on sex, Michel Foucault says:

To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than law of rohibition. Its objective: that sex renounce itself. Its instrument: the threat of punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the
penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification. Power constrains sex only through a taboo that plays on the alternative between two nonexistences.\textsuperscript{50}

The forms of oppressions and their external manifestations may differ at different periods in history but the fact remains that women have been and still are victims of patriarchy.

In \textit{The Handmaid’s Tale}, female anxieties associated with fertility, procreation and maternity are projected as feminist nightmare and cultural catastrophe. Atwood demonstrates the way in which the profound and irreconcilable spilt between pro-life and pre-choice ideologies of reproduction in contemporary social experience corroborate female ambivalence about childbearing in patriarchy. She imagines a world in which women are explicitly defined by their potential fertility, procreation and maternity are simultaneously idealized and dehumanized.

Under the guise of religious salvation, the Gileadean regime builds a social structure that is rigid, oppressive and above all, misogynistic, “Women in Gilead are as unintelligent matter in the reproduction process which is like everything else in this dystopia, dominated by men.”\textsuperscript{51} By exaggerating some existing misogynistic attitudes and intertwining them with an affecting plot and characters, Margaret Atwood finds success in her endeavors to shed light upon and caution against a horrific social treatment of women.

\textbf{3.2.6. Imagery:}

Atwood uses the imagery of nature in her novel in complex ways, delineating the terms of survival and growth as well as oppression and
death. The imagery of mutilation and dismemberment permits the narrator’s own language. Offred struggles to reconstruct her fragmented selfhood and to justify the choices she has made under the circumstances she describes. Her past experiences, apparently severed from the present time of Gileadean tyranny, are in fact linked by these very images of female brutalization. The terse words she exchanges with other handmaids, who may or may not be trustworthy confidantes, are “amputated speech”\textsuperscript{52} Late in her story Offred apologizes to an unknown audience in whom she must believe for her own survival; her story is an act of self-generation that opposes the oppressive obligations of procreation.

She describes her narrative as if it were herself, “a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force ---- this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story.”\textsuperscript{53} The images she uses are not simply about loss of control but also about bodily damage. Standing in the cupboard scrawled with her hanged predecessor’s secret message, Offred is aware that she too, like that other Handmaids, is trapped. Yet her irrepressible energy impels her towards life rather than death, as she listens to her heartbeat opening and closing, opening. Besides the summer garden provides a sublimated image of Offred’s own repressed desires, but more than that it becomes suddenly and overwhelmingly the space of romantic fantasy, a “Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word \textit{swoon},”\textsuperscript{54} where traditional images of femininity breathe through Offred’s prose as the garden itself breathes in the warmth, breathing itself in. In this eroticised feminine space conjured by Offred’s imagination, everything signifies romance, temptation and desire.
3.2.7. Symbolism:

Other images throughout the narrative reinforce the symbolism of disembodiment and dismemberment. When Offred tries to recall her visceral connections to the husband and daughter from whom she has been so abruptly separated. She mourns,

Nobody dies from lack of sex. Its lack of love we die from.

There’s nobody here I can love----Who knows where they are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person----Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around?

Without it I too am disembodied.\textsuperscript{55}

Her empty room, she sits in, becomes a symbol of her own empty inner space, “I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in as dust across the floor.”\textsuperscript{56}

Margaret Atwood frequently uses metaphors, symbols and images in her novel. Offred plays scrabble, which is symbol of reading and writing. The Scrabble game functions as a spatial metaphor of the freedom and restrictions existing for Offred in the novel, for she can write but not communicate by writing and choose her moves but only within the confines of the board and the Commander’s room with his complicity. The novel can be interpreted as a metaphor of the condition of women which has changed minimally over the centuries.

The language used by Offred is as her weapon for she, who herself was a librarian in pre-Gilead has language in her mind that enables her to survive in Gilead who is initially silenced by Gileadean culture. The very thing that is denied Offred – the freedom to speak up,
speak out, be heard — becomes the medium through which she defines herself. Offred realizes the centrality of language to the process of self-realization and the struggle for equality. Language — the ability to speak, to tell one’s own story — is at the heart of Offred.

Language which is initially an intimidating silence for Offred is ultimately converted into a liberating phenomenon as Carol Beran observes: “Offred’s power is in language.” Therefore, she eventually works her way to freedom through language which is officially denied. Offred escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the Undergroud Female road to tell her tale. She is forcefully reduced to morality and to keeping her diary by speaking into a tape recorder. She tells most of her tale in the present tense with her direct experience. Offred’s voice on cassette tapes serves as records of an emergence from silence. She uses language to raise her voice against the sexual oppression of the patriarchal society and to demolish authority of the Republic of Gilead.

3.2.8. View of Life:

Offred, the protagonist challenges the traditional values. With her revolutionary view of life she tells that one needs Canonization of feminism for survival and to know about the human capacity. The novel can be read as a cautionary tale about the effects of excessive adherence to norms already existing in our world. By watching the characters grappling with the effects of excess, every woman is supposed to learn how to avoid them and their consequences. As Malashri Lal says:

_The Handmaid’s Tale_ is a warning against essential biologism which for women must create the most terrible disjunction between body and spirit. For society as a whole, the warning is against the tendency to see all human
endeavours as economic production thereby causing a corresponding neglect of earth-based spirituality. The novel is also a recognition to the victimized women that the structures that cause and perpetuate women’s oppression are arbitrary. Offred, the Handmaid never stops judging her world, reading its rewritten language for fractured signs of hope. Offred decides to illustrate how orality can be cultivated to question the authoritarian power structures. This talking woman has the cause and will and strength and means to articulate silence.

III

3.3. Introduction:

Margaret Atwood’s seventh novel *Cat’s Eye*, published in 1989 is a fascinating and immensely detailed work that deals with interaction between adulthood and childhood as well as the relationship between art, artist and interpretation. This is a novel which combines the discourse of fiction and autobiography, since and painting in its attempt to represent the female subject. Arguably this novel could be read as Atwood’s own retrospective glance back at the imaginative territory of her earlier fictions. There is a female artist who is more successful than the nameless woman in *Surfacing* and the same parent and brother figures as in that novel; the same childhood tormentors and traumatic experiences in the Toronto ravine have appeared in *Lady Oracle*. The crucial importance is of retrospective art in the female protagonist’s construction of herself, for
novel is Atwood’s most developed version of life-writing in the feminine, where her middle-aged protagonist Elaine Risley struggles to define herself through figuring out her life story in different versions.

The novel raises questions about the representation of women, about writing as a woman, about autography and about mothers and daughters. It is a study of female identity construction in contemporary middle-class Canadian society. It is an anthropological catalogue of the evolution of Toronto’s tribal customs from the forties to the eighties. The novel focuses on the issues of women through art, for the first time in history. As Prabhakar says,

*Cat’s Eye* is Atwood’s attempt to expose male prejudices against women’s creativity and talent and shows how art can be used as a weapon against tyranny in all its manifestations. Thus, the novel is like an oasis in a desert for those whose creativity is prevented from blooming.\(^59\)

### 3.3.1. Title:

Usually a woman is compared to a cat as it is known for its cunning. But in one stroke Atwood changes it into a positive symbol by referring to its eyes which can see in darkness. Metaphorically speaking, the cat’s eyes are not the eyes of cat but the eyes of Elaine, a woman painter and the protagonist of the novel. Atwood presents her protagonist to help her see and expose the truth tucked away under the darkness of ideologies dominating the world with her extraordinary visual capacity. Besides, as a trainee biologist or a painter, or as the sister of a budding astronomer, Elaine’s primary activity is ‘seeing’ and therefore “eyes are important, but so are microscopes and telescopes, and so are lenses, with their ability to magnify and to focus more powerfully than the naked
In this context the title of the novel, Cat’s Eye acquires significance. Cat’s Eye, retrospective’s title “self-portrait, of sorts” shows long buried eidetic childhood image, now retrieved. The image of the cat’s eye is central. It represents a world into which she has been allowed access. Thus invested by the nine-year-old girl with supernatural powers to protect her, it becomes for Elaine a talismanic object and the sign of her own difference.

3.3.2. Story:

Like most of Atwood’s novel *Cat’s Eye* has more than one face and tells more than one story. The novel depicts the story of Elaine Risley, a noted artist returning to her hometown of Toronto after years away in Vancouver. While in Toronto, Elaine is the subject of a retrospective show and finds herself dealing with the painful memories of her childhood in suburban Toronto, her mature into adolescence, then marry and have children of her own, her growing old parents, death of her brother, fade of her friends, victimization by male artist and leave of her husband’s. The story is littered with references to her pictures and culminates in her first retrospective exhibition.

The novel also deals with the problems of growing up as well as the various anxieties of a mother. The narrator recalls incidents from her childhood and the relationships she had with the members of her family. Elaine’s dreams as well as her paintings recuperate her past and present her anger at her treatment by her friends as a child. As a married woman, she worries about her own children and the problems. She considers the different influences including family, relationships and education, which mould a person and make them what they are in adulthood. Elaine’s own memories are finally integrated and recuperated in a series of event that
accentuate the double voice of the narrative, first her painting tells her story, then she speaks to exorcise Cordelia that make her position as “a speaking painting subject.”

In novel, *Cat’s Eye* Elaine psychologies the dialogue, creating a narrational braid with three discourses of the subject, two of which are voiced in the two segments of the narrative and one that is inscribed across both. The voice narrating the present is that of the middle-aged woman. The voice remembering the past is free of affect. The first voice is social, engaged in a telling. The second voice narrating the past is almost toneless, an inner voice and unaddressed. In the first voice Elaine speaks and in the second voice her past speaks to her. Structure of the novel offers the realistic mode with its critical reflection of contemporary manners and its engagement with timely issues.

Elaine Risley, a successful, middle-aged painter, returning from Vancouver to Toronto for a retrospective exhibition of her work, tells two stories: one of her stay in Toronto and the other of her past. The second forms the main body of the narrative. In both, stories the obsessive presence of Elaine’s best friend, Cordelia, identifies Elaine’s relationship with her as the unifying motive of the two braided narratives. When the narrative of the past is absorbed into the narrative of present time at the end Elaine leaves for Vancouver, apparently with the past behind her but with a sadness which comes from facing the absence of friendship.

**3.3.3. Plot-construction:**

The retrospective exhibition is the informing principle of the novel, for it has already been constructed on the contents page, where the chapter titles are all given the names of paintings mentioned in the novel. The only painting missing bears the title of the first chapter, Iron Lung
which Elaine cannot paint. Throughout the narrative, fifteen individual paintings offer a disruptive commentary figuring 75 events from a different angle from that of the memoir. Her paintings show her fragmentation. She has titled her works according to their themes. Significantly, they have eloquent themes — nature, figures from her past, her parents, brother and others. Her self-portrait is entitled *Cat’s Eye* and it eloquently expresses her fragmented self because in it she has painted only her half-face. While the painting reflects some of the elements of her past, it becomes a portrait of her inner turmoil.

The exhibition is presented as a chronicle, with its brief views of earlier paintings and detailed descriptions of five later paintings together with a few less-than-helpful interpretations from the catalogue supplemented by Elaine’s comments. The novel beings with a definition of time, she dismisses linear time in favor of

> time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don’t look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away.\(^{63}\)

When Elaine returns to her childhood home in Toronto, symbolically she is in two places and times at once. The above remark is filled with echoes of Stephen’s voice in allusions to his theories about space-time. They both are engaged in trying to reconstruct the past, he through physics and mathematics and she through memory and imaginative vision.

Significantly, the last chapter of novel *Bridge* suggests the ability to join two parallel lines or banks. Standing on the bridge, Elaine recasts her post once again. She remembers the day she fell into water and froze
to death but that time is past now. She also understands the futility of judging others because every human being is entrapped by his or her situation. At last she has taken her revenge on them by painting them as she saw them one by one and art has released her tension and now she no longer wishes to judge people. Thus the structure of the novel reflects the lack of closure to Elaine’s dilemma, as past continuously counterpoints present.

3.3.4. Characters:

The novel, *Cat’s Eye* portrays the inner development of the main character Elaine Risley by means of backward look over her life. Her parents are plain middle-class people who have led an unsettled, nomadic life. Seeing the glory and glamour around, Elaine realises “for the first time that we are not rich.”\(^{64}\) This gives a blow to her self-esteem. Her first eight years are spent on the road with her family, as her father, an entomologist tracks infestations across northern Canada. But very soon her parents move to Toronto, to a new and only partially completed tract house. Untrained in the ways of the world, Elaine feels awkward with her girl friends — Carol, Grace and Cordelia, girls from affluent middle-class families influence little Elaine. Her constant effort is to measure up to their standards so that she becomes acceptable to them. Being acceptable becomes of foremost importance to Elaine because it means being lovable.

In her childhood Elaine draws girls “in old-fashioned clothing, with long skirts, pinafores and puffed sleeves, --- with big hairbows on their heads.”\(^{65}\) She uses silver paper of cigarette packages to draw figures of women and cuts coloured figure of women, cookware and furniture out of the book and paste them in her scrapbook. She plays the scrapbook
game with her brother Stephen and friends — Grace, Carol and Cordelia. Photography is also one of her hobbies. She takes snapshots of women with her camera and pastes them into her album. Playing marbles with her brother is also a favourite pastime of Elaine. Blue cat’s eyes are her favourite marbles. Elaine is pulled towards the rich intellectual and scientific interests of her father and particularly of her brilliant mother. She also bears the stamp of her brother’s artistic talent. Stephen helps her in developing her mental perception and vision of painting.

But Cordelia and her two friends surround Elaine throughout her day, pointing out her failings, her weakness, mocking the way she walks, the way she eats, the way she laughs. They torment her with her own image, ostracize her and in terrible bit of play-acting, bury her alive. Cordelia starts victimizing Elaine almost as soon as they are introduced. She experiences mixed feelings towards them and cannot understand their love for her, as is seen when she confusedly says,

> With enemies you can feel hatred, and anger. But Cordelia is my friend. She likes me, she wants to help me, they all do. They are my friends, my girl friends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I’m terrified of losing them. I want to please.66

Her teasing shatters Elaine’s self-esteem and leads her to adopt neurotic habits, such as peeling her skin, biting her nails and chewing her hair. Her mental anguish becomes so great that she forgets how to laugh, begins to feel secure when ill, contemplates suicide, desires invisibility and faints at will.

Leaving Cordelia behind, Elaine begins to study drawing, has an affair with her art teacher Josef Harbik who is a demon lover of the
Healthcliff variety. She comes to know the true nature of Josef as a manipulator and leaves him. Later Elaine comes in contact with Jon, a fellow art student by accident and gets married but she is not satisfied with her married life. With her marriage and childbirth Elaine’s dreams of establishing a balanced and healthy relationship with a fellow painter turns sour. Soon after her divorce, Elaine marriage Ben, a travel agent who seems a mild-mannered trusting and caring person. She begins her career as a painter and takes part in several women’s conference and group shows organized by women. She deals with the torment of her early life in her art. Empowered by her success as an artist Elaine returns to Toronto for a show of her work and calls Cordelia now who is a pitiful patient in a psychiatric facility. She surpasses her desire for revenge with art work.

Elaine’s father influences her most. Her parents frown upon religions and radical fanaticism and are friendly with people of other races and faiths. As a scientist her father believes that science can help make the world a better place to live in. He is impatient and concerned about ecology and so passionately interested in Biology that he wants his children to share his excitement about the subject. He believes that science is “the one truly universal language.” When Elaine decides to be a painter, her father acts supportive but secretly thinks that her talent for drawing is impressive but wasted. Her mother fully aware of the presence of the power-hungry beast within all human beings but chooses not to talk about it. She is a very hard-working, tolerant and sensible woman who makes the best of even the worst situations. When she comes to know that her daughter is tortured by Coredia and other she asks
her to either stop associating with the girls altogether. Elaine feels that her parents are unconventional and complains:

My parents are like younger, urchin like brothers and sisters whose faces are dirty and who blurt out humiliating things that can neither be anticipated nor controlled. I sigh and make the best of it I feel I’m older than they are, much older. I feel ancient.  

Like her parents, Elaine’s brother Stephen, an astrophysicist is so completely involved in his intellectual system that he keeps as far away as possible, from social interaction. He encounters in the books and comics he read. His hobbies change periodically. He begins by collecting milk-bottle tops, then marbles and later comic books. For a short period he feels interested in chemistry and finally in stars. He introduces Elaine to scientific concepts and helps her in developing her mental perception and vision of painting by means of the various dimension of the universe and the idea of space-time. He teaches her how time and space go hand in hand in the universe. He says, “Time is a dimension. You can’t separate it from space. Space-time is what we live in.”

Stephen’s discourse from theoretical physics provides the conceptual framework for her paintings for Elaine is painting time. He teaches Elaine how to explore the freedom of imagination beyond the constraints of time. Her association with her brother encourages her to improve her painting skill and teaches her how to see in the dark. While observing butterflies in military testing zone in California he suddenly dies at the hand of terrorists. The novel is filled with echoes of her dead brother’s voice in allusions to his theories about curved space, light, black holes and the uncertainly principle. In significant ways, Stephen’s
scientific theories have shaped Elaine’s imagination as an artist, for his theories and her paintings occupy the same area of speculation on the mysterious laws which govern the universe. Indeed, it is his theoretical physics lecture on The First Picoseconds and the Quest for a Unified Field Theory which gives Elaine the title for the final painting in her exhibition.

It is Cordelia, her childhood companion and tormentor, for whom Elaine searches incessantly on her return to Toronto. Elaine’s account of her childhood experiences with Cordelia is analysed in a way that sheds new light on the deception that marks their teenage friendship. In light of this, Cordelia, easily the most important character in the narrative aside from the protagonist herself is analysed with the kind of significance that befits her role within the novel. All the major characters of Atwood’s fiction develop vision and identity. They function as mirrors or cameras. In telling the story of her life, Elaine Risley foregrounds Cordelia as a monster only to show how she freed herself from Cordelia who is the slightly older girl and comes into Elaine’s neighbourhood in her ninth year.

The novel focuses on one key relationship between Elaine and her childhood friend Cordelia. Cordelia represents the best and the worst in people. She is the chief tormentor. Her family environment is unhealthy. Her mother is a tiny and fragile woman, an actress in her youth, presenting herself as an artist; she cleverly leaves the household work to a cleaning lady and takes painting classes. Cordelia’s father too seems to suffer from a split personality. His craggy, charming external self is at variance with his power hungry, brutish inner self. It is largely on his account that Cordelia is the kind of person she is.
Cordelia grows up as an alienated person totally unaware of her inner self. She feels that she is neither as beautiful nor as gifted as her elder sisters. She tries hard to imitate her sisters’ way of talking their pretentious mannerism like rolling their eyes upward and blowing out smoke through their nose. Hungry for power, Cordelia starts victimizing Elaine. She acts as she knows everything and tells Carol, Grace and Elaine about plays and with her other friends tortures Elaine by making her believe that she is not normal and she wants to improve personality. Elaine says,

the expression on my face, how I walk, what I wear, because all of these things need improvement. I am not normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me. Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time. 

Overcome with self-hatred and fear of them, Elaine peels off the skin from her toes as far as blood and knows the pain gave her something definite to think about, something immediate. It is something to hold onto. Elaine feels angry for having been a willing victim. Thus Cordelia functions as the conscience of the patriarchal status. She uses Elaine in the classic patriarchal pattern of projecting what one is trying to escape within oneself onto another. But such Cordelia is not the subject of Elaine’s any painting.

Elaine’s other friend Carol Campbell is an Anglican by faith. She is a stubby girl with frequent laugh. Her parents seem to have split personalities. As Carol tells Elaine, “her mother sings on a radio program, under a different name, ---- her father takes some of his teeth out at night and puts them into a glass of water beside his bed.” Her
another friend, Grace Smeath is a year older than Carol, Cordelia and Elaine. She is taller than Carol with dark thick coarse hair. Her skin is extremely pale. Taught to control her emotions, Grace is terribly repressed and acts hypocritical and manipulative even as an eight-year-old child.

The things they play are mostly Grace’s ideas, because if they try to play anything she doesn’t like, she says she has a headache and goes home or else tells her friends to go home. Grace does not raise her voice, gets angry or cries. She always insists on being the teacher and forces them into doing spelling tests. Elaine and Carol always use only those colours, which Grace specifies in her movie star colouring books. She is incapable of laughter and there is no trace of naturalness in her.

Later Elaine joins Art College because of her deep interest in painting. There her art teacher, Josef Hrbik is in his mid-thirties, with dark thickly curled hair, a moustache, eagle nose and eyes that look almost purple like mulberries. During his art class he arranges the picture of live naked woman, especially for girl students to draw for fluidity of line. Here Elaine comes to know how art is being used by male artist as “a vehicle for sexual wish fulfillment--- a way of making women an object for man’s contemplation and erotic desire.” Elaine discovers that her art teacher wants to have sexual relationship with his students. They learn to draw objects very well but fail to draw life on canvass.

Josef says to his girl students, “You are an unfinished woman” and adds in a lower voice, “but here you will be finished.” And Elaine falls in love with Josef; she is delighted with his unpredictable lovemaking. He tells her that she should remain untouched by others as he sees her as his property and tells that a woman belongs to a man—if a man finds his
woman with another man, he kills both of them. He regards women as helpless flowers, or shapes to be arranged contemplated.

Elaine knows the true nature of Josef in the victimization of Susie, her fellow art student who commits suicide because of her illicit pregnancy. After Susie’s abortion Elaine realizes that women were not real to Josef. Elaine identifies with her so deeply that she feels, “At the same time I know that in her place I would have been just as stupid. I would have done what she has done, moment by moment, step by step.”

As time passes, Josef’s disappearance leaves Elaine to begin her affair with Jon, a fellow art student. They come together by accident, their married life is almost lethal and she becomes a silent buried mother within the confines of house. Elaine says:

If I were to win them, the order of the world would be changed, and I am not ready for that. So instead I lose the fights, and master different arts. I shrug, tighten my mouth in silent rebuke, turn my back in bed, leave questions unanswered. I say. “Do it however you like.”

Jon seems to have split personality. Before marriage he has pretended to offer Elaine equality, now he doesn’t like her working at night because it disturbs his sleep. He wants her to stop painting. Elaine now realizes that her own husband crushes her creativity and individuality. She starts developing her personality as an independent painter and come across with all limitation. Her husband never supports her instead he thinks that she is mad because she is a woman. But she rebels against the attitude of her husband and leaves him, goes to Vancouver with her daughter, Sarah and marries to Ben, a travel agent. As against Josef and Jon, Ben does not cherish popular images of womanhood and accepts Elaine as she is and
respects her decisions. He encourages her and gives her a lot of moral and financial support.

3.3.5. Theme:

The novel, *Cat’s Eye* is about the thoughts and images that make up Elaine’s reflections—feminist, humanist and personal. It is more than a feminist tract, more than a postmodern exploration of literary self—reflection because it speaks from and about the autobiographical form. It is all of fiction and autobiography, feminist tract and personal meditation, contemporary metafiction and classical narrative because it is more than these. This novel raises questions about the representation of women, about writing as a woman, about autobiography and about mothers and daughters. Despite Margaret Atwood’s disclaim that the novel is not autobiographical, this is the novel of the author’s own struggle to achieve self-hood as a woman and as an artist.

Besides this novel is like a single breaking ocean wave, its waters gathered from far-away coasts, diverted by channels and chance winds, yet moving inexorably towards a crashing silvery moment that peaks and breaks on a designated shore. It gathers its many streams, sends them flowing forward in wash after wash of rich detail and observation, but disappointingly no wave forms. Fizzling, it disperses its brilliant waters ineffectually, allowing them to be sucked back into the general stream. But water is one of Margaret Atwood’s powerful elements and there is no doubt that her extraordinary gifts will keep her sailing.

3.3.6. Imagery:

In the opening pages of the novel, Elaine assembles a number of images. One Cordelia is a bag lady in a worn coat and knitted hat; another is unconscious in hospital, brain dead; a third is trapped in an iron lung,
aware but immobile. These reproductions are indicative of the fact that
constructed objects are enunciations. They are nothing more than
compositions spoken by a posited subject. Except this Margaret Atwood
uses mirror imagery to focus on Elaine’s dual identity. When reflected in
the mirror of Cordelia’s sunglasses, Elaine appears “in duplicate and
monochrome, and a great deal smaller than life-sized.”76 The mirror
metaphor has a symbolic significance as it functions of perceiving and
being perceived. The images of mirrors and reflections abound in Cat’s
Eye are a dominant motif in Elaine’s paintings as well as in her inner life.

Elaine’s childhood of negative self-image continues to have the
power over her like a mirror. Whenever she sees in the mirror, she finds
Cordelia standing near her, which disturbs her because as Stephen,
Elaine’s brother observes, “Cordelia has a tendency to exist.”77 Stephen’s
words suggest a relationship between Elaine and Cordelia. Although
Cordelia’s tendency to master and the power Elaine has given Cordelia
over herself threaten her freedom. Thus Elaine develops a kind of love-
hate relationship with Cordealia. In moments of crisis she becomes
Elaine enemy, when the crisis is over, she thinks of her as her friend.

3.3.7. View of Life:

Elaine’s struggle towards achievement of identity as woman and as
artist is obviously harder, more painful because she is a painter. Margaret
Atwood makes us to believe in Elaine’s march towards wholeness and
health as she concludes the novel with an apparent healthy note:

Now its full night, clear, moonless and filled with stars,
which are not eternal as was once thought, which are not
where we think they are. If they were sounds, they would be
echoes, of something that happened millions of years ago: a
word made of numbers. Echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing. It’s old light, and there’s not much of it. But it’s enough to see by.  

Symbolically, the full, clear night with a star-studded sky is interpreted as Elaine’s conscience, which has rid itself of Cordelia and has gained freedom. She has marched ahead, in time and only echoes are heard, not the real voice. If this statement is an indication of a healthy attitude, then Elaine is a mentally sound woman who has got over her neurotic difficulties. Elaine’s this last positive statement is only an expression of her relief because she is leaving Toronto. Away from this town, she hopes to be at peace and immerse herself in her art as she has done earlier. Thus the novel sums up as “a portrait of the artist as a woman and a survivor.” It wishes for a society, which will come together as human being.

IV

3.4. Introduction:

With the eighth novel, The Robber Bride (1993), Margaret Atwood returns to her favourite genre of female Gothic romance. In the 1990s she turns Gothic romance upside down by using and revising its conventions to produce a worldly novel which engages not only with questions of sexual politics and fantasies of femininity but also with questions of national identity in an urban postcolonial context. Besides it is both like a fairytale and like history, which—as Tony explains—is always “a
construct,” being the combination of different kind of textual evidence: social documentary, private memory narrative and imaginative reconstruction. The novel also exposes how seduction is the weapon in the war of the sexes and how it acts like a slow poison for men as well as women.

*The Robber Bride*, this novel is the story of three middle-aged women who despite the different directions their lives have taken, are united in a common goal: the struggle against one woman who has at various times become arch-rival for each one of them, robbing them of someone they loved through a play of treachery, deceit and a contest of wills. Through Roz, Charis and Tony’s interaction with the villainous Zenia, who comes to epitomize power, brutality and belligerence, the novel explores the aggressivity that characterizes the subject’s encounter with alterity and the role of the other in the constitution of the self.

**3.4.1. Title:**

The title of the novel, *The Robber Bride* indicates the most interesting figure in novel — Zenia. She is there in the title of novel as the Demonic woman. She has come from central Europe as an immigrant to torment in Canada three innocent friends who live in modern Toronto since the 1960s and comes back to haunt them in 1990. The novel is Zenia’s story which defines and focuses the narrative. She does not appear to be a beautiful and successful career woman but reputed to be The Robber Bride who uses the magic trick to turn men easily inside out. She is a waif, a homeless but has “undeniable power over men.” Zenia— The Bobber Bride remains un-dead, a vampiric figure desiring a bowl of blood, a bowl of pain, some death for she derives her life from the insecurities and desires of the living.
3.4.2. Story:

*The Robber Bride* is the story of Zenia, another of Atwood’s missing persons like Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* or Cordelia in *Cat’s Eye*, told through the multiple narratives of her three friends — Antonia Fremont (Tony), Roz Andrews and Charis. As each of the three tells her own life story, different overlapping frames of reference are set up through which Zenia’s character and significance are given meaning, though Zenia never exists independently of the stories of others. Her identity is constructed through her relationships with a military historian (Tony), a successful businesswoman (Roz) and a New Age mystic and shop assistant (Charis). These women are all living in Toronto on 23 October 1990, a crucial date for the narrative as on that day they are having lunch together at a fashionable Toronto restaurant called the Toxique and “Zenia returns from the dead.” Having been robbed by Zenia of men, money and self-confidence, they keep on meeting once a month for lunch because of her. They meet to tell stories about Zenia, it is their collective need of her that brings her back from the dead. They need her, their stories are about her to define them and she is inside them.

3.4.3. Plot-construction:

The novel is structured quite schematically, moving out from the crisis of Zenia’s Gothic reappearance in the restaurant five years after her memorial service, then scrolling back through the life stories of all three in an attempt to track Zenia down. Though the three friends have met to exchange stories of their confrontation with Zenia, whom they have all encountered on the same day, to celebrate their resistance and her defeat, they discover something even more startling has happened.
The tale of Zenia is told through the life stories of the three women friends who have survived Zenia, and it ends with homecoming and the restoration of family and social order. Zenia has three different versions of her life story, which she tells to each of her friends in order to gain their trust and then to rob them of their money and their men. This is what her friends tell one another and the reader for the novel is structured out of three fictive autobiographies and Zenia never gets to tell her story in her own voice.

Several years prior to the opening of the novel, Zenia, a woman who attended college with Roz, Tony and Charis, feigns her death in order to assume a new identity and to evade responsibility for the tragedies that she inflicted upon the protagonists. At the opening of the novel, Zenia returns to Toronto and entangles her life into the lives of the protagonists who come to recognize that their reunion is hardly the mark of coincidence. Within that contemporary frame the memory narratives of Tony, Charis and Roz all occur in chronological sequence, charting the history of changing cultural fashions in Toronto over the previous thirty years.

The narrative is signalled in the first and last sections, entitled ‘Onset’ and ‘Outcome’ told by Tony who has a historian’s belief in the salutary power of explanations. Within the doubled framing chapters – Onset and Toxique; Toxique and Outcome at the center of the story, are the triple parallel narratives of Tony, Charis and Roz. Each of these inner chapters also contains its own beginning, middle and end which are structured in a highly controlled manner. In the long inner chapter called Black Enamel, Tony is to begin telling of her battle with Zenia. It recounts Tony’s memories of meeting Zenia as a student in the 1960s as it
tracks back through Tony’s unhappy childhood and recounts Zenia’s many attempts to rob Tony of her money, her professional reputation and her beloved West.

Charis’s section — Weasel Nights’ focuses on her memories of Zenia in the 1970s, her American lover Billy and their daughter August, with flashbacks to her childhood as a victim of sexual abuse. It ends with Zenia’s seduction of Billy and his disappearance. Then Roz’s section—The Robber Bride recounts her meetings with Zenia in the 1980s and follows a similar pattern of recall: childhood memories, marriage, motherhood and a successful business career, up to Zenia’s seduction of Roz’s husband Mitch and his eventual suicide. Only Tony survives with her man, and it is left to her to give a narrative shape to the fragments of Zenia that exist in the multiple anecdotes of these women.

In the closing pages of the novel, we are told “wherever else Zenia had been in her life, she had also been at war. An unofficial war, a guerilla war, a war she may not have known she was waging, but a war nevertheless.” At the end of the novel, all three women reject Zenia and she commits suicide. She is vilified with the revelation that she was a drug pusher, and she is reputed to be suffering from ovarian cancer. Within the fairy tale structure, the three little pigs are all bitten by the wolfish Zenia. The structural organization of The Robber Bride shows that each of the characters has a domain of human story-telling associated with Zenia.

The plot is driven by a struggle for supremacy between the characters as it enacts a bitter battle between protagonist and antagonists: siege and conquest on the part of the merciless Zenia and strategies of defense from the embittered and embattled Tony, Roz and Charis. Even
secondary characters are in some way implicated: either they are directly involved as players in the primary chain of events or they are shown to have played a part in earlier incidents that may not show immediate impact upon the present but have had formative value as infantile experiences of struggle.

3.4.4. Characters:

Zenia first appears at the Toxique, a trendy Canadian restaurant where the protagonists are having lunch early in the novel. She is fatherless and her mother is a victim of commercial sex. Being protectionless the survival becomes very difficult for Zenia and her mother. The harrowing circumstances force them on the streets where they are to earn their livelihood through the “best paid industry,” prostitution. Her mother is a sort of “bargain-basement mistress.” She rents herself and her daughter to men as the sexual commodities to be bought and sold in the open market. Her mother is not very successful in the politics of prostitution because she does not really like it. Zenia flees home leaving her sick mother who is seriously ill with T.B. After the death of her mother, Zenia is brought up by her aunt who remains a maiden throughout her life for her dear niece. With the death of her aunt, Zenia is emotionally disturbed and faces very hard times and once again dragged into prostitution.

Zenia as postwar immigrant to Canada is the Jewish persecution victim of the Second World War. She is also the victim of sexual abuse and male violence, a drug addict and a sufferer from cancer and AIDS. Through her multiple identities she embodies the diseases, neuroses and traumas which are buried in the foundations of Western culture, not only in Europe but in the New World as well. Zenia is having multiple
identities but not fixed identity as she migrates from one woman’s life story to another. Thus for all three — Tony, Charis and Roz, Zenia is the other woman in the romance triangle. At last Karen pushes Zenia from her hotel balcony from where she does fall from to her death by the end of the novel.

Zenia has a double existence for she belongs to two different fictional discourses, those of realism and of fantasy. She is a very transgressive figure who exists both as a character in a realistic fiction and also as the projection of three women’s imaginations. Her identity is fabricated through their stories about her which are all stories of seduction, betrayal and humiliation. She herself is an enigma. Indeed she derives meaning only within the signifying structures of other people’s stories. Zenia is a liar, a floating signifier and certainly a fraud. There is no indication that she has any independent subjective life. According to Charis, “a turbulent muddy green…a deadly aureole, a visible infection.” This is how Zenia appears to one of her victims, always on the loose and ready to rob them of whatever is most precious to them.

Tony / Antonia Fremont / Tnomerf Ynot is the product of an unhappy marriage between a Canadian solder and an English war bride. Tony’s mother, Anthea is a war bride. She is fallen to a prey to an old trick of Griff, war husband. Tony is an accident of her mother’s hasty wartime marriage. Her parents are like the couple waiting to depart from a train station. One day her mother runs away with Perry, a life insurance man from her husband’s office. In her childhood, Tony suffers from motherlessness. Tony’s father marries for second, to Rhonda from her mother’s bridge club and goes abroad. After sometime he returns home and commits suicide.
After the demise of her parents, Tony becomes a Lecturer in History and marries West, a musicologist. Incidentally, West is sensual and sex is the very breath of his life. She suffers more due to failed family romance. Tony, the professional historian knows the technique how to engage the interest of listener and readers:

She likes the faint shock on the faces of her listeners. It’s the mix of domestic image and mass bloodshed that does it to them.87

Tony has always associated Zenia with war—or raw in terms of her own subjective life. Tony’s husband, West develops erotic relations with Zenia, who comes to contact Tony. She feels Zenia as a tumour. For her, friendship with Zenia is like dragging “along on a rope, behind a speeding motorboat…or as if racketing downhill on a bicycle, with no hands and no breaks either.”88 Zenia is a student in the 1960s of Tony. That time she attempts to rob Tony’s reputation and money; in married life her beloved, West. So Tony wishes to give Zenia’s ashes a sort military burial on Armistice Day: “An ending, then. November 11, 1991, at eleven o’clock in the morning, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.”89

Charis, formerly known as Karen, a New Age mystic and shop assistant provides comic relief in the novel. She is fatherless as her father is killed in war. She is bred and brought up by her mother and grandmother. Her grandmother encourages her a lot to show her will power as her mother is weak-minded. Charis falls in love with Bill, who deserts war and hides in her residence. The feeling of safety and security develops into romance and bring them together. His very existence depends upon her protection. He is seven years younger than her. He is
homesick and sheds his emotions on her in “a deluge-watery, chaotic, a melancholy blue in colour, like a great wave of tears.”

Charis is a Yoga teacher who wishes to restructure her own body through her spirit-‘yoga’. Zenia attends Charis’ yoga classes for her feigned cancer and scrutinizes the sexual relationships between Billy and Charis. Billy has no love and sympathy for his wife even when she is pregnant. He treats her pregnancy like “a big catastrophe… a death, not a birth” and always humiliates her.

After the weasel nights Billy runs away with Zenia. To Charis, Zenia is Jezebel who has ruined the life of her husband. She feels Zenia has robbed him “the part of herself she needs in order to live.” Zenia also steals Charis’ photo album which is a record of her memories and dreams of past and future. She destroys the photos and kills Billy as a revenge. Charis cannot win in the fight. Augusta, her dear daughter tries to console her speaking out the hard realities of contemporary life:

…Maybe I minded when I was small, but look around you, Mom, this is the twentieth century! Fathers come and go—a lot of the kids on the Island didn’t have them. I know some people with three or four fathers! I mean, it could have been worse, right? Temporarily, Charis feels consoled but she stays away from men and sex. Thus Charis in her section Weasel Nights focuses on her childhood as a victim of sexual abuse, her American lover Billy and their daughter Augusta, her memories of Zenia in the 1970s and Zenia’s seduction of Billy and his disappearance.

In her life Roz has shifted names and identities three times, from Rosalind Greenwood as the daughter of an Irishwoman who kept a
lodging house in Toronto during the war, to Roz Grunwald, the rich half-Jewish princess, when her father returns from Europe after the war, to Ms Roz Andrews through her marriage into old Toronto WASP society. Roz Andrews/ Rosalind Greenwood/ Roz Grunwald’s father was a Jewish immigrant from Winnipeg who made his money as a black marketer in Europe during the war and who returned to Canada as a Displaced Person, only to make his fortune in Toronto as a property developer. Roz’s life story reflects an important element in Canada’s postwar social history with its high proportion of ethnic immigrants and culturally hybridized identities with questions of nationality.

Roz’s mother meets her husband by chance when he is in a street fight. The shelter she gives him gradually develops into love and marriage. She is a silent woman by habit of her mind. Taking advantage of her silence he indulges in illicit relations with many mistresses. Roz’s mother experiences death-like silence. After the death of her mother, she marries Mitch and gives birth to her son — Larry and her two daughters — Paula and Erin. She runs a magazine called Wise Woman World to improve women’s condition.

Zenia is familiar with Roz’s life and associates herself with the magazine as a freelance journalist; develops a sexual relation with Mitch. Actually she never loves him, she steals him for an adventure and retaliation — “the pleasure of winning, of taking him away from Roz” in the game of sexual politics. She kills him when he is prepared to dress her up in leather underwear. Except this Zenia also robs Larry when he comes to the Toxique to enquire about his lost father. She kidnaps Larry to break family of Roz and to get money for a plane ticket to go abroad.
The secondary characters — West, Billy and Mitch help to develop the novel. Tony’s potential lover is West; there is no other man on her horizon. He is a musicologist. Zenia, friend of Tony comes to know about his sensual nature and steals him not by virtue of a show of her strength, but on account of his weakness for sex. She sucks his life blood, humiliates and ultimately discards him because he is boring like “one woman’s meat was another woman’s boredom.” Thus West is so terribly frightened by Zenia that thereafter he is afraid to look at other women.

Billy, lover and husband of Charis deserts war and hides in her home. His feeling of safety and security develops into romance and bring them together. He does not like being reminded of his age as he is seven years younger than Charis. He feels inferior at the mention of words young, innocent in relation to him. Zenia, student in yoga class of Charis discovers that he has lust for women. To him sex is a fun. After the weasel nights Billy runs away with Zenia and he has been won by her. Zenia has robbed him and has ruined his life by killing him as revenge.

Mitch is the runaway husband of Roz and father of Larry, Paula and Erin. He is on the board of directors of the magazine, Wise Woman World where Zenia takes charge as the editor. He develops a sexual relation with Zenia and considers her far superior to lesbians. He is a “sick lech” who needs women, particularly Zenia for sexual twist. But Zenia never loves him. She robs him for an adventure. Her stealing of him is her pleasure of winning, of taking him away from Roz in the game of sexual politics. Mitch has lost his weight, his flesh is also loose. She has made a fool of him who has no place in her life. She not only robs him but also kills. Zenia feels a sense of pride in putting an end to Mitch.
3.4.5. Theme:

Margaret Atwood, in her recent novel, *The Robber Bride* shows how one sex dominates and attempts to possess the other by control through social authority and economic force. Kate Millet calls this system a most ingenious form of interior colonization. She says:

It is one which tends to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, --- However muted its present appearance may be, sexual domination obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides it’s most fundamental concept of power.\(^97\)

*The Robber Bride* shows how sex is strategy for exercising power in the society. Through the caricature of Zenia, the novelist confronts the ideology of traditional female romance where getting the power means getting the man, for the man is the power. Zenia’s power is the power of female sexuality. In her reading from the novel at the National Theater in London in 1993, Atwood offered an important clue to an interpretation of this new novel when she said, “It’s a book about illusion: now you see it, now you don’t. This is not ideology; It’s real life.”\(^98\) Through Zenia’s story Atwood says that female sexuality has always been a problem for real women and real men, just as it is a problem for feminism.

3.4.6. Imagery:

The novel, *The Robber Bride* is full of mirror images, with Zenia on one side of the mirror and the three friends on the other, as all of them see themselves reflected in her. At the beginning of her relationship with Zenia when Tony looking into her eyes, Tony sees herself as more heroic and assertive than she has ever been in real life for she “sees her own
reflection: herself, as she would like to be Tnomerf Ynot. Herself turned inside out.”

Even Charis for all her unworldliness and New Age mysticism, dreams of being a different, stronger self when she sees her own image and Zenia’s merging together in her first power dream.

Zenia’s return from the dead is signalled by her appearance in the mirror of the Toxique restaurant. The dark reflection in the magic mirror is still there, in that “infinitely receding headspace where Zenia continues to exist.”

The conflicts between Zenia and the three women take on the greatest significance as they image the relation of two self-conscious subjects pitted in fierce battle against each other in the process of recognition. The last image of Zenia is given by Tony in her ambiguous elegy:

She is like an ancient statuette dug up from a Minoan palace: there are the large breasts, the tiny waist, the dark eyes, and the snaky hair. Tony picks her up and turns her over, probes and questions, but the woman with her glazed pottery face does nothing but smile.

Thus she remains an enigma to the end. Though absent, Zenia is also still present.

Zenia revolts indirectly against the power of male sexuality as man has constructed women’s sexuality to serve his needs, wants and interests through prostitution and sexual harassment. The irony of the situation is that female sexuality is for men but male sexuality is not for women. By the insistence of the rule women’s sexuality has been restrained, mute and hypocritical. As a reaction to male sexual aggression and double standards of morality Zenia adopts male sexual practices and wages a war
against male sex. Thus she drifts into prostitution as a temporary solution to her uneasy circumstances created by the male world.

3.4.7. View of Life:

In the novel, *The Robber Bride* the optimistic view of life is expressed through the mouth of Roz, one of three friends and who builds novel’s third section The Robber Bride. Tony, Charis and Roz cannot let Zenia go, when they believe she is dead and when they have been to her memorial service five years earlier. Having been tricked and robbed by Zenia of men, money and self-confidence, they keep on meeting once a month for lunch because of her. The positive outcome is that they become fast friends. The fact remains that they meet to tell stories about Zenia and in fact is their collective need to express their loss, unhappiness, frustration in domestic life and mental suffering.

The readers of the novel have to remind that how Roz transforms herself into a new woman and plays the role of a saint. She goes in quest of “superhuman goodness.”¹⁰² She wishes to mingle with the poorer who lead a real life to overcome her emotional suffering. She is saint Roz — a kind of Mother Teresa succouring the poor. She has the rays of good behaviour in her difficult condition. Through the figure of Roz, Atwood makes readers to think more about how we think about gender relations challenging the feminist slogan — The other woman will soon be with us as being naively optimistic. The novel shows that the Other Woman is always against us, precisely because she represents that otherness which cannot be accommodated or acknowledged but which is also necessary for self-definition.

Roz also suggests that men and women who adopt the male / female perversion lead them to degradation. So every woman must
possess the unconquerable will, unbending courage, patience as well as pride to wage her struggle peacefully to bring about a transformation of men and their society. Through the introspection of Roz in *The Robber Bride* Atwood says that women can not negate the total absence of men who are good:

I have heard some rather tired women express the opinion that the only good man is a dead man, but this is from correct. They may be hard to find, but think of it this way: like diamonds, in the rough or not, their rarity makes them all the more appreciated.

Besides, women must stop imitating male attitudes. The novel hopes for the equality in social relationships so that women have to take the concerns of men as seriously as they expect men to take theirs. The message of the novel is that all men and women should stop pretending and dissembling to keep the world free from sexual exploitation and oppression.

The projection of Atwood’s novels belonging to middle phase presents her art of writing as a matured novelist. Her experience is widened. She goes beyond her nation for setting of novels. Her novel writing career shows all the qualities of a good narrative and best storyteller through changing form of novels, creating live characters with help of familiar images and symbols. The novels of middle phase have won various types of awards that stamps Atwood one of the greatest Canadian English novelists.

Atwood’s novels of later phase will be discussed in the forthcoming chapter.
Notes and References:

7. *Bodily Harm*, p.54.
20. Ibid., p.167.
21. Ibid., p.133.
22. Ibid., p.284.
24. Ibid., p. 208.
29. Bodily Harm., p. 301.
33 Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Canada, Seal Books, 1998, p.333. All references are taken from this text.


39 *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.171.


51 Klarer, Mario. p.131.

52 *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.252.

54 Ibid., p.190.
56 Ibid., p.128.
61 Atwood, Margaret. Cat’s Eye, Toronto: Seal Books, 1999, p. 549. All subsequent references are to this edition.
63 Cat’s Eye, p.3.
64 Ibid., p. 96.
65 Ibid., p. 37.
66 Ibid., p.162.
67 Ibid., p.446.
68 Ibid., p.321.
69 Ibid., p. 296.
70 Ibid., p.159.
71 Ibid., p.64.

Cat’s Eye. p. 367.


Josephine Butler to Mary Priestman, 4, May 1874, No. 3327, Butler Collection, Fawcett Library, London.


93    Ibid., p. 663.
94    Ibid., p. 554.
95    Ibid., p. 599.
96    Ibid., p. 645.
97    Prabhakar M. *Feminism / Postmodernism Margaret Atwood’s Fiction*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999, pp.139-140.
98    A statement made by Atwood in Wales in 1982.
99    *The Robber Bride*, p.244.
100   Ibid., p. 680.
101   Ibid., p. 688.
102   Ibid., p. 578.
103   Prabhakar M. p. 151.