Chapter V

5. Assertion of Feminine Self: End of the Quest

Atwood’s feminist perspective means defining an individual selfhood without being hampered by the patriarchal myths of traditional femininity and masculinity. Women who passively accept traditional feminine roles and gain the approval and admiration of the male world are not depicted as successful. Women, who simply move to ‘male’ roles and seek to become individuals by oppressing other people are not considered successful. Only the nonconformist women who carve out a special place for themselves in the society without seeking power and without isolating themselves from the male world are considered successful in Atwood’s novel. The women who are discussed in this chapter play leading roles in Atwood’s novels and they finally transcend the gender constraints successfully. Though only a few of them observably achieve selfhood at the end, all these characters start to resist patriarchal pressure and move towards individuation near the end. Due to Atwood’s realistic story-telling skills, each female character examined in this chapter is unique, and the forms of oppression and subversion differ from novel to novel. However, there are interesting parallels among them. All of them, surprisingly, start their life as traditional women who are effortlessly exploited by the patriarchal society. All of them have unhappy childhood which they reexamine in order to make sense of their sufferings in the present. All of them resort to some sort of psychological escape to create for themselves an illusion of emotional well-being. All of them live with a hidden craving to free themselves from social constraints. All of them use creative strategies to gradually invalidate the effects of their social conditioning and to achieve emotional freedom. Over all, the successful
women characters discussed in this chapter are a clear exemplification of Atwood’s feminist philosophy. They are the protagonists in her novels and it is through them that one listens to Atwood’s authorial voice.

In *The Edible Woman*, Marian MacAlpin is portrayed as a thoughtful university graduate in her twenties, who is financially self-reliant. She lives in Toronto and shares an apartment with another young woman, Ainsley Tewce. The novel is a clear description of the phases she goes through in her rise against the social norms prescribed by the male-dominated society. Satirically, Marian, out of necessity, has to live in an old building with a nosy and meddlesome lady in the ground floor and the restrictive nature of the building, parallels that of the society itself. In the beginning, she chooses to live according to the norms of the society with a complete awareness of the expectations of the male-dominated society and the acceptable norms of gender relations. However, through her relationships with different types of characters in the novel, she comes to know how women are subjugated and “she becomes increasingly disillusioned with her job and her fiancé, Peter Wollander, to the point where her inner conflict finds its outward expression in an eating disorder whose symptoms resemble anorexia nervosa” (Howells, 2005, 24).

In part 1 of the novel, all characters and situations are viewed through Marian’s eyes, and therefore the narration is in the first person. Atwood seems to use this narrative strategy to indicate the subjective and the limited nature of the perspective. It is her company, Seymour Surveys, which gives Marian an initial (but a crucial) understanding of how women are being marginalized and forced to accept certain ‘socially acceptable’ roles. Seymour Surveys is “layered like an ice cream sandwich, with three floors” (13).
The top floor is occupied only by men who have responsible and respectable positions. In other words, it is the ‘decision-making floor.’ The bottom, on the other hand, is full of machines / operatives. The middle layer which Marian belongs to is the link between the two. “Marian soon realizes that she is literally and figuratively trapped” (Tandon, 2009, 37). She feels great anxiety and uncertainty about her role in the company.

What then could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys? I couldn’t become one of the men upstairs; I couldn’t become a machine person or one of the questionnaire-marking ladies, as that would be a step down.

(14)

Seymour Surveys also has certain practices that discriminate against women. The Manager, Mrs. Bogue thinks women who get pregnant are disloyal to the company: “I’m afraid Mrs. Dodge in Kamloops will have to be removed. She’s pregnant.” (21)

Moreover, her job as a market researcher enables her to realize how humiliating it is for a woman to do something which is not conventionally appropriate for women. The extract below shows Marian’s experience with a man she meets during a survey on men’s beer consumption.

....I saw him lurching out of his chair towards me with a beery leer. ‘Now what’s a nice little girl like you doing walking around asking men all about their beer?’ he said moistly. ‘You ought to be at home with some big strong man to take care of you.’ (52)

She finds the attitude adopted by Seymour Surveys and the public extremely vexing, but as a meek social conformist, she often, till the end of the second part of the novel,
behaves in a passive manner and creates an impression that she is a supporter of male
dominion. McWilliams (2006) says, “In her (Marian) work as a market researcher […]
she is accomplice to, as well as victim of, the mass consumerism that she later identifies
as defining her relationship with her fiancé, Peter.” (67)

Marian spends weekends with Peter Wollander, a young lawyer who has an ardent
fascination for guns and cameras. Their relationship has a highly symbolic value in the
novel as Marian represents Canadian passivity, while Peter is a typical symbol of
American consumerism and imperialism. Their first sexual experience only frustrates
Marian as Peter’s attention is directed more towards cleaning off the pieces of glass that
gets broken. On another occasion, Peter takes Marian into the bathroom because he
wants love under shower. Marian thinks this is perhaps Peter’s “attempt to assert
youthfulness and spontaneity” (68). Peter does not care about how inconvenient it is for
her, but Marian, in spite of her physical discomfort, remains submissive and tries to
satisfy him: “….I knew the tub would be too small and uncomfortably hard and ridged,
but I hadn’t objected” (68).

It is very clear that Atwood uses sex in The Edible Woman “to evoke masculine
blindness to the women’s point of view” (Inamdar, 2002, 183). It also exposes
women’s passivity and how it facilitates their own victimization. Marian, being a
subservient young woman, willingly loses her personality, and in Peter’s presence, she
only reflects Peter’s image of herself: “As we stared at each other in that brief light
I(Marian) could see myself, small and oval, mirrored in his (Peter’s)eyes” (98). In
other words, Marian willingly accepts the restrictive gender roles imposed upon women
in paternalist society. Regarding Marian’s passivity, Salat (1994) says:
If Peter’s-the male’s-imperialistic designs are condemnable, Marian’s-the female’s self-willed subservience is no less blame-free. In Atwood’s exposition of gender-politics, therefore, woman is as much implicated in the processes that perpetuate male hegemony as is man. (97)

However, Marian seems only to accept the social destiny of women in the patriarchal system. Women’s biological destiny which is celebrated by her friends, Ainsley and Clara, on the other hand, only evokes a feeling of aversion in her. Atwood comically dramatizes the ambiguities and inconsistencies within the notion of ‘femininity’ by juxtaposing the subservient Marian with “two parodic versions of earth-mothers” (Howells, 2005,23): Clara, who is a passive victim of women’s biological destiny and Ainsley, who hatches a cunning plot to find a father for her child. Neither of them is acceptable to Marian, and this shows that she is going through an identity crisis. Pourgharib (2008) rightly says she “represents the younger generation of women, which considers itself drifting along without any sense of direction” (87).

Marian agrees to Peter’s proposal of marriage as she thinks it is unavoidable and can make her life better by providing some sort of stability. She thinks Peter is attractive and bound to be successful: “When do you want to get married?’ he asked almost gruffly.……I’d rather have you decide that. I’d rather leave the big decisions up to you” (107). Marian’s reply shows more of her belief that she is required to depend on Peter (or any other man for that matter) than any personal exhilaration. She also seems to think that she as a woman cannot make major decisions. That Marian’s entire personality is a social construct is made evident in Pourgharib’s remark:
The kind of pressure that drives her towards the marriage institution is by no means coercive or imposed from above: the pressure is rather psychological, ideological and cultural which have structured her subjectivity and ego that constantly bar her from thinking or doing anything that is socially branded as ‘abnormal’ or ‘perverse’ (2008: 90).

Though Peter uses her for his own benefit, she persuades herself that she has to comply with his wishes. With reference to the victim positions postulated by Atwood in *Survival*, Tandon (2009) contends that “at the beginning of the novel, Marian occupies victim position number two—acknowledgment of the fact of being a victim but the acceptance of it as something inevitable” (42). Her acceptance of her own victimization should not be viewed as an individual choice, but as a sign of how malevolent patriarchal values have been strongly and craftily established in the society.

In spite of the insidious effects of the discriminating social system she lives in, Marian, out of her experiences with various characters in the novel and her own perceptiveness, becomes disillusioned with Peter and marriage. She soon becomes acutely conscious of how Peter is using her for his own benefit. She realizes that he shows no consideration for her feelings and that he takes her everlasting presence and submissiveness for granted. There is a shift from first person to third person narration in Part 2 befitting Marian’s loss of an independent sense of self. Interestingly, Clara seems to be one of the initial catalysts that trigger off a change in Marian’s attitude towards matrimony and motherhood. Marian has always found sexually mature female bodies rather sickening. She likens Clara’s pregnant body to “a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a
watermelon” (30). It “seemed somehow beyond her (Clara), going its own way without reference to any directions of hers” (37). The way Marian disapprovingly views Clara’s wretched life with her children in the beginning of the novel shows that there is an innate aversion in her to the traditional roles imposed on women, which is often eclipsed by her outward social conformity. Perhaps, it is this conflict in her that later urges her to set out to free herself from the social restrictions and discover her selfhood.

Later in the novel, she visits Clara in a maternity hospital and when she leaves the hospital, she feels greatly relieved: “She had the sense of having escaped, as if from a culvert or cave. She was glad she wasn’t Clara” (161).

According to Pourgharib (2008), “Clara provides Marian a foresight of what she will end up becoming if she gets married to Peter” (90). The fear of losing her identity and freedom to Peter, therefore, grows in her as marriage nears. She begins to doubt if she has made a right decision. Her consciousness of her own victimization in Peter’s manipulative hands becomes painfully intense when she watches Peter eating:

Watching him operating on the steak like that, carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes, made her think of the diagram of the planned cow at the front of one of her cookbooks; the cow with lines on it and labels to show you from which part of the cow all the different cuts were taken…. She could see rows of butchers somewhere in a large room, a butcher school, sitting at tables….cutting out steaks…..(185)

She thinks that she herself has become an object of consumption, devoured by Peter with great delight. The fear of being consumed makes her extremely repugnant to meat
and she cannot eat meat anymore: “She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood Red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed...” (185).

The more unreliable her relationship with Peter, the more distressed she becomes and her anxiety results in a growing antipathy towards food and she hates to eat anything. As Peter gains more power over her, she hysterically starts identifying herself with the hunted and consumed. “As her marriage gets closer, so her disorder gets worse and the list of ‘forbidden foods’ gets longer, until the point where she can eat nothing at all” (Howells, 2005, 29). Her anxiety about the possibility of losing her independent social identity through marriage to Peter results in an overt physical disorder- complete loss of appetite. It looks as though Marian suffers from anorexia nervosa, but Howells (2005) argues that “it is a pathological condition of self-division – a division of head and body at the neck” (27).

Simone de Beauvoir says that woman’s body offers a tough resistance to the unfair demands that the society and nature make on it. In other words, even though Marian is willing to give in to the demands of the patriarchal social system, her body revolts against them. “It is Marian’s very metabolism that is most rebellious to her efforts at metamorphosing into a social-cultural conformist” (Pourgharib, 2008, 89). This is because Marian has intrinsically rejected the models of adult women represented by Clara, Ainsley and the office virgins, and her fear of growing into any of the model that conforms to the social standards stops her from giving any further sustenance to her body. Though Marian is terrified by this problem and thinks that she “will starve to death,” (186), from the perspective of her search for selfhood, her eating disorder needs
to be interpreted as a major step forward. Marian’s eating disorder marks a positive moment of change and transformation and it represents a political act of resistance. Her rejection of food is caused by her subconscious rejection of the victim role and this means she is now in victim position number three: acknowledgement of the fact of being consumed and assimilated by Peter (Tandon, 2009, 42).

However, to Marian, her eating disorder is just a baffling illness until Duncan makes her understand its significance by relating it to an inner rebellion by saying, “You’re probably representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system” (236). Marian meets Duncan when she was doing a survey for Moose Beer. She meets him again at the Laundromat and is instinctively attracted by him. It is fitting that her relationship with Duncan, who is weak and puny, becomes stronger as her eating disorder gets worse. What she really likes about Duncan is that he, unlike Peter, does not have any expectations that she has to meet.

....when he (Duncan) would murmur...... ‘You know, I don’t even really like you very much,’ it didn’t disturb her at all because she didn’t have to answer. But when Peter....would whisper ‘I love you’ and wait for the echo, she had to exert herself. (227)

This frank and unpretentious nature of Duncan is a crucial element in Marian’s journey to self-discovery. Since there is no pressure on her to conform, she can be herself, Marian. Thus, she, in the company of Duncan, gets an opportunity to self-examine and reassess herself in relation to others and slowly acquire a new awareness of herself. Now, she can perceive more clearly the covert dominion that Peter has over her and she
is filled with a sense of impending doom. What annoys her more is “his maneuvers to squeeze Marian into a model identity based on his own propensities and prejudices as to how a woman should be” (Pourgharib, 2008, 97).

While she is in the bath just before her engagement party, she begins to feel that “she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle” (274). She feels very uneasy because she thinks that Peter has manipulated her cleverly, made her do things she never liked and nearly erased her true personality. Once she gets dressed up and (heavily) made up for the event, Peter is pleased and says “Darling, you look absolutely marvelous“ (287), but this compliment only saddens her as she feels Peter has succeeded in tearing her away from her true self. She thinks what she sees reflected in the mirror is not herself but a fake:

Her attention caught on the various details, the things she wasn’t used to – the fingernails, the heavy earrings, the hair, the various parts of her face……. What was it that lay beneath the surface these pieces were floating on, holding them all together?. (287)

Nonetheless, she is still a “socio-cultural” conformist trying to perform her role to the satisfaction of Peter and other guests. She puts on a welcoming countenance in the engagement party while her inner self feels completely alienated. She entertains the guests smilingly but her mind is filled with a sense of detachment. Though part 2 is in the third person narration, Atwood’s use of phrases like ‘soap-men’ and ‘soap-wives‘ (303) to refer to the guests, skillfully indicate Marian’s cynical view of the social system and the falsity of the so-called socially appropriate gender roles and behavior.
Kindled by the extreme inner-conflict, she starts simmering with frustration. Her sense of victimization is further fueled by Joe’s comments on the effects of marriage on women:

_When she gets married, her core gets invaded....Her core. The centre of her personality, the thing she’s built up; her image of herself.........Her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her......._(296)

In that potentially explosive situation, Peter tries to take her photograph. This terrifies her because she sees Peter’s camera as a symbol of the restrictive forces of the society. She thinks the photograph will trap her permanently and she will not be able to move or change. Panic-stricken, she flees like a hunted animal and retreats to Duncan with a view to saving herself. Fleeing from the party is a metaphorically significant step in Marian’s quest for selfhood. All major characters that represent various alternatives available to Marian come together at Peter’s party. By running away, Marian metaphorically rejects all these alternatives.

Duncan, to Marian’s disappointment, proves to be deceitful and sexually exploits her. However, Atwood uses Duncan’s character in such a way that his deceitfulness has a didactic value in the novel. He makes Marian understand how she has always been compliant and passive, and allowed both men in her life to use and consume her quite easily, thus helping the process of victimization. She is not angry with him as he, unlike Peter, is very explicit about what he wants from her. Most importantly, he makes her
shed all those carefully nurtured pretences and turn into her true self: “I’m not letting you into this bed until you go in there and peel that junk off your face” (319).

Prompted by Duncan to go back and fight her way through her predicament individually, she returns to her place and bakes a cake in the shape of a woman which is intended to be her own image. The process of making the ‘cake woman’ makes her ruminate on the wretched destiny of a woman in the society. Staring at the cake, she realizes her own complicity in her victimization, and she tells herself, “You look delicious….Very appetizing. And that’s what will happen to you; that’s what you get for being food” (342). When Peter comes to see her, she offers the cake to him and says, “You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you….You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better…..” (344). Peter is alarmed and immediately leaves the place. Choosing cake-making, a traditionally feminine act, to express her resistance clearly shows she is not willing to shed her femininity but only her willingness to be consumed by the patriarchal social system.

Once Peter leaves, Marian is relieved that her womanhood, which she would have lost to Peter, is safe. Consequently, her body returns to normal metabolism. She feels very hungry and eats the cake herself. Seeing this act, her friend Ainsley exclaims in horror: “You’re rejecting your femininity” (345). However, Marian’s eating of the cake, by showing her control over herself, only asserts her femininity. The act of eating the cake also signifies the realignment of her body with her head. With no inner conflict, she rejoins the society. She tells Duncan over the telephone: “I realized Peter was trying to destroy me. So now I’m looking for another job” (350). This shows she is ready for renewal and reformation. Her desire is to be “a woman with an absolute, as
against a relatively defined, identity” (Salat, 1994, 95-96). In other words, she wants to remain a woman “not by consenting to be a part of the social mainstream, but by revolting against it” (Pourgharib, 2008,92). This renewed form of Marian clearly matches up with Atwood’s creative non-victim position.

The namelessness of the protagonist of *Surfacing* helps the character effectively epitomize the social alienation that is commonly felt by people who are unable to play the roles imposed upon them by the domineering patriarchal society. She says, “I no longer have a name. I tried all those years to be civilized but I’m not and I’m through pretending” (173). The social alienation also makes her emotionally numb. She says, “I realized I did not feel much of anything, I hadn’t for a long time. Perhaps I’d been like that all my life, just as some babies are born deaf or without a sense of touch” (106). She gets upset about her inability to feel and is occasionally jealous of Anna and Joe who are emotionally sound. However, from this deficient position, the protagonist “finds a way to heal the split within her own psyche, thereby restoring her emotional and spiritual health” (Howells, 2005: 41) and revolts “against the denial of woman’s professional aspirations as well as motherhood” (Prabhakar, M, 1999:100).

After living in Toronto for several years, she goes back to the Quebec wilderness, the place of her childhood, to look for her lost father. However, she slowly realizes that what she is looking for in the wilderness is not her father but her own past, which holds clues to the root causes of her present problems. Her return to her childhood environment evokes memories of incidents that shaped her gender identity and of how she gradually gave in to the demands of the patriarchal system. The novel is about the narrator’s psychological journey into her past only to emerge as a liberated woman.
She believes that it is only by understanding and reversing the effects of her own past that she can attain selfhood. Her urge to reverse the effects of the society on her psyche to attain emotional and social purification is evident when she finally says, “Everything from history must be eliminated” (181). A study of the narrator’s past will therefore reveal how the domineering, male-dominated society subdues a woman and shapes her gender identity.

First of all, her childhood memories are replete with forceful personalities of father images and dim elusive mother figures. As a child, the narrator adores her father. She is socially conditioned to identify herself with him, rather than with her insipid mother. She grows up in a male-dominated school system where it is worse for a girl to ask questions than for a boy. The boys in the school chase and capture the girls after the school and tie them up with their own skipping ropes, “silently underscoring how feminine playthings may themselves trap young girls into sexual stereotypes, thereby constraining their free development” (Gottlieb, 1978: 311). Sadly, the boys tease the narrator much more vehemently as she is more reclusive and timid than other girls. “Being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded, it arouses in others disgust and pity and the desire to torment and reform” (69). Her aversion to fabricated social customs is manifest in her remarks about birthday parties:

\[
I \textit{ despised them, the pew-purple velvet dresses with antimacassar lace collars and the presents, voices going Oooo with envy when they were opened, and the pointless games, finding a thimble or memorizing clutter on a tray. (68)}
\]
However, such ‘personal opinions’ are unbecoming of a girl, and the narrator is forced by her mother to conform to the social expectations and be civilized (69). In addition to what happens to her at school and home, her observation of what happens to other local women also seems to mould her gender consciousness. The local priest bans women from wearing short skirts and bare arms and, sincerely obeying this religious rule, many women refrain from swimming because they do not want to wear swimsuit and expose their legs and arms. Interestingly, the various developmental stages of the narrator’s gender identity, due to the impact of the society, can be seen in the pictures drawn by her as a child in her scrapbooks. Her earliest scrapbook is full of semi-divine pictures, implying that she is in a state of wholeness. One of her later scrapbooks, however, has pictures of Easter eggs and rabbits. “Page after page of eggs and rabbits, grass and trees, normal and green, surrounding them, flowers blooming, sun in the upper right hand corner of each picture, moon symmetrically in the left. All the rabbits were smiling and some were laughing hilariously; several were shown eating ice-cream cones from the safety of their egg-tops” (91). This is possibly the girl’s visualization of heaven. This stage represents a clear distinction between the good and the bad and a tendency to identify only with the good. The social values are beginning to impinge on the narrator’s attitude. The third developmental stage is marked by a scrapbook which is full of “illustrations cut from magazines and pasted in. They were ladies, all kinds: holding up cans of cleanser, knitting, smiling, modeling toeless high heels and nylons with dark seams and pillbox hats and veils” (91). This shows that the narrator has imbibed socially determined gender principles and the meaningless fabrications created
by her consumer-oriented society. It indicates that she is now a ‘woman’ in the patriarchal sense, ready to be controlled and exploited.

It is little wonder that her femininity and professional aspirations are easily shattered by her devious art teacher. The art teacher prevents her from developing into a real artist by discouraging her by saying that studying art will not be useful to her as “there has never been any important women artists” (49). She therefore becomes an illustrator of children’s books, and also does designs and fabric patterns, a profession which does not satisfy her artistic sensibilities. She then falls prey to his seduction techniques and starts thinking of him as her husband and loves him sincerely: “I worshiped him, non-child-bride, idolater; I kept the scraps of his handwriting like saints’ relics” (150). However, his relationship with the narrator is driven by pure lust. And the narrator is sexually exploited. What happens subsequently is something that leaves a deep scar in the narrator’s mind and makes her emotionally numb for many years to come. When she is pregnant, her art teacher skillfully convinces her to abort the child, an immoral act that the narrator feels guilty about almost eternally: “Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn’t a child but it could have been one, I didn’t allow it” (144). The abortion rather effectively illustrates “the side effect of a patriarchal rational and oppressing world” (Tandon, 2009: 73). The exploitation by the man she loved and the thoughts of her aborted child fill her mind with a sense of remorse and she becomes a sort of psychological suicide. Since she cannot face her own sinful past, she, like many of Atwood’s protagonists, escapes into a fabricated past; she tells everyone that she is a divorcee and her child lives with her husband. However, her experience with the art teacher is a very crucial factor that changes her attitude
towards men and marriage. This probably can be considered the beginning of her journey to selfhood. Her awakening is further strengthened by her visit to the place of her childhood and her observation of how Anna is ill-treated by her husband David.

“She discovers that marriage is no more than a surrendering of values and distortion of the identity of a woman” (Prabhakar, M, 1999: 104). Besides, she no longer believes in love and in fact she is completely incapable of love, a defect that often maddens her boyfriend, Joe.

Nevertheless, she remains an untruthful person who keeps refusing to accept her own past and draws comfort from the network of deceptions and lies that she has created. In fact, what makes her bizarre is that she herself believes in her own falsehood. All her faults, however, are expelled from her when she dives down into the lake to search for the Indian rock paintings that were recorded in her father’s paintings. While swimming underwater, she sees a strange, unclear image which, she thinks, is her father’s drowned body. That image brings back in her mind the painful memories that she has repressed so far and she gets the mental courage to come to terms with her real past. She confesses her falsehood finally: “I couldn’t accept it, that mutilation, ruin I’d made, I needed a different version” (144). As Howells (2005: 46) points out, diving into the lake works both as a realistic description and as a metaphor for descent into the territory of the subconscious. The changes that happen to the narrator can therefore be interpreted as a pure psychological transformation, which, surprisingly, helps her recover her emotional well-being: “Feeling was beginning to seep back into me. I tingled like a foot that’s been asleep” (147). She is a whole being now. Like Marian in *The Edible Woman*, who regains the ability to eat, she regains the ability to feel.
As a reformed woman, her first discernible act against the malevolent patriarchal aspirations is the destruction of the film made by David and Joe. By flinging the film reels into the water, she thinks she has released all the enslaved elements that have been captured by David and Joe, including the nudity of Anna. Her next objective is to attain motherhood which has been denied to her. This is necessary not only to respond to her new feminist consciousness but also to flush out the death that she thinks she is filled with. She believes she can bring back her aborted child alive by becoming a mother again. “Nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive” (160). What is significant at this stage is that the narrator has become a conscious decision maker, and chooses Joe, her boyfriend, and takes him to the wilderness to make love. The copulation in the wilderness indicates “a symbolic rejection of the civilization and its institutions” (Ramana, P.S, 2006: 16). She feels extremely happy because she thinks she has got her child back: “He(Joe) trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been imprisoned for so long” (165). It should also be noted that a powerless woman who was used by her art teacher is now using a man, Joe, to fulfill her ambition. This clearly indicates a transfer from victim position to victor position.

However, the realization of her true self makes her sense of alienation more intense. She thinks she is totally incompatible with the ‘civilized’ world which wants everyone to conform to patriarchal expectations. Therefore, she discards her “human skin” that is the clothes and runs through the woods, rejecting the world that has victimized her. She starts to live like an unblemished animal that peacefully coexists with nature. Later,
“her body boundaries dissolve and she has a vision of becoming vitally connected to the earth as a component of the wilderness landscape” (Howells, 2005: 47).

‘I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning….I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place (187)

However, her momentary separation from the civilization and the human social order gives her a greater understanding of her place in the society and an awareness that she cannot survive without society. “At the sight of a fish jumping on the lake, the narrator undergoes a series of radical shifts in perception till her vision settles back into a frame of normalcy” (Howells, 2005:47).

From the lake a fish jumps. 
An idea of a fish jumps.
A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides, no, antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting spirit. It hangs in the air suspended, flesh turned to icon, he has changed again, returned to the water. How many shapes can he take.
I watch it for an hour or so; then it drops and softens, the circles widen, it becomes an ordinary fish again. (193)

From this sight, the narrator clearly understands that though her immersion into her subconscious mind (symbolized by water) is very useful, she must return to the conscious level and lead a responsible life in the society. She also realizes that it is very important for her to live in order to allow her child to be born. “If I die it dies, if I starve
it starves with me... It must be born, allowed” (198). This can also be interpreted as the narrator’s realization that mankind cannot survive without women. She decides to return to the society, but this time as a liberated woman who knows her place in the society: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim” (197).

Engulfed by the overbearing patriarchal forces, Joan Delacourt Foster, the protagonist of Lady Oracle, escapes into a fictional world and her career as a writer “serves a therapeutic purpose for Joan as it soothes and consoles her mind” (Prabhakar, 1999:59). Her fabrications are so convincing and frequent that the border between the fiction and the reality blurs and the readers start finding her very unreliable. However, her constant attempt to escape from the reality and her unwillingness to take responsibility for her actions do her more harm than good. Her life gets messier. “She moves through mirrors and through her own self-deluding fictions into a realm of fairy tales and myth where, instead of escaping, she becomes trapped in the very surfaces she strives to create” (Rigney, 1987:62). Finally, to get away from the complications of her life, she, with the help of some of her friends, stages a false boat accident to fake her own death, flies to Italy, buries her wet costume and tries to begin a new life.

Such escapist tendency is not the result of any yearning for change or duplicity, but it is the result of an inability to fit into the conventional role a woman is expected to play in a male dominated society. Joan’s dejection is not because of her unwillingness to conform to the patriarchal norm, but it is because of her failure to make herself acceptable despite her sincere attempts to conform to patriarchal values. Throughout her life, Joan has to alter her behavior to please someone. She spends most of her life pretending to be a person she is not. She puts on performances for people and even
changes her names to better fit in with her surroundings and, more importantly, to hide her past from others. “Her assumed names, which can be put on and off like costumes, constitute nothing less than a set of aliases for a woman who has a very insecure sense of her own identity” (Howells, 2005:57). Her feeble sense of self drives her to “*have more than one life*” (141). Even death loses its tragic overtones to suggest instead a sort of metamorphosis in Joan’s life.

She escapes into a fictional world mainly to seek refuge from her own past which she thinks is disgraceful. She wants to erase her past because she thinks “*the truth was not convincing*” (167). Her childhood, therefore, holds the clue to her frail sense of selfhood and her fragmented personality. As a child, she is conspicuously overweight and she reminds her mother of “an inner tube that took things in at one end but didn’t let them out at the other” (93). Prabhakar (1999:56) thinks that Atwood deliberately portrays Joan as a fat girl in the novel to question male attitudes to women’s body and to present her as a victim of patriarchal pressure. As if to prove Prabhakar’s point, Joan, as a child, has to endure many disappointments and insults because of her size. Those unpleasant childhood experiences make her feel uncomfortable about her own existence.

Her father is an indifferent man who works as an anesthetist at the Toronto General Hospital. He went to war and returned only when Joan was five years old. Her mother had to bring her up all alone. Exasperated by the dreariness of her life, one day her mother shouts at her father, “*You don’t know what it was like, all alone with her to bring up while you were over there enjoying yourself...It’s not as though I wanted to have her. It’s not as though I wanted to marry you...I had to make the best of a bad job*” (82). Joan understands that she is an unwelcome accident in her parent’s life. As
an unwanted daughter of a miserable housewife, Joan is growing more and more pessimistic about life. Her dejection is further fueled by her mother’s unceasing efforts to transform her from an unattractive fat girl into a slender beauty.

Joan’s mother is a victim of the intimidating standards created by the male-dominated society. All she wants in her life is full compliance with the societal values. She also tries to transform herself according to what she thinks is real beauty by putting layers of make-up. With her desperate struggle to conform, she becomes the first symbol of the patriarchal repression in Joan’s early life. Incidentally, Joan’s name itself is an effect of her mother’s imitative nature. Joan was named after Joan Crawford, a beautiful film star. This name has left in her a feeling of guilt for not living up to her mother’s expectations.

However, as a young girl, Joan does all she can to defy her mother’s attempts to make her slim and beautiful. She has two reasons for doing this. First, she feels very insecure as an unwanted child: “I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic. Sometimes I was afraid I wasn’t really there. I was an accident; I’d heard her call me an accident. Did I want to become solid, solid as a stone so she wouldn’t be able to get rid of me?” (78). Second, the idea of marriage fills her with disgust. Joan’s mother sends her to a psychiatrist who tells her that being thin and beautiful is essential for a girl to get married. However, her observation of her parents’ miserable married life makes her loathe marriage. Hence, she starts doing everything that her mother hates. She eats too much, dresses ridiculously to exhibit her mounds of fat, and works outside to upset her. She proclaims, that she is not a puppet and continues to do everything to extricate
herself from the repression of authority. Rigney (1987:65) draws an apt analogy between Joan and Marian in *The Edible Woman*:

*As Marian in The Edible Woman rejects her female identity, her ‘role as Woman’, by refusing to eat, so Joan rejects her prescribed roles by eating to excess until the real Joan is hidden and protected in a cocoon of fat, a ‘magic cloak of blubber and invisibility’* (157)

As Joan’s body swells, her mother begins to see her as a symbol of her failure, “a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize” (67). This results in more humiliation and agony for Joan. At the dancing school, when Joan has a chance to dance as a beautiful butterfly, her mother convinces her teacher that Joan is not fit for the role, and makes her do a ‘mothball’ dance instead. She feels naked, humiliated and exposed during the dance program and finds the entire event “grossly unfair” (53) on the part of the society. This incident seems to be an important formative influence in the development of her sense of insecurity and desire for acceptance. Later, in high school, she has to play “kindly aunt and wise woman” characters because of her fat appearance. Another important thing she discerns from her mother’s life is that everyone is shadowed by their opposites. She grows up watching her mother’s duplicitous attempts to make herself look like what she is not, using a three-way mirror. She even thinks that her mother is a “triple headed monster.”

While Joan’s mother paves the way for Joan’s sense of insecurity and low self-esteem, Aunt Lou gives her an understanding of the need for escape. By taking Joan to Hollywood romance films, she provides Joan a momentary sense of relief from reality
and an introduction to the world of fantasy. As a young girl, she feels pity for the dejected heroine of the film *The Red Shoes* acted by Moira Shearer. The predicament of this red-haired dancer, who has to choose between career and marriage, gives Joan a clear understanding of the pathetic position of professional women in the male-dominated society. The fact that the red-haired dancer finally has to commit suicide shocks Joan. Besides, Aunt Lou’s personal life also testifies to the ways in which women are victimized by the institution of marriage. Aunt Lou was married to a “compulsive gambler” who neglected all her attempts to reform him and had no concern and love for her. Aunt Lou describes the nature of her family life with him as follows:

> Then he’d come back and if he’d lost he’d tell me how much he loved me, if he’d won he’d complain about being tied down. It was very sad, really.

> One day he just never came back. May be they shot him for not paying. I wonder if he’s still alive; if he is, I suppose I’m still married to him. (90)

Though Aunt Lou is a helpless victim in the clutches of the patriarchal system like Joan’s mother, she plays a much more constructive role in Joan’s life. She is the one who introduces Joan to Leda Sprott, a spiritualist who stimulates Joan to try the Automatic writing by telling her that she has “great powers” (123). This incident initiates Joan into the profession of writing. Secondly, she leaves two hundred thousand dollars in her will. However, it is on one condition. Joan has to lose hundred pounds to be able to inherit the money. This motivates young Joan to lose weight and keep in shape. Overall, Aunt Lou is the main catalyst for Joan’s ‘magical transformation’ that, interestingly, resembles the Gothic conventions that Joan herself employs in her literary career. Interestingly, from the personalities of Joan’s mother and Aunt Lou evolves
Joan’s unique identity, “an identity suspended between opposites: a part of Joan is given to romantic indulgences while another favors duplicity and self-denial” (Hengen, 1993:69). A person with a bitter and ‘shameful’ past, Joan is thrilled at the prospect of becoming a new person with a new slim appearance and a new ability.

*I was now a different person, and it was like being fully grown at the age of nineteen; I was the right shape, but I had the wrong past. I’d have to get rid of it entirely and construct a different one for myself; a more agreeable one....The thought of going on with the same kind of life for ever and ever depressed me. I wanted to have more than one life.* (157)

She initially starts to write to escape from her past. She starts writing under the pen name Louisa K.Delacourt to commemorate her aunt. However, her encounters with men as an independent mature woman give her a frustrating awareness of how women are treated like material goods and forced to lead a life of servitude. This makes her write with an aim of escaping from her present as well.

The cook in *Bite-A-Bit* restaurant where Joan works wants to marry her for her ‘functional value.’ He says, “I am serious. I want to meet with your father, and look, I show you my bank account”.......*I wish to open restaurant of my own.....You would work the cash register for me, and welcome the people. I would cook... I will give you babies; lots of babies, I see you like the babies. You are a good girl*” (108-09). She is repelled by his strange, self-seeking approach which hints at the traditional roles that she is expected to play as a woman. She therefore does not take him seriously and does not accept his proposal.
However, while she is in London, she meets Paul, a Polish Count, who preys upon her quite effortlessly. Surprisingly, Joan, a person who stood against all kinds of oppressions as a young girl, suddenly becomes submissive and starts acting in a way that would be found acceptable by Paul. Though the reason for this transformation is not explicitly explained by Atwood, it is very easy for one to understand that there is a great deal of pressure on Joan, who has just left her homeland, to survive in a new place successfully. Atwood, perhaps, indirectly wants to indicate how quickly and skillfully the patriarchal system can exploit women who fall under its sway. Secondly, it seems the sense of inferiority that Joan’s childhood has instilled into her mind, gets transmuted into a yearning for acceptance when Joan becomes independent. After Paul, a man whom she does not love, deprives her of her virginity, she does not feel cheated or victimized. Instead, she is happy and feels relieved: “I was glad it had happened. It proved to me finally that I was normal, that my halo of flesh had disappeared and I was no longer among the untouchables” (168). Such is the effect of patriarchal forces on a woman’s sense of self and dignity.

Unquestionably, Paul is a conventional male model. He expects her to do only those things that please him. Joan is amazingly yielding in the beginning, but slowly starts detesting the way he looks down on women. He categorizes women as ‘wives’ and ‘mistresses’: “it’s an odd term, “mistress”...that was how he thought of me, these were the categories into which his sexual life was arranged: wives and mistresses. ....For him there was no such thing as a female lover” (167). However, she keeps quiet about her dissatisfaction. Incidentally, in spite of being a symbol of male oppression in Joan’s life, Paul is the one who stimulates her (quite involuntarily, of course) to choose writing
as a career. Seeing him churning out nurse novels and making enough money to support his mother and daughter back home, Joan is encouraged to write books to support herself. This marks an important milestone in Joan’s life. Nevertheless, when Paul’s possessiveness becomes no longer tolerable and when her autonomy is endangered, she moves away from him.

Understandably, Arthur, “a melancholy fighter for almost-lost causes, idealistic and doomed, sort of like Lord Byron....” (165), appears to be a savior to Joan. His unorthodox rebelliousness and the ‘ban-the bomb movement’ he is associated with make Joan believe that she has found the love of her life. Unlike Paul, who thinks that life for women “is babies and sewing” (178), Arthur “talked a lot about wanting a woman whose mind he could respect” (33-34). However, to her disappointment, Joan later realizes that Arthur is also a male chauvinist who wants her to be a silly domestic servant. By contrasting Paul and Arthur, Atwood seems to indicate that men, despite the differences in their outward behavior, are intrinsically domineering and manipulative. Moreover, she apparently ridicules the hypocrisy of men who claim to rebel against conventions. Like the cook in Bite-A-bit restaurant, Arthur proposes to her for ‘practical’ reasons:

Marriage itself would settle us down, and through it, too, we would become better acquainted. If it didn’t work out, well, it would be a learning experience. Most importantly, we could live much more cheaply together than we could separately. (220)
There is absolutely no sign of affection and devotion in his proposal, and yet Joan is happy to marry him. This is because Joan is truly in love with him. She tries her best to be a perfect wife to Arthur and make sure he is not dissatisfied with her. However, this ‘reformist’ man, to Joan’s dismay, imposes many restrictions on Joan. He expects her to cook. What is more upsetting for Joan is that he enjoys Joan’s failures.

Arthur enjoyed my defeats. They cheered him up. He loved hearing the crash as I dropped a red-hot platter on the floor, having forgotten to put on my oven mitt; he liked to hear me swearing in the kitchen; and when I would emerge sweaty-faced and disheveled after one of my battles, he would greet me with a smile and a little joke or perhaps even a kiss, which was as much for the display, the energy I’d wasted, as for the food...My failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience”.

(234-35)

Though she earnestly tries to keep Arthur ‘amused’ with her ‘accentuated’ inadequacies, she is deeply distressed by his uncaring attitude to her, his crafty repressiveness and the way he changes his principles frequently. However, she does not reveal her unhappiness to him mainly because her longing for acceptance forces her to endure the pain. For her, being accepted is more important than being happy. Writing escapist romances, therefore, becomes very crucial for Joan, at this point of time, to give herself a temporary respite from the bitter reality.

She, as usual, tries to keep her writing career secret from Arthur, because this secrecy “provides her with a kind of escape, for she cannot be defined by any statement made
her name, and her names are always changing” (Howells, 2005:57). “Writing Costume Gothics-ironically entitled *Escape from Love and Stalked by Love* – under the pen name Louisa K. Delacourt fulfills this female desire to escape through an imaginative act” (McKinstry, 2008:57). The double identity is her reward for being a writer:

...The really important thing was not the books themselves, which continued to be much the same. It was the fact that I was two people at once, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believed I existed. I was Joan Foster, there was no doubt about that; people called me by that name and I had authentic documents to prove it. But I was also Louisa K. Delacourt. As long as I could spend a certain amount of time each week as Louisa, I was all right, I was patient and forbearing, warm, a sympathetic listener. But if I was cut off, if I couldn’t work at my current Costume Gothic, I would become mean and irritable, drink too much and start to cry. (214-5)

However, her double identity also becomes a threat to her peacefulness. Joan starts to feel like one of the victims in her Gothic romances. The fear of being found out keeps wearing down her happiness. Her situation goes from bad to worse when she rises to fame as a writer. She can no longer hide her secret career from Arthur, who is shocked by the news of the publication of *Lady Oracle*. Joan’s unexpected rise as an author exasperates him. The theme of the book makes him feel very uncomfortable. Consequently, their married life begins to crumble away even faster, and Joan, who
does not want be a ‘rejected’ person, tries hard to appease Arthur. However, all her efforts are in vain and Arthur turns more apathetic.

To escape from the monotonous and dispirited family life, Joan has an affair with Chuck, the Royal Porcupine, who sexually exploits her. The relationship gets a bit too far and starts threatening her married life. She therefore breaks away from his sway and blames Arthur for her difficult situation. Paul reappears in her life and, knowing her predicament, offers to ‘rescue’ her, but Joan knows clearly that Paul sets a trap for her and cleverly shuns him. Fraser Buchanan, the Montreal Poet, blackmails her for sex and money by threatening to reveal the secrets of her private life. After successfully getting rid of him, she receives anonymous phone calls, frightening notes and dead animals on the doorstep. Shocked by these terrifying signs, she stages a false boat accident to fake her own death and flies to Italy. Thus, her escapist tendency, her innate defense against the repressive society, turns out to be a reason for her troubles.

Her agonizing experience with men makes her see how women are robbed of their autonomy and basic rights. When she tells Arthur that it is time for them to have children, he rejects the idea and forces her to take birth control pills. Like the narrator of *Surfacing*, Joan is denied motherhood. Her professional life as an author is also affected by the male-controlled publishing world. She is undermined by the male editors who are engrossed in the promotional strategies instead of analyzing the quality of writing. In fact, one of the editors, Doug Sturgess, reduces Joan to an attractive image on the cover of her book. The very name ‘Lady Oracle,’ as Howell (2005: 56) points out, is chosen for her by her male publishers: “*You write, you leave it to us to sell it*” (234).
Despite all the patriarchal obstacles that are placed in her path to freedom and selfhood, Joan, through her writing career, alters her own male-constructed identity and demolishes all the restrictive roles that are traditionally forced upon women. She is able to rewrite her history as a woman. By creating a female Gothic version, she skillfully creates an alternative to the male discourse in which the oppression of women has been glamorized for centuries. The fact that she can finally establish herself as a successful woman writer gives her a confidence in her ability to resist all kinds of patriarchal pressure to subjugate her. Through the plots of her novels, she is able to assess different male tactics to manipulate women. Her evaluation of life as a perceptive writer makes her understand the duplicitous nature of men. Joan concludes that every man has two costumes each:

*My father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double; Chuck Brewer; even Paul, who I’d always believed had a sinister other life I couldn’t penetrate. Why should Arthur be any exception? The fact that I’d taken so long to discover it made it all the more threatening.* (321-26)

This realization helps her come to terms with her own duplicities. Her acceptance of her own imperfections and the defective past gives her the courage to face up to her responsibilities. She is no longer an escapist and a liar. She decides to return to Toronto to save her friends who were wrongly involved in her ‘murder.’ She no longer tries to please others and starts living for herself. She realizes at the end that to be stronger in life, she has to clearly understand what she wants to do and do it. This
“seems clearly to entail joining the two strands of women’s history represented by Aunt Lou’s futile gentleness and her mother’s imprisoned strength” (Hengen, 1993: 73).

In the early chapters of Life Before Man, the portrayal of Lesje indicates that she is playing a traditional feminine role. She comes across as a timid and meek woman who can easily be considered ‘adorable’ in a patriarchal sense. “She’s one of those people unduly startled by sudden noises, she tells her friends. She sees herself as a timorous person, a herbivore” (19). She is very compliant with the wishes of her lover, William. She admires his confidence and abilities in spite of the fact that he disdains her ethnic background. Later, she loves to be mothered by Nate, Elizabeth’s husband. A woman of exotic Lithuanian origin, Lesje is modest and naïve and works in the museum of natural history. She becomes one of the chief characters in Atwood’s narrative perspective owing to her sense of alienation from social life. Lesje isolates herself from her surroundings and frequently fantasizes the Upper Jurassic period where dinosaurs wander freely. “Lesje is wandering in prehistory. Under a sun more orange than her own has ever been, in the middle of a swampy plain lush with thick-stalked plants and oversized ferns, a group of bony-plated stegosaurs is grazing” (18). She regards her fantasy world as a refuge from her real life where she has to deal with people who, she thinks, are worse than dinosaurs.

According to Atwood (1990), the title of the novel Life Before Man refers to prehistoric era for Lesje. She prefers ‘life before men’ to ‘life with men.’ She hates her social life because she thinks her social skills are useless. That Lesje feels ill at ease in social occasions is clearly evident in the way she behaves at the dinner party hosted by Elizabeth. During the party game “Lifeboat,” each person in the party needs to
“convince everyone else why you should be allowed to remain in the lifeboat instead of being thrown overboard” (155). While everyone else is able to give a valid reason for his or her survival, Lesje realizes that “she can’t think of a single reason why she should be permitted to remain alive” (156). Feeling even more alienated, she locks herself into Elizabeth’s bathroom and escapes into her fantasy world of dinosaurs: “Is she really this graceless, this worthless? From her treetop she watches an Ornithomimus, large-eyed, birdlike, run through the scrub, chasing a small protomammal” (157). Thus, as Howell (2005) says, “The prehistoric jungle offers her a place of refuge from the embarrassments of social life” (73).

Her lover, William, an environmental engineer, is a dominant character. Though he is one of the prime reasons why Lesje often seeks refuge in the fantasy world of prehistory, she believes in and admires his abilities. She thinks William will save the world from environmental disasters: “You can see it just by looking at him, his confidence, his enthusiasm” (27). In contrast, William’s attitude towards Lesje is not equally approving. Though Lesje’s multicultural origin makes her look attractively ‘exotic’ to him, he thinks Lesje is racially inferior, “her Ukrainian-Jewish heritage rendering her unfit in his judgment to meet his parents or bear his child” (Rigney, 2008:88). Thus, Lesje is given only an insignificant place in William’s life. Though her desire to become a mother and gain a social identity as William’s wife is snubbed, Lesje carries on with William. However, one day, she is shocked to find herself raped and hurt by William: “She always thought of rape as something the Russians did to the Ukrainians, something the Germans did, more furtively, to Jews.....But not something
William Wasp, from a good family in London, Ontario, would ever do to her” (186). Disappointed and offended, Lesje leaves William.

Lesje, according to Atwood (1990), is “a wimp” (145). It is obvious that she does not have a definite sense of self and this indistinctness makes it difficult for her to face the reality. Her escapist fantasies about wandering in the prehistoric world and observing dinosaurs, therefore, make her feel safer. Howells (2005) says:

Lesje’s position up in the top of tree and watching through binoculars is one of ‘blissful uninvolvment, her otherness is so incomprehensible to the dinosaurs that they will not even notice her’, which ‘is the next best thing to being invisible.’ Of course such fantasizing is escapist but it is also creative and recreational, opening up spaces where she feels at home in a way she never does in the real world. (72)

According to Rigney (2008), Lesje is a perennial child/woman, a woman who avoids growing up or confronting reality by becoming a tourist “underground” (85). She enjoys watching life in a scientific and ‘dispassionate’ way. In other words, “Lesje is not a participant in life, prehistoric or otherwise, but a voyeur watching from behind a large fern, ‘invisible’ to the dinosaurs” (Rigney, 2008: 86). Rigney nicely brings out a striking similarity that Lesje bears to the protagonists in Atwood’s earlier novels:

As the heroine of Surfacing prays to be made invisible, as Joan Foster in Lady Oracle regards her excess weight as “a magic cloak of invisibility”, and as Marian in The Edible Woman seeks to disappear by
refusing to eat, so Lesje in this novel finds it convenient to temporarily eliminate herself.

In addition, the narrative technique employed by Atwood to tell Lesje’s story seems to have another purpose as well. Lesje’s fantasy not only helps her escape from the hard reality, but also serves as a reminder of the barbarism hidden in the social customs of the modern life. “Lesje’s narrative with its juxtaposition of prehistory and the present might be read as illustrative of a continuity of irrationality and violence rather than of the moral evolution of the human race” (Howells, 2005:76). In the novel, she is a sort of a pessimist, a doomsayer whose opinion of the human race is very gloomy: “Does she care whether the human race survives or not? She doesn’t know. The dinosaurs didn’t survive and it wasn’t the end of the world. In her bleaker moments, of which, she realizes, this is one, she feels the human race has its coming” (27).

Lesje’s pessimism and the sense of alienation can clearly be traced to her childhood. “Lesje is a casualty of her multicultural upbringing across three cultures –those of her Ukrainian and Jewish grandmothers and the Canadian culture of her birth” (Howells, 2005:72). As a child, she has to spend half of the week with each of her grandmothers. She is stuck in the family rivalries and as a result she does not clearly understand where her roots are. As a child, she is considered bad at English. Her ability to imagine is also very poor and so is her ability to spell. When she is ten, she happens to read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* and this is the beginning of her passion for fossils, rocks and dinosaurs. Moreover, the urge to stay away from the family quarrels also fuels her interest in dinosaurs. She starts escaping into a fantasy world of dinosaurs. As a child, she strongly believes that, like the hero of *The Lost World*, she might also discover
some lost world where prehistoric life survives. What is interesting is that she preserves this belief even as an adult. With fantasies such as this, Lesje perpetuates the effects of social isolation stemming from her ethnic background. Her childhood interest in dinosaurs arises from needs caused by her isolation; however, as an adult she persists in isolating herself, not just through her fantasies of being the only human being present in prehistory, but also in having these fantasies rather than interacting with the people around her.

Her relationship with Nate, who is kind and relatively undemanding, does make her feel better. Nate believes that Lesje is “serene” and “kind” (267). Lesje knows that it is untrue, but “she’s addicted to Nate’s version of her,...she wants to be this beautiful phantom, this boneless wraith he’s conjured up. Sometimes she really does want it” (267). However, Nate’s devotion to his family and children makes her feel unimportant. Overhearing telephone conversations between Nate and his family, she feels envious of Elizabeth. “The words “home,” “love” and “mother” have disturbed Lesje. A vacuum forms around her heart, spreads; it’s as if she doesn’t exist” (128). She wants to exist as someone. Though she is terrified of Elizabeth for many reasons, she has a strange yearning to ‘become’ Elizabeth. In other words, she wants a distinct identity as Nate’s wife. “She wants to belong, to be seen to belong; she wants to be classifiable, a member of a group. There is already a group of Mrs Schoenhofs: one is Nate’s mother, the other is the mother of his children” (267). Lesje begins to see Nate as someone who can do for her what William refused to do. She thinks he can provide a classification for her. She wants to have a child with Nate, a plea which is ignored by Nate who still remains devoted to his daughters.
Feeling hopeless and offended, she even identifies herself with Chris, Elizabeth’s dead lover whose love was subjugated to Elizabeth’s family. She even considers committing suicide like Chris but later changes her mind. She suddenly becomes optimistic and starts making plans for her survival: “If children were the key, if having them were the only way she could stop being invisible. Then she would goddamn well have some herself” (293). She throws away her birth control pills and cleverly traps Nate into impregnating her. Given Nate’s commitment to his children, what Lesje does is a cruel act. “Lesje’s act of throwing away her birth control pills, an act of liberation for the protagonist of Surfacing is here committed in revenge and with malice” (Rigney, 2008:89). Nate is mercilessly victimized by Lesje who is now totally selfish and inconsiderate. Moreover, Lesje starts more and more to behave like Elizabeth. She is rude and wicked in her dealings with Nate. In one of her attempts to persuade Nate to leave Elizabeth and the children, she says, “I’ve got news for you...Elizabeth doesn’t need any support. Elizabeth needs support like a nun needs tits” (291).

Though Lesje’s transformation involves some deterioration of her character, it has to be viewed as a development in terms of her journey to selfhood. A woman who was once manipulated by William is now able to manipulate Nate to achieve her aim. “Earlier she has identified herself as an “herbivore,” peaceful and benign….Lesje is, at the end of the novel, still dancing, this time among the carnivores” (Rigney, 2008:89). She now seems to have the power to steer herself towards her future. Lesje no longer thinks she has no right to survive. Her act of disposing of birth control pills is an assertion of a basic human desire for individual survival, and ultimately, survival of the species set in the context of overcoming the isolating effects of her ethnic background. Lesje,
pregnant and optimistic, feels her life has some significance. What is more, she is now visible to her dinosaurs. “With that knowledge comes the destruction of her fantasy as she realizes not only that they are long since dead but that if they were alive, ‘they’d run away or tear her apart.’” (Howells, 2005:74). In brief, Lesje is now ready to integrate with the real world with an identity of her own.

Renata Wilford, the protagonist of Bodily Harm, is a free-lance journalist who writes on lifestyle and food for newspapers and magazines. Her propensity to choose only innocuous subject matters and to avoid any serious topic which will have implications for the society is used by Atwood to ridicule the insincere upper middle class ethos. Both as a journalist and a person, Rennie has a tendency to avoid commitments and to escape from reality. She thinks that “surfaces, in many cases, were preferable to depths” (211). She is a ‘camera-narrator’ who wants to view things only through the lens of her camera. In the beginning of the novel, she is introduced as a person who does not even know the names of her neighbors. She does not want to have ‘friendship’ for fear of bearing responsibility. She believes only in having ‘contacts.’ She reports on lifestyles in a detached and passive manner. As a journalist, she is not interested in effecting changes. Similarly, in personal life, she is passive and allows herself to be exploited by Jake whom she desperately tries to please. The novel depicts Rennie’s transformation from a submissive person to a person who can assert her rights. Moreover, Rennie is another of Atwood’s women writers like the novelist and poet Joan Foster in Lady Oracle, Antonia Fremont the female historian in The Robber Bride, or Iris Chase Griffin in The Blind Assassin. So, this novel also explores the question of the woman writer’s task and possible subjects for women’s writing.
Like in the case of other women in Atwood’s novels, the reasons for Rennie’s passivity and escapism can be traced back to her traditional, conformist upbringing. She was brought up in a small, old-fashioned town called Griswold by her grandparents who were highly ‘moralistic.’ As a child, she was taught “how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them” (54) and according to her grandmother, “it was bad manners to ask direct questions” (54). Gender differences were drilled into her in Griswold. The ideas of decency differed significantly between boys and girls. “If you were a girl it was a lot safer to be decent than to be beautiful. If you were a boy, the question didn’t arise” (55). Moreover, Rennie grew up seeing her grandmother worshipping her grandfather. As a young child, she too admired her grandfather’s talents and wanted to be a doctor like him. However, she gave up the idea later because she was made to realize that “men were doctors, women were nurses; men were heroes and what were women? Women rolled the bandages” (56). Worst of all, her mother’s miserable life in Griswold made Rennie understand that women willingly sacrificed their lives to serve others, and she hated this self-denying nature of her mother. Rennie could clearly see how family ties kept women imprisoned, and understandably she wanted to break away from her family:

\[
I \text{ didn't want to be trapped, like my mother. Although I admired her – everyone was always telling me how admirable she was, she was practically a saint – I didn’t want to be like her in any way. (58)}
\]

Her independent life in Toronto as a young free-lance journalist has been relatively enjoyable. However, for Rennie, “it’s not always so easy to get rid of Griswold “ (18). Though she often tells jokes about Griswold to entertain her friends, her inner self is
still controlled by the patriarchal values that Griswold has engraved on her mind. For example, a stalker breaks into her flat and leaves an ominous trace, a coiled rope lying on her bed. As soon as Rennie sees this, she thinks of what people in Griswold will possibly say about this: “This is what happens to women like you. What can you expect, you deserve it” (18). Griswold’s moral codes haunt her and they provide the framework for her relationships with men and her profession.

Her relationship with Jake is a typical example of the conventional power relations between male and female. She behaves as though she practises all the womanly qualities that she has imbibed from Griswold, while he tries to prove that he is masculine enough. Her permissive attitude boosts his male ego and Jake freely uses her to fulfill his sadistic desires:

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. (207)

Rennie allows him to decide what she has to wear and eat. He fills the bedroom with erotic pictures which display women in captive positions, and she does not mind them. His strange ideas like, “pretend I just came through the window. Pretend you’re being raped” (104) are tolerated. Rennie’s forbearance stems from her delusions of love and trust. She endures Jake’s viciousness by telling herself that “a secure woman is not threatened by her partner’s fantasies….As long as there is trust” (105). Rennie’s delusion and passivity indicates the strong influence of the patriarchal system on her psyche.
Nevertheless, Rennie is slowly disillusioned. Her association with Jocasta, a feminist activist, helps her understand that men obliterate women’s individuality in the name of social conventions. She also comes to understand that women are stripped off their respectability and reduced to mere sex objects. Rennie’s new consciousness of her own victimization is evident when she complains to Jake: “Sometimes I feel like a blank sheet of paper...For you to doodle on” (105). It disturbs her to realize that it has taken her very long to understand that she is one of the things packaged by Jake who is a packager by profession. However, the real crisis point for Rennie is the research that she carries out for the article she is asked to write on pornography for the men’s magazine Visor. Though she finally refuses to write the article, her research into pornography helps her see that women are projected as objects of male fantasies of desire and power, and that their bodies are displayed as maps of violence. At Metropolitan Police Department’s pornography museum, she is appalled by nude film clips which display various types of violence perpetrated on women for the sadistic pleasures of male viewers. The crude nature of hard-core pornography, popularly known in the porn industry as the ‘raw material’ sparks her feminist consciousness. “Troubled as she is by glimmerings of a connection between rape games and male violence against women, she can no longer take pleasure in playing the victim in Jake’s fantasies as soon as she starts thinking of herself as raw material” (Howells, 2005:89). Besides, her relationship with Jake is further marred by her mastectomy. Jake, who is interested only in Rennie’s body, is repelled by the scar on her breast, which he sees as “the kiss of death on her” (201). Separation from Jake, a typical male oppressor, signifies an important step towards liberation in Rennie’s life.
Unfortunately, Rennie is not only the victim of male exploitation, but also of a serious disease. “The diagnosis of breast cancer and her subsequent mastectomy are the central trauma of her life” (Howells, 2005: 84). In fact, the way she describes her relationship with men is affected by her dislike for her own damaged body. In other words, the whole novel is presented from the point of view of a woman who has been affected by cancer and has undergone a mastectomy. After the diagnosis, Rennie lives in constant fear of succumbing to her disease and this fear makes her turn to Daniel, her surgeon, who is very sympathetic towards her, unlike Jake. In her view, Daniel, the rescuer stands in total contrast to Jake, the hunter. She wants to be touched by his healing hands. Besides, her love for Daniel partly stems from her total dissatisfaction with Jake who cannot see anything other than her external body. Rennie thinks Daniel “knows something about her she doesn’t know, he knows what she’s like inside” (80).

Moreover, Daniel looks very safe and he does not seem to be interested in exploiting her situation. He refuses to go to bed with her by saying, “It would be unethical……. I’d be taking advantage of you. You’re in an emotional state” (143). She has all the reasons to be mad about Daniel who “figures dominantly in her fantasy life […] he has been imprinted on her, the first face she saw when emerging from the anesthetic” (Irvine, 2008:97). However, when Rennie finally succeeds in enticing Daniel to go to bed with her, she is totally disappointed since the experience does not match up to her rescue fantasies:

The fact was that he had needed something from her, which she could neither believe nor 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. (238)

Afterwards, she feels she has been violated and victimized by Daniel. Consequently, she can no longer think of her mastectomy as a form of surgical remedy. She starts viewing it as a physical abuse by a man. She thinks that the loss of her breast is the result of Daniel’s sexual assault upon her.

She realizes that she has foolishly allowed herself to be manipulated and degraded by Jake and Daniel. She feels very exposed as all men seem to be devious and unreliable. To fuel her fears, an intruder breaks into her apartment while she is away and leaves a frightening item on her bed; a coil of rope. In fact, the novel opens with this crucial incident. The coil of rope signifies domination and coercion. It is important to note that the policemen who come to Rennie’s apartment try to make her feel that she must somehow have provoked the break-in. Instead of trying to alleviate her anxiety, the policemen try to frighten her further by saying that the intruder must have observed her as she has been too noticeable and he is likely to come back. The policemen’s attitude makes Rennie understand that the patriarchy holds only women responsible for male sexual violence. Atwood seems to use this scene to show the pathetic position of women in the post-feminist era. The lack of identity of the intruder is what moves the plot; throughout the novel, Rennie is driven by the urge to find out who the faceless intruder is.

She starts to feel that she is too noticeable and vulnerable in Toronto. This fear takes her to St. Antoine, a Caribbean island on the pretext of writing a travel piece on it for
the magazine she works for. The idea is to escape from her Canadian society, which she
thinks has become very dangerous for women, to a serene island where she can feel
“...she is invisible... she is safe” (39). While in St. Antoine, she disguises herself as “a
house guest, a visitor” (237). She thinks she can stay here with no sense of obligation
and attachment: “there is nothing to worry about, nothing can touch her...she is
exempt” (203). However, in spite of her attempts to remain a detached observer, she,
quite involuntarily of course, gets involved in the socio-political issues of St. Antoine.
The social status of women in the island appalls her and it dawns on her that the
subjugation of women is a global issue and that the so called feminist movement has
achieved only a hollow victory. The horrible manner in which Marsdon, the campaign
manager of Prince of Peace, torments his wife with impunity is the best example of the
bleakness of women’s life on the island.

...he made her take off her clothes...and then he covered her with cow-
itch...Then he tied her to a tree in the back yard, right near an ant hill,
the stinging kind. He stayed in the house, drinking rum and listening to
her scream. He left her there five hours, till she was all swollen up like a
balloon. A lot of people heard her but nobody tried to untie her. (214-15)

One striking difference between Rennie and many other Atwood’s protagonists is that
Rennie is not intentionally searching for a distinct identity. She just tries to be invisible
and to avoid commitments and dangers. On the other hand, the people she meets and
the events she undergoes in St. Antoine spontaneously lead to her transformation. For
example, Paul, a shady businessman, makes a significant impact on her recovery of
sensuality and her capacity to come to terms with her scar. Unlike Jake and Daniel, Paul
accepts Rennie for what she is because “he’s seen people a lot deadlier than her” (204). Rennie likes the fact that Paul sees her as a perfectly normal woman. She finds her first sexual experience with Paul very fulfilling:

*He reaches out his hands and Rennie can’t remember ever having been touched before…..She’s open now, she’s been opened, she’s being drawn back down, she enters her body again and there’s a moment of pain, incarnation, this may be only the body’s desperation, a flareup, a last clutch at the world before the long slide into final illness and death; …..she’s grateful, he’s touching her, she can still be touched.* (203-04)

However, like Jake and Daniel, he too is indisposed to have an enduring, meaningful relationship with Rennie. “Don’t expect too much …too much of me” (226), says Paul. Rennie’s disappointment with Paul’s offhand manners leads to her disillusionment with men in general, another stage in her transformation: “I don’t need another man I’m not supposed to expect anything from” (227). Her experience with Paul helps Rennie see all men as one, manipulative and irresponsible.

Nonetheless, Rennie continues to be emotionally distant from her surrounding and keeps trying to evade reality both as a person and as a journalist. She repeatedly attempts to insulate herself against the threat of too much reality by invoking print material. First, while on the plane, she gets irritated with Dr. Minnow and hopes “there’s something she can pretend to read” (29). Similarly, when she meets Lora for the first time, she desperately looks for a reason to break off their conversation: “She wishes she had a book; then she could pretend to read” (86). Nevertheless, it is
Dr. Minnow who first moves Rennie from the state of voluntary obliviousness to some sort of self-consciousness. By repeatedly using the phrase “sweet Canadians,” he makes her aware of her gullibility, which is later substantiated by Paul when he says Rennie is “too nice….too naïve….too easy” (245). Moreover, Dr. Minnow makes Rennie pay attention to the unpleasant reality of St. Antoine by telling her: “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” (133). Once she starts ‘seeing’, the political and sexual exploitation that the island is infested with, it evokes her professional conscience. As a result, “Rennie’s journey develops from feeling of physical death to conviction of internal awakening; from rejection to acceptance; from escaping to facing” (Martin, 2001: 148). Rennie is now a little inclined to get ‘involved’.

Finally, Lora, whose unsophisticated manners once displeased Rennie, plays a significant edifying role and makes Rennie understand that “the real success starts only in the personal involvement in someone else’s problem” (Martin, 2001:151). Lora’s stories of suffering and merciless exploitation completely demolish Rennie’s belief in women liberation in the post-feminist era. As the prison-mate, Lora facilitates the process of Rennie’s transformation. “The process of gradual change first appears in her [Rennie’s] thoughts and in her relationships with Lora. Because Lora, despite Rennie, will make her transformation possible” (Martin, 2001:152). In fact, the whole novel is woven around the protagonist’s attempts to search for “connections between Lora’s damaged body and her own mastectomy” (Howells, 2005:91). Though Lora is a lower class woman, who has had an unhappy childhood and has been sexually exploited by many, she, unlike Rennie, seems to have the boldness to stand up to male oppressors.
She knows how to survive in the patriarchal system. The leg up that Lora gives to help Rennie reach to the prison window to see what happens outside, has an important symbolic meaning; Lora is the catalyst for Rennie’s change. Rennie, with Lora’s help, is able to see how humans act in a malignant way, like her cancer, and enjoy it. The cruel ways in which the prisoners are tortured by the police make Rennie’s self-centeredness dissipate, thus initiating her transformation. Another quality of Lora which impresses Rennie is her true, self-sacrificing love for Prince. While Rennie considers her needs and safety more important than those of others including her lovers, Lora thinks Prince’s interests and needs are more important than those of hers. It is this earnest and altruistic love for Prince that leads to the lethal mutilation of Lora by the prison guards. Lora’s horrible death makes Rennie feel that her mastectomy and her scar are totally insignificant. Also, Lora’s battered face makes Rennie realize that “there’s no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone’s, it has a name” (299). Rennie sees Lora’s smashed body as a symbolic evidence of the gender-oppression of women in a male dominant society. It also makes an enlightening effect on Rennie and encourages her to become a subversive reporter. In other words, “Rennie, the naïve heroine is finally radicalized. By the end of her journey Rennie proclaims that detachment, neutrality, and non-involvement are no longer possible for her. The knowledge of Lora’s fate compels Rennie to think in terms of some kind of positive action against the atrocities on women” (Prabhakar, 1999: 78).

Rennie’s imprisonment plays a very important role in helping her attain selfhood. First of all, she is made to realize that she is not exempt from anything, no matter how hard she tries to insulate herself from the reality. She has thought that she can be invisible in
St. Antoine as a foreigner, but, on the contrary, she has attracted a lot of attention and people have thought she might be a CIA Agent. Rennie is forced to see how the personal and the political cannot be separated. Secondly, the frightening cruelties inflicted on Lora by the male prison guards awaken her feminist consciousness. Lora’s tragedy is so moving and horrifying that Rennie’s cancer and mastectomy look very insignificant. For the first time in her life, Rennie overcomes her self-pity and feels pity for Lora. She earnestly wishes she could bring Lora back to life. This is the liberation of Rennie’s inner self which has long been suppressed. Howells (2005) aptly states that “It is one of the ironies of Bodily Harm that Rennie is rescued only in time to be thrown into prison” (87). Another important observation is made by Hengen (1993) about Rennie’s ability to feel compassion and love: “The experiences late in the novel show that what Rennie had lost by renouncing her mother was specifically her ability to feel empathy” (Hengen, 1993:95). In other words, Rennie is able to attain womanhood and feel compassion for the oppressed only by associating herself with her matriarchal lineage again. She has hitherto seen herself and her surrounding from the point of view of the patriarchy. It is very interesting to note that Rennie works for Visor, a magazine which is intended for men. However, her new feminist consciousness now enables her to see things as a liberated woman. She is no longer a submissive woman who always tries to please men. The ultimate disillusionment with men comes about for Rennie in the prison: “She is afraid of men and it’s simple, it’s rational, she’s afraid of men because men are frightening. She’s seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like” (290). However, this awareness does not scare Rennie off. Instead, it makes her understand her moral responsibility as a reporter. She discovers her individuality
through her new role; a subversive journalist. “Rennie’s effort to tell the story is, like her effort to save Lora, an exercise of the moral imagination, as she comes to see her own private pain from a wider human perspective” (Howells, 2005:91).

Offred, the narrator and the protagonist in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, goes on a journey to liberation, which deviates from the predictable pattern in the earlier novels of Atwood. Unlike the earlier protagonists who are inculcated with the traditional patriarchal values in childhood, Offred is raised in a relatively uninhibited manner by her (extremely) feminist mother. Whereas the earlier protagonists in Atwood’s novels start as submissive victims and slowly achieve their freedom as women with distinct identities, Offred is an internally emancipated woman in the beginning of her story but later forced into victimization by the repressive Gileadean society. This reversal of progression can be attributed to Atwood’s dissatisfaction with the results of the feminist movements. By showing the futility of the extremist feminist training given to Offred by her mother, *The Handmaid’s Tale* “has moved beyond exclusively female concerns to a recognition of the complexities of social gender construction. Offred’s tale challenges essentialist definitions, whether patriarchal or feminist” (Howells, 2005: 95).

Offred’s story elucidates Atwood’s forewarning vision of a future society in which all women are stripped off their individuality and sorted into functional order—Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, Ecowives, etc. The explosion in the number of infertile women caused by environmental contamination and the consequential drop in the Caucasian birth rate create a great demand for women with viable ovaries. Such women are forced to become Handmaids whose only duty is to bear children for the powerful men in the society. *Handmaid’s Tale* is set in the Republic of Gilead. The name reminds
one of the biblical land where Jacob went to the Handmaid Billah as his wife Rachel was barren. Religious dogmas are unceasingly used to validate the exploitative system followed in Gilead. The Republic of Gilead is established in America and its repressive regime is justified by espousing “a peculiarly American version of religious fundamentalism which leans heavily on the country’s Puritan inheritance” (Howells, 2005: 97).

The whole story is narrated from the point of view of Offred whose recollection of her life in Gilead as a Handmaid reveals the dehumanizing effects of unrestrained patriarchal oppression. Though she meekly obeys the rules of Gilead, she preserves her sense of self throughout, and is optimistic that one day she will achieve her physical liberation from the repressive Gileadean society. Her perception of her own victimization is evident in the way she ridicules the false conventions and the callous behavior of powerful people in Gilead. As the Handmaid of Commander Frederick, Offred is unable to conceive, an official obligation that she must fulfill in order to survive in Gilead. With an aim of impregnating her, the Commander’s infertile wife, Serena Joy, sets up an illicit relationship between Offred and Nick, the Commander’s chauffeur. However, Offred develops a feeling of deep affection for Nick who finally stages a fake arrest and gets her out of Gilead. What can be deduced from the evidence available is that she might have gone to Canada or England to live in a socially isolated way.

Life as a Handmaid in Gilead is extremely terrifying, especially for those whose pregnancy is delayed for some reason. Each handmaid is given only three chances to fulfill her state obligation. Failure to give birth to a child within three chances is a
punishable offence and the Handmaid will be shipped to the toxic colonies to meet her end. Regrettably, it always rests with the Handmaid to produce a child; the Commander’s fertility is unquestionable. “There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (71). In this repressive society which is biased towards patriarchal standards, women are classified on the basis of the presence and the absence of fertility. The Handmaids are lodged in small rooms like animals kept for breeding purposes. Rubenstein (2008) vividly portrays the agonizing life of Handmaids in Gilead:

The physical confining rooms, walls, and other actual boundaries of the Republic of Gilead corroborate the condition of reproductive “confinement” to which the handmaids are subject. Maternity is both wish (handmaids are discarded after three unsuccessful attempts at pregnancy) and fear (the baby, unless deformed and declared an “Unbaby,” becomes the property of the handmaid’s Commander and his wife) (117)

Intriguingly, the narration does not give any information about Offred’s real name and her appearance, even though she is the protagonist of the novel. It is strange that one can know about her internal features that make her fertile and her perception of her past and present, but one cannot know what she looks like. This shows that Offred, the narrator of the story, is preoccupied with her fertility and has no chance of thinking about her external physical features, which are unimportant in Gilead which degrades women by classifying them into functional roles. She is not allowed to look in mirrors. Her voice is grief-stricken and she struggles with the process of narration. This is
because Offred is telling her story from a place where there is barely any freedom for her. The painful and the fragmented nature of her story clearly show the unpleasant social situation in which Offred lives: “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” (279). The absence of details about Offred’s physical features makes her a common representative of every woman who is debased and tormented in a repressive social system.

In the pre-Gileadean time, she was a financially independent woman who happily lived with her husband Luke and a little daughter. At first, Offred was having an extramarital affair with Luke who was married to another woman. Later, she became his second wife, a marriage which not only left her with a sense of guilt, but also paved the way for her separation from her family and her confinement when Gilead came into being. Under the puritanical and conservative regulations of the Republic of Gilead, their marriage was declared illegal because of Luke’s previous marriage. Luke was conceivably killed, her daughter was handed over to a barren woman who belonged to the high social class and, as a fertile woman, Offred was captured and forced to work as a Handmaid. A progressive woman has been socially constricted thus. It is really heartbreaking to see Offred longingly thinking about her little daughter even though she knows that there is no much chance of getting her back. She often wonders whether her daughter even remembers her. At the Re-education Centre, the Aunts tell the Handmaids to consider their children dead. Offred finds it easier as it saves her from the agony of believing in something which seems bleak. However, she cannot help wishing her daughter would come back to her. Moreover, her husband Luke is also in her
thoughts all the time. For example, her never-ending love for him is manifested in one of her monthly visits to the doctor. When the male doctor ‘suggestively’ tells her that he can help her, she immediately thinks of Luke: "Does he [the doctor] know something, has he seen Luke, has he found, can he bring back?" (70). On the whole, Offred is completely cut off from her loved ones and forced to perform her role as a childbearing machine.

Besides, the patriarchal organization of Gilead craftily does everything necessary to strip women of their identity and human dignity. Immediately after its inception, the first step taken by the Gileadean regime was to terminate women’s financial independence by suspending women’s credit cards and bank accounts. Women’s jobs and their property rights were also taken away. Offred, who was forced to fully depend on Luke for her existence, lamented her helplessness: “We are not each other’s any more. Instead I am his” (191). Women’s individuality is repressed in Gilead by reducing them to mere objects owned by powerful men. For instance, Offred becomes one of the properties of Commander Frederick. The name ‘Offred’ is not her real name but an indicator of the fact that she is the Handmaid of ‘Fred.’ Offred clearly describes the nature of her subjugation: “Household: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part” (91). Another strategy that Gilead uses to degrade women is to divide them into various functional categories. Offred belongs to the category of Handmaids who are treated like “two legged wombs” (146). They are distinguished from other types of women by their red dresses and veils which prevent them from seeing and being seen. Other types of women are Wives, Marathas, Econowives, Jezebels and the Aunts. The
separation of women according to their functions helps Gilead keep them fragmented and therefore powerless. Moreover, Gilead keeps the Handmaids inarticulate by forbidding them from reading and writing. Even their day-to-day communication is very limited. Handmaids greet each other by saying “Blessed be the fruit” and accept the clichéd response “May the lord Open.”

In the repressive Gileadean system, Offred’s frame of mind is completely moulded by the patriarchal expectations of the establishment. She is given three chances to fulfill her state obligation, which is giving birth to a child. Failure to do so may even cost Offred her very life. Consequently, she is always preoccupied with pregnancy and childbirth: “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (83). In The Handmaid’s Tale, as Rubenstein (2008) aptly says, “Female anxieties associated with fertility, procreation, and maternity are projected as feminist nightmare and cultural catastrophe” (116). The fear and helplessness that Offred experiences makes her feel alienated from her own body, a dejected feeling which Offred describes in a lucid manner: “Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I am a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of pear, which is hard and more real than I am” (84).

The Aunts play a very important role in repressing Handmaid’s individuality by imposing on them the patriarchal oppression. They treat Handmaids like farm animals, tattoo them with ‘brands’ and control them with cattle prods. The Aunts, who are devoted to the patriarchal principles of Gilead, skillfully brainwash Handmaids into accepting the Gileadean values. Biblical passages are continuously manipulated by
them to justify the repressive regime of the Republic of Gilead. The Handmaids are shown an ‘exaggerated’ porno film from seventies or eighties to terrorize them into detesting the life in pre-Gileadean era. The film shows women being sexually abused in unbelievably shocking ways. The purpose is to make the Handmaids hate pre-Gileadean life and to quell their sexuality. Moreover, the Handmaids are frequently made to see dead bodies of men who have broken Gileadean rules and are expected to feel hatred for them. Overall, the way they are encouraged to shred the bodies of rapists during ‘Particicutions’ and the manner in which they are expected to shriek orgiastically during birthing ceremonies clearly show Gilead’s intention to destroy the Handmaid’s individuality and turn them into a foolish mob which faithfully follows Gileadean regulations.

The Commander, who tries to impregnate Offred once in a month in a ceremonial manner, shows no personal interest in her. She is given a bath only before the ceremony: “I wait, washed, brushed, fed like a prize pig” (79). The manner in which she is made to perform her duties as a Handmaid is bereft of sensuality and individual freedom. In short, she is expected to perform a lifeless task which has a tremendous dehumanizing impact on her psyche. The Commander often invokes ‘nature’s norm’ and religious principles to justify male superiority and female subordination. He says that the pre-Gileadean years which were characterized by love, passion and desire “were just an anomaly, historically speaking.....just a fluke. All we’ve done is to return things to Nature’s norm” (232). Later, while at Jezebel’s, he tries to justify the extramarital sex by the powerful men in Gilead by saying, “But everyone’s human, after
all.... You can’t cheat Nature....Nature demands variety, for men...It’s part of the procreational strategy. It’s Nature’s plan” (248-49).

It is true that the repressive strategies of the Aunts and other powerful people in Gilead do make Offred outwardly submissive. She lets herself be shaped by the Aunts: “We are hers [Aunt Lydia’s] to define, we must suffer her adjectives” (124). She understands her helpless condition and remains physically passive: “I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object” (268). However, she mentally remains a dissident and is aware of the hypocritical and exploitative nature of the Gileadean society. Atwood has named almost every other chapter of the novel ‘night,’ signifying that the night time plays a crucial role in helping Offred remain ‘mentally’ liberated throughout and devise her subversive tactics. She says, “The night is mine, my own time....”. (147). Claiming some time for herself in an oppressive Gileadean system is an impressive step towards her psychological survival. She uses the night time to remain connected with her past. She cherishes her memories and hope for freedom. She safeguards her pre-Gileadean name as a sign of her real identity: “I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day” (94).

Offred’s most important subversive strategy is story-telling. By telling her story, “she reclaims her own private spaces of memory and desire and manages to rehabilitate the traditionally ‘feminine’ space assigned to women in Gilead” (Howells, 2005: 93). In other words, through her story-telling, she is able to lead a mental life as a free individual. She is not a hopeless victim in her inner life:” I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight” (18). Secondly, in spite of the
fragmentation of women into various groups and the official ban on all kinds of contact among women, Offred, like many other Handmaids, successfully develops relationships with Cora and other fellow handmaids. For instance, the inspirational story of the rebellious Moira is passed from women to women and Offred is able to patch Moira’s story together from information from various sources: “Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard from Aunt Lydia” (139). Besides, the Handmaids often mutter about the Gileadean authorities and Offred feels it is an effective way of challenging the repressive system: “There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenity about those in power. There’s something delightful about it; it deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with” (234). Thirdly, Offred frequently thinks about stealing things from the Commander’s household as she considers it as a way of getting her power back. She frequently steals butter from her plate to use as a moisturizing cream since the Handmaids are not allowed to use hand lotions. Gilead thinks such lotions are unnecessary for the Handmaids as their appearance is of no importance as they are just “two legged wombs” (146) and there is no chance for them to become normal individuals again. However, Offred keeps her skin soft by using the stolen butter, thereby retaining her merit as an individual and hope for survival: “As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will some day get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire” (107). Besides, the Commander’s friendship also gives Offred a sense of power and a belief in herself: “To him I’m no longer merely a usable body...To him I am not merely empty” (172).
Offred’s (inner) subversive nature may give one an impression that she is a feminist fighter. However, Atwood uses Offred’s character to point out “the paradoxes and dilemmas of contemporary feminism” (Howells, 2005: 98). It is very important to note that both Moira and Offred’s mother, the women who exemplify radical feminism, are depicted as unsuccessful characters in the novel. This shows Atwood’s mistrust of belligerent feminist activists who want to create a women’s culture and completely do away with men. Interestingly, Gilead, though founded by men, is run by women, but it is a women’s culture which suppresses women. Offred, who has never believed in her mother’s radical feminism, scoffs at the fragmented women’s society in Gilead which is controlled by the Aunts:

_Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a woman’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies (137)_

The fact that Atwood does not support confrontational gender politics is made very clear here. Her practical humanism is revealed in Offred’s belief and interest in heterosexual love. She loves her husband Luke and this love is one of the few sources of her inner strength that helps her survive the oppressive situation in the Gilead. Neither her mother, who believes in single parenthood, nor Moira, the lesbian separatist, inspires Offred. In contrast, it is Nick who rekindles her sexuality and the sense of self. It is he who helps her physically free herself from the patriarchal oppression of Gilead. Nick has a very important symbolic significance in the novel. He is the only one who looks at Offred’s face attentively and he is the only one in Gilead, who calls Offred by her real name. In fact, her affair with Nick makes her lose interest in her escape and
Gilead suddenly becomes an interesting place for her. However, Nick persuades her to get out of the bondage of Gileadean life. The message is very clear: Selfhood cannot be achieved by women who simply want to take the place of men. Instead, it is achieved with feminine power which overcomes male supremacy.

Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye* is Elaine Risley’s *bildungsroman* which analyses the effects of Elaine’s childhood experiences on her psyche and her later relationships with women and men. It is also a portrayal of Elaine’s quest for freedom from the shades of her past. In order to free herself from the clutches of the past, she recalls her past in order to understand clearly how her personality came to be influenced by various people and successfully disengages herself from the phantoms of her past. The novel also depicts the patriarchal prejudices against women’s creativity and artistic temperament, and how a woman can use her art as a weapon against male oppression. Through the eyes of her childhood ‘friends’, Carol, Grace and Cordelia, Elaine understands that she is not normal and is incapable of fulfilling the traditional expectations of femininity. She also realizes that her anomaly stems from her constant travel with her entomologist father and her unconventional mother. Her friends’ constant disapproval of her behavior and appearance leave an indelible impression on Elaine’s mind, and her childhood memories haunt her throughout her life affecting her relationships with others. Finally, on her return to Toronto, the place of her childhood, she confronts her past, disengages her personality from it and regains her own power as a liberated woman. As Rao (2007-08) aptly remarks, Atwood builds the quest theme in this novel upon the most extensive and perceptive exploration of young girlhood. She delves into the fierce politics of childhood that exert a profound influence in shaping the identity of Elaine
Customarily, the novel has men who are bigoted, domineering and manipulative, but *Cat’s Eye* seems to be mainly about women victimizing other women. In fact, Elaine feels quite in control of her career and her relations with men, but she is bewildered by her relations with other women.

Atwood skillfully uses Elaine’s character to illustrate the dynamism of the society in sustaining gender differences and in relegating girls to subservient roles. She achieves this by making Elaine spend the first eight years of her life in the wilderness as a blissful person who is free from social-conditioning. By suddenly bringing the character to Toronto to lead a settled life and to play with friends, who have already embraced patriarchal values, Atwood clearly shows the difficulties of an eight year old girl who is subjected to gender-conditioning. Elaine feels lonely and humiliated in the company of her girl friends who are very conceited. For the first time in her life, Elaine is made to realize that she is relatively unrefined and needs to learn a lot of social skills.

Grace Smeath, a girl who comes from a highly religious family, makes Elaine feel like a barbarian. She is older than others, and brought up to control her emotions and to be orderly. She is too cunning and duplicitous for an eight year old. She does not laugh and there is no sign of genuineness in her behavior. Their games are mostly her ideas and she always wants to be a teacher and makes other girls act like students. She thinks she is very pious and knows everything about God. Grace’s mother Mrs. Smeath considers Elaine a heathen and tries to enlighten her by taking her to church. The ritualized lifestyle of Smeaths astounds Elaine. Mrs. Smeath is very much aware that Elaine is being harassed by her daughter and Carol, but thinks Elaine deserves it as an infidel. “It’s God’s punishment”, says Mrs. Smeath. “It serves her right” (213).
Overhearing this, Elaine feels that there is something totally wrong in her upbringing. Carol Campbell, on the other hand, makes fun of Elaine’s unfinished house and the exotic lifestyle of her family. “[S]he wants herself to be marveled at, for revealing such wonders. It’s as if she’s reporting on the antics of some primitive tribe: true, but incredible” (57).

However, it is Cordelia who plays havoc with Elaine’s sense of self. She exerts a great power on Elaine to make her believe that she is deficient in everything that is important in life. Elaine’s painting “Half a Face” reveals the insolent and hostile gaze of Cordelia. It also shows that Cordelia has an interminable power over Elaine’s identity. "Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture. I am afraid of Cordelia. I’m not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I’m afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I’ve forgotten when" (267). She never misses a chance to make Elaine feel inadequate as a girl. For example, after a short conversation that Elaine has with her father, Cordelia says, “How could you be so impolite? You didn’t even answer him. You know what this means, don’t you? I’m afraid you’ll have to be punished. What do you have to say for yourself?” (138). She, along with Grace and Carol, always watches Elaine pointing out her mistakes and deficiencies: “Stand up straight! People are looking!....... Don’t hunch over ....... Don’t move your arms like that” (141). The might of Cordelia’s influence manifests itself in Elaine’s meek submission. Elaine says, “She [Cordelia] creates a circle of two and takes me in” (83). Cordelia successfully makes Elaine accept the belief that she is nothing: “Nothing, I would say. It was a word I came to connect with myself as if I was nothing” (47). Elaine is also made to believe that Cordelia’s help
is necessary for becoming a socially acceptable person: “I am not normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me” (140).

It is important to note that three young girls, Carol, Grace and Cordelia, act as the upholders of traditional patriarchal values and oppress Elaine in the name of social conventions. Interestingly, all of them are victims of the patriarchy themselves. For instance, Cordelia is terrified of her father and often digs holes to hide herself in. Carol is oppressed by her parents and the piano teacher. According to Hite (1995), “Elaine is a surrogate victim, representative of the category “girl” and thus a stand-in for the other girls, who use her as a scapegoat in order to displace their own suffering as members of a patriarchy, here literalized in the authority of their own fathers” (137). The fact that the patriarchal upbringing at home has a knock-on effect on the society is made very clear by Atwood. To make this knock-on effect explicit, Atwood makes Cordelia victimize Elaine by using her own father’s expressions of contempt.

Overpowered by her friends’ oppressive tactics, Elaine starts hating herself and adopts certain outrageous habits, such as fainting. “Fainting,” she says, “is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time on into another time. When you wake up, it’s late. Time has gone on without you” (171). She also frequently peels off the skin from her toes as far as the blood and says, “The pain gave me something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold onto” (114). However, Elaine silently endures the humiliation and the agony inflicted upon her by her friends, because they threaten to expel her from their company, if she reveals the truth to the elders. Elaine’s yearning for being an acceptable person in the girl’s world forces her to tolerate her victimization. As Rao (2007-08) aptly remarks, “she is in fact like the
colonized who is afraid of the colonizer, but still desires to imitate for survival” (161). Encouraged by Elaine’s submissive nature and the helplessness, her friends make their games more and more severe. One day, for instance, they dress up Elaine as Mary, Queen of Scots and bury her alive, a dreadful incident which Elaine vividly recollects:

*I'm supposed to be Mary, Queen of Scots, headless already. They pick me up by the underarms and lower me into the hole. Then they arrange the boards over the top. The daylight air disappears, and there is the sound of dirt hitting the boards, shovelful after shovelful. Inside the hole it's cold and dim and damp and smells like toad burrows. Up above, I can hear their voices then I can't hear them, I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game, now I know it is not one... It was the point at which I lost power.* (125-126)

Her friends’ malice only puzzles Elaine who still considers them her well-wishers. She wonders: “with enemies you can feel hatred, and anger. But Cordelia is my friend. She likes me, she wants to help me, and 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” (142).

In order to please her friends, Elaine starts doing many things that she never did before. In other words, the gender-conditioning starts to work on Elaine. She draws girls in traditional clothing. She cuts cookware and furniture out of Eaton’s Catalogues and pastes them into her scrapbook. Elaine is fully aware of the change that she undergoes
and says, “I begin to want things I’ve never wanted before: braids, a dressing-gown, a purse of my own” (62). The futility and the pretentiousness of girls’ world astounds her, but she feels it is very easy to be a conventional girl: “All I have to do is sit on the floor and cut frying pans out of the Eaton’s Catalogue with embroidery scissors, and say I’ve done it badly. Partly this is a relief” (63). However, the gender-conditioning does not cover only the outward activities. It also makes a profound effect on Elaine’s attitude. She watches girls feeling awkward when another girl is found sexually abused and murdered in a ravine: “It’s as if this girl has done something shameful herself, by being murdered” (260). The girls’ world teaches Elaine that “for women, to be seen is both to have an identity and to be identified as vulnerable: both a requirement and a stigma. Fundamental to this definition is the premise that the female object of the look is also somehow guilty of it and thus susceptible as a consequence of her own instigation” (Hite, 1995; 139). Due to her desire to be considered likeable and appropriate, Elaine follows her friends’ instructions uncritically. Cordelia holds sway over Elaine’s thinking and converts Elaine into a zombie.

Nevertheless, Elaine does not totally lose her innate sense of self, and she is gradually awakened to the realization that her friends are victimizing her and they are not her well wishers. When she is abandoned in the dangerous ravine by her friends, she reintegrates with her real self. It is here that Elaine has a vision of Virgin Mary, who soothes her and helps her recover her strength.

Though Elaine’s brother, Steven, is not presented as a wicked exploiter in the novel, he shows some signs of male domination. Elaine notices his arrogance and gender consciousness: “…if he has to go anywhere with me and my mother, he walks ahead of
us or crosses to the other side of the street” (54). He urinates in the sand to mark his territory, his place in the world. In the novel, Steven represents scientific orderliness and patriarchal domination, whereas girls like Elaine are associated with chaos, religion and prejudices. He introduces Elaine to scientific concepts and helps her in improving her mental perception and vision of painting.

Like the narrator of Handmaid’s Tale, Elaine comes from an unconventional home. Her father does not have any class or gender consciousness. He loves people from all racial backgrounds. He believes science can help make the world a better place to live in. The family’s nomadic life style is due to his career as an entomologist. Elaine’s mother is very hard-working and patient. She does not believe in any sort of categorization. She does not care for social demands. Elaine feels that it is this nonconformist family background that makes her look atypical and is the reason for her victimization at the hands of her girl friends who have internalized the patriarchal values. She laments her liberal upbringing:

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. (282)

Surprisingly, even her individualistic mother does not know what to do to save her daughter from her oppressive friends, even though she is always aware of her daughter’s suffering. She tells Elaine, “Don’t let them push you around. Don’t be
spineless. You have to have more backbone” (186). Elaine understands her mother’s powerlessness in this matter and resolves to fight against the oppression on her own.

Elaine gets the spiritual power to stand up to her wicked friends from a very ordinary object: a blue cat’s eye marble. She keeps it in her red purse. It later starts appearing as an important image in her paintings recurrently. It becomes an object that she subconsciously associates with people whom she considers her well-wishers, including Virgin Mary. In the words of Howells (2005), “it becomes for her a talismanic object and the sign of her own difference” (117). Elaine believes that the cat’s eye marble enhances her vision: “Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees…I am alive in my eyes only” (141). This greater visual capacity helps her see the truth which is hidden in the darkness of patriarchal beliefs. In an emotionally charged visionary experience, Elaine feels that the cat’s eye marble becomes a part of her and she is a different person:

I dream that my blue cat’s eye is shining in the sky like the sun, or like the pictures of planets in our book on the solar system. But instead of being warm, it’s cold. It starts to move nearer, but it doesn’t get any bigger. It’s falling down out of the sky, straight towards my head, brilliant and glassy. It hits me, passes right into me, but without hurting, except that it’s cold. (172)

Subsequently, her vision of Virgin Mary (conceivably an effect of her cat’s eye) gives her the personal strength to reintegrate with herself again. Elaine thinks she hears Virgin Mary say, “You can go home now….. it will be all right. Go home” (224). As
Rao (2007-08) says, this incident makes her “aware of the fact that there was never anything in her that needed to be improved” (163). She no longer needs her conceited friends to ‘correct’ her. Elaine starts disregarding her friends’ demeaning comments. Cordelia, Carol and Grace are shocked to see an independent Elaine. Elaine feels that nothing binds her to them and she is completely free:

They follow along behind me, making comments on the way I walk, on how I look from behind. If I were to turn I would see them imitating me.

‘Stuck up! Stuck up! They cry. I can hear the hatred, but also the need. They need me for this, and I no longer need them. I am indifferent to them. There’s something hard in me, crystalline, a kernel of glass. I cross the street and continue along, eating my licorice. (229)

Elaine now has the power to make Cordelia feel uneasy, and she is thrilled about her new power: “I’m surprised at how much pleasure this gives me, to know she’s so uneasy, to know I have this much power over her..... I have a denser, more malevolent little triumph to finger: energy has passed between us, and I am stronger” (274-275).

Owing to the merciless harassment in the hands of her girl friends, Elaine turns towards the world of men which she thinks is relatively candid and better than the female slyness. She does feel initially comfortable with boys: “My relationships with boys are effortless, which means that I put very little effort into them. It’s girls I feel awkward with, it’s girls I feel I have to defend myself against; not boys” (279). However, she slowly understands that the male world is no better. Due to the patriarchal dogmas strongly engraved on her mind, Elaine remains submissive and continues to be
victimized - this time for a different purpose. She is sexually exploited by her art teacher, Josef Harbik who embodies the patriarchal power and the male view of femininity. He has an unfair view of women as “helpless flowers, or shapes to be arranged and contemplated” (373). He makes his girl students draw pictures of a naked woman model and this makes Elaine understand how women are being used as objects for man’s observation and sexual wish fulfillment. Josef tells Elaine, “You are an unfinished woman” and adds in a lower voice “but here you will be finished” (321). Elaine knows about his disposition towards sexual exploitation from Susie, her fellow art student, who kills herself because Josef gets her pregnant illegitimately. Nevertheless, she lets him exploit her almost effortlessly. Gradually, Josef gains total control over her and Elaine is fully aware of this. She says, “Josef is rearranging me” (358). He directs all her activities: “You should wear your hair loose” …. “You should wear purple dresses...It would be an improvement” (358). When Josef’s possessiveness becomes unbearable, she leaves him.

Jon, a fellow art student, seems to offer Elaine escape and fun, along with what she desperately needs – ‘equality.’ However, she soon realizes that Jon is just another type of wickedness. They get married through force of circumstance. Their marriage is impaired by their childish irresponsibility and mutual exploitation. Regarding the futility of her life with Jon, Elaine says, “We compete, for instance, over which of us is in worse shape...We fight over our right to remain children” (400). Gradually, Elaine starts to lose the fights to keep Jon happy. Thus, the marriage becomes ruinous to Elaine’s individuality and freedom. Jon says he is against sexual possessiveness, but instead of saying that they don’t own each other, he tells Elaine, “Hey, you don’t own
me’ (380). Nonetheless, it becomes apparent to Elaine that he owns her. Jon freely encroaches upon her individual rights and professional freedom. Elaine is so busy with domestic chores during the day that she paints only at night, but Jon hates it as it disturbs his sleep. His male chauvinism becomes evident when he remarks, “She [Elaine] is mad because she’s a woman” (405). This mortifying remark infuriates Elaine and rouses her feminist consciousness. She shouts at him angrily: “I’m not mad because I’m a woman..... I’m mad because you’re an asshole” (405). She rebels against her husband’s oppression and refuses to accept traditional woman’s role. As a liberated woman, Elaine divorces Jon and marries Ben who is very gentle and supportive of her career. Ben’s encouragement helps Elaine to become a successful painter. The choice of Ben does not show that Elaine is lucky this time. Instead, it shows that Elaine’s newly awakened feminist consciousness and the sense of dignity make her choose the right man who she thinks will let her live an honorable life. In other words, she is no longer a weak woman who has an innate propensity for being dominated by manipulative males.

Strangely enough, her feminist consciousness is not helpful for her to feel connected with women. She still finds it more difficult to have relationships with women: “Sisterhood is a difficult concept for me, I tell myself, because I never had a sister. Brotherhood is not” (404). In addition, Elaine’s sense of her mother as powerless keeps Elaine from identifying too closely with her. As Elaine’s mother is dying, Elaine reveals that “I’m aware of a barrier between us. It’s been there for a long time. Something I have resented. I want to put my arms around her. But I am held back” (467). Her fear of being powerless like her mother forces her to look up to women who
seem to be strong. However, instead of fortifying Elaine’s womanhood, such seemingly powerful women like Cordelia and Mrs. Smeath kindle in Elaine’s mind a feeling of hatred towards fellow women. Elaine’s inherent dislike for fellow women is revealed when she answers Susie’s anxious call and finds that Susie is dying as the result of a voluntary abortion. Despite her feeling of sympathy for Susie, Elaine hears a voice coming from deep inside her head: “It serves her right” (376). These were the words that Mrs. Smeath once used for Elaine. Thus, Elaine’s identity as a woman is unfixed due to her childhood experiences. Elaine is fully aware of her uncertain personality and even at the age of fifty, she finds herself a bit hazy when she looks in the mirror: “Even when I’ve got the distance adjusted, I vary. I am transitional; some days I look like a worn-out thirty-five, others like a sprightly fifty. So much depends on the light, and the way you squint” (5). On the one hand, Elaine does not want to be a traditional wife and be subservient to her husband, but on the other she does not want to be a feminist. About her disinclination to join radical feminists, Elaine says, “I am like someone watching from the sidelines, waving a cowardly handkerchief, as the troops go boyishly off to war, singing brave songs” (446).

As usual, through the character of Elaine, Atwood tries to tell the readers that people (especially women) who have the willpower to achieve selfhood first try to break away from the two conventional roles that exist in the patriarchal system - the oppressor and the oppressed. Elaine successfully does this. She refuses to be classified into any type: “I hate party lines, I hate ghettos” (105). Atwood has always maintained that the achievement of freedom from patriarchal oppression should not give rise to another type of oppression. In Cat’s Eye, Elaine considers radical feminism as another form of
coercion, and prefers to stay away from it. She wants to create her own identity as a free woman, something that transcends all kinds of social classifications.

In spite of her outward submission to the oppression at the hands of her childhood friends and male companions, Elaine has always lived with an innate (and suppressed) sense of self. Her subtle subversive strategies, such as fainting and peeling the skin, have helped her survive her painful formative years. She has always silently fought against authoritarianism. One impressive example of it is the way she responds to Mrs. Smeath’s religious pompousness. Enraged by Mrs. Smeath, who calls her a heathen, she starts worshiping Virgin Mary (instead of Christ) to show her noncompliance. However, later in her life, painting becomes Elaine’s most powerful and significant subversive strategy, which she uses to wield power over the people who harassed her. For Elaine, painting also becomes a way of fondly remembering the people who have helped her. With her painting skills, Elaine demolishes the myth that art belongs only to men and seems to affirm that art and creativity belong to all human beings. Elaine’s painting skills help her establish herself as a subject self from an object self without having to depend on verbal language which is a patriarchal construct. Her return to Toronto for her retrospective art exhibition, therefore, plays a crucial role in her construction of her own self. It is an important stage in her journey towards selfhood.

Elaine’s return to the city where she spent her childhood enables her to review various elements of her formative years that have contributed to the unfixed nature of her personality. This is essential for Elaine to relocate and quell the phantoms of her past, which have been preventing her from attaining a complete sense of self. Interestingly, the object that sets off her journey into the making of her present personality is her blue
cat’s eye marble. After many years, she rediscovers it while looking through the steamer trunk at her mother’s house. As she looks through it, she recovers all the childhood memories that she has lost: “I look into it, and see my life entire” (468).

The freshly restored reminiscence helps Elaine interpret her own paintings in a new way. Since the director of the art gallery has arranged Elaine’s painting in a chronological order, Elaine is able to look at her own life story as an objective viewer: “I walk slowly around the gallery, sipping at my glass of wine, permitting myself to look at the show, for the first time really. What is here, and what is not” (476). First, Elaine sees paintings of objects related to her mother. Pressure Cooker, a series of paintings about her mother, depicts the suffering of women in the kitchen. It is Elaine’s way of wanting to bring her mother back to life. These paintings show the slavery of women who have accepted the traditional roles. Next, she sees Jon and Josef who make her think about her complicity in her own objectification. The paintings of Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia remind her of the repressive power that women can exert on fellow women. Three muses makes Elaine feel a bit optimistic as it depicts people who comforted her. Cat’s Eye is her self portrait which shows her that she is still haunted by the ghosts of her past; her childhood friends still have an influence upon her. The last painting, Unified Field Theory, helps Elaine realize the power she is endowed with. The painting portrays “the Virgin of Lost Things. Between her hands, at the level of her heart, she holds a glass object: an oversized cat’s eye marble, with a blue centre” (481). The picture of a compassionate figure holding a powerful object makes Elaine marvel at the feminine power. Finally, Elaine feels that she has the power to reintegrate with herself.
On the importance of the retrospective art exhibition in the novel and Elaine’s journey towards selfhood, Howells (2005) says, it “is the informing principle of the novel, for it has already been constructed on the Contents page, where chapter titles are all given the names of paintings mentioned in the text” (111-112). The women, who have remained as unconscious and profoundly compelling subjects for her art, finally enter Elaine’s conscious memory in the novel’s climactic moments. Elaine’s conscious awareness now gives her the power to fight with Cordelia’s ghost: “You’re dead, Cordelia. No I’m not. Yes you are. You’re dead. Lie down” (489). She soon realizes that Cordelia’s ghost does not have an independent existence but it is an inseparable part of her personality. Besides, Elaine now understands that Cordelia herself is a victim of the repressive society and this makes her desire for revenge recede. She forgives Cordelia and lays her spirit to rest by enunciating the same words that she heard in her vision of Virgin Mary many years ago: “It’s all right, I say to her. You can go home now” (443). Elaine is now completely free from the ghosts of the past. She can now identify herself with the influential women in her life. In other words, Elaine has restored her womanhood.

Iris Chase in *The Blind Assassin* differs very significantly from her sister Laura Chase in social behavior and temperament, but circumstances put both of them in the same terrible predicament. Iris Chase is so accommodating and socially conscious that she initially has no personal likes and dislikes and lives only to be ‘useful’ to others. She is often used by others to lessen their sufferings and Iris does not resist it. In other words, Iris is a willing victim of social exploitation. Upon her mother’s illness, she is made to become the caretaker of her sister Laura. When her family runs into serious financial troubles, she is asked to marry Richard, a rich business man whom Iris does not like,
only to save the family and factory from bankruptcy. She silently endures the domineering behavior of Richard and his sister Winifred for the sake of her family, especially her father. Nevertheless, underneath this apparently passive and self-effacing behavior of Iris, there is an outburst of suppressed emotions which incites her to have a furtive relationship with Alex, a stranger whose life and activities do not conform to the social norms of Canadian upper class. Her inner urge to live a life of her own also prompts her to write her own life history and to achieve her selfhood through the power of the pen.

Iris is subjected to rigorous social conditioning from early childhood. She is made to believe that the purpose of her existence is to be useful to others and that she should never have any personal opinion on anything in life. As a girl, she is trained to live like a sacrificial victim. Her grandmother Adelia is the initial catalyst in Iris’s gender conditioning: “We grew up inside her house; that is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren’t” (78). She is not valued for what she is; she has to be as helpful to others as possible in order to be of some importance. When her mother falls ill, life becomes even more terrible for Iris: “I soon found that if I could keep quiet, without clamouring for attention, and above all if I could be helpful – especially with the baby, with Laura, watching beside her……I would be permitted to remain in the same room with my mother. If not, I would be sent away. So that was the accommodation I made: silence, helpfulness” (105). Even as a four year old girl, Iris is burdened by excessive social expectations and household responsibilities. Her mother often says, “Be a good girl”…. “I hope you’ll be a good sister to Laura. I know you try to be” (116). Iris feels that she is unimportant and her
younger sister Laura has an unfair advantage: “I felt I was the victim of an injustice: why was it always me who was supposed to be a good sister to Laura, instead of the other way around? Surely my mother loved Laura more than she loved me” (116). Thus Iris, as a child, is conditioned to restrain the urge to live like an individual and to live to fulfill the expectations of others. When she reaches puberty, her father is irritated by Iris’s physical growth as if it were her fault. He starts imposing restrictions on Iris’s posture, speech and clothing:

My clothing should be simple and plain, with white blouses and dark pleated skirts, and dark velvet dresses for church. Clothes that looked like uniforms – that looked like sailor suites, but were not. My shoulders should be straight, with no slouching. I should not sprawl, chew gum, fidget, or chatter. The values he required were those of the army: neatness, obedience, silence, and no evident sexuality”. (193)

In addition to being restrictive, Iris’s childhood is very upsetting as her mother dies of miscarriage and her father takes to drinking. “Iris’s identity is defined by her gender, her class and her role as ‘good sister to Laura’, and her feminine destiny is already laid out for her” (Howells, 2005: 159). When the family runs into serious financial trouble, Iris’s father asks her to marry Richard and again she becomes a sacrificial lamb. Her father does not care if Iris likes Richard; he only tells her about the practical benefits of the marriage:

I have to consider your futures. In case anything should happen to me, that is. Laura’s future, in particular. ….I have to consider the factories
as well….I have to consider the business. It might still be saved, but the bankers are after me. They’re hot on the trail. They won’t wait much longer”. (276)

To save the family from financial disaster, Iris agrees to marry Richard, a rich businessman whom she never loves. As a young ‘woman’ she has to do it to safeguard her family’s interests. Since she marries a domineering man against her will, the marriage, is the erasure of her own identity.

However, Iris’s younger sister Laura stands in total contrast to Iris in the novel. She is more courageous and dignified than Iris. She lives an individualistic life and never fits into the social norms and systems. She is unworldly and uncompromising. Unlike Iris, she is defiant, inconsistent and touchy. Iris’s description of her sister Laura clearly reflects Laura’s true nature: “As for Laura, she was not selfless, not at all. She was skinless which is a different thing” (73). However, when looked beyond the obvious and tangible, it may be perceived that Laura is symbolic of Iris’s inner self. Laura is what Iris really wants to be. She represents Iris’s suppressed emotions. They both love Alex Thomas, a radical labour agitator. They hide him in the family attic before he flees from Canada. However, it seems Laura is more devoted to Alex than Iris and that is why she kills herself immediately after hearing the news of Alex’s death. Laura’s suicide leaves an indelible scar in Iris’s mind as she feels she is responsible for Laura’s death. Laura makes two versions of their photograph with Alex Thomas. The photos are cut by Laura and the severed hand, colored yellow in one picture and blue in the other denote different personalities of the girls, the central theme around which this mysteriously doubled novel is organized. While Iris has an ability to perceive surface
details and social requirements, Laura has an ability to see into people’s inner selves. Both for Laura and Iris, Alex represents freedom; freedom from social restrictions and freedom from class and gender consciousness. He takes them to a different world where they can become what they are.

Because of Iris’s passivity and meticulous adherence to gender norms, the values imposed on her by the family and the society, she continues to lose many things after her marriage. Richard Griffin is very selfish and his sister Winifred is a merciless oppressor. Iris lets both of them freely prey on her dignity and individuality. Winifred always tries to make Iris feel inadequate as a woman by pointing out to her how unfashionable and unappealing she is. She tells Iris: “You could be charming….. With a little effort” (285). What she means is that Iris is not charming and she needs her help to become a better person. From the way Winifred regulate Iris’s mannerisms, it is very clear that Winifred represents patriarchal repression in the novel: “…never look at the floor, it makes your neck look weak. Don’t stand up straight, you’re not a soldier….” (287). She uses the power that she derives from her brother to oppress Iris. Winifred is over ambitious and socialite. In her ruthless hands, Iris is being shaped into a ‘fashionable woman.’ She arranges Iris’s shopping according to her taste and Iris has to like, use and own only those things that Winifred likes: “…. in one of my several brand new trunks were a tennis skirt although I didn’t play, a bathing suit although I couldn’t swim, and several dancing frocks although I didn’t know how to dance ” (240).

While Iris’s social life is being marred by Winifred, Richard ruins her personal life and feminine psyche. He is a typical male; oppressive and self-centered. He enjoys Iris’s
pains and does not bother to make sure that Iris is happy with him. Iris is totally disappointed with Richard’s insensitive nature:

> I didn’t yet know that my lack of enjoyment – my distaste, my suffering even – would be considered normal and even desirable by my husband. He was one of those men who felt that if a woman did not experience sexual pleasure this was all to the good, because then she would not be liable to wander off seeking it elsewhere (294-95)

Richard is so inconsiderate that he does not inform Iris of her father’s death in order to prevent the sad event from spoiling their holiday. Later, when Iris comes to know of her father’s death and asks Richard about it, he casually says: “I know I ought to have, but I wanted to spare you the worry, darling. There was nothing to be done, and no way could we get back in time for the funeral, and I didn’t want things to be ruined for you” (376). However, Iris, owing to her traditional upbringing, endures her married life silently. She simply watches Richard treating her (and other women) as objects. He says women can be divided into apples and pears, according to the shapes of their bottoms: “I was a pear, he said, but an unripe one. That was what he liked about me – my greenness, my hardness” (390). As a traditional woman, Iris is happy about her social status as Richard’s wife and the sense of power and security it gives her, even though she knows she loses her dignity:

> I was the official wife, and he had no intention of divorcing me. Divorced men did not become leaders of their countries, not in those days. This situation gave me a certain amount of power, but it was power only if I
did not exercise it. In fact it was power only if I pretended to know nothing. (584)

Their marriage is completely futile and the main purpose of it is to satisfy the requirements of the society and Richard’s political career. He keeps up appearances and so does Iris. They attend cocktail parties and dinners and make entrances and exits together, his hand on her elbow. Iris is fully aware of the frailty of their life as man and wife: “We were still skating on the surface of things – on the thin ice of good manners, which hides the dark tarn beneath: once it melts, you’re sunk” (585).

However, what finally rouses Iris’s inner spirit is the fact that Laura is also being victimized by Richard with the help of Winifred. She realizes this very late as she is very busy trying to resist the imposition of patriarchal authority for which Richard and Winifred stand. Richard uses Laura to satisfy his lust for young girls, but Winifred cleverly sends Laura to an asylum saying that Laura is jealous of Iris for all the comforts that she enjoys with Richard. However, later Iris understands that this is only to hide the fact that Laura has been impregnated by Richard. Though Iris does not mind losing her own dignity and independence to Richard, losing her own sister to Richard’s lust enrages her. This awakens her feminist consciousness and Iris chooses writing as a means of exposing Richard as a liar and molester. Writing also enables her to be what she truly is. Iris leaves Richard’s house with her daughter Aimee and after that Richard is found dead in the sail boat ‘Water Nixie’ since his political career is completely ruined by the disgrace brought on him by Iris’s book.
Though Iris carves an identifiable place for herself in the patriarchal society after she frees herself from the married life and sets out to write the true story of Laura’s life and death, the rigorous gender conditioning of her early years still affects her lifestyle. She still thinks about how to be an acceptable person in the society. As an old woman, Iris feels her life is repetitive and full of “ceremonies we perform to make ourselves look sane and acceptable to other people” (43). As a mature woman, she reflects on the wretched condition of mothers in families:

> What fabrications they are, mothers. Scarecrows, wax dolls for us to stick pins into, crude diagrams. We deny them an existence of their own, we make them up to suit ourselves – our own hungers, our own wishes, our own deficiencies. Now that I’ve been one myself, I know (116)

This shows Iris’s feminist awakening and her new independent self. However, she also realizes that the nature of her childhood makes it a bit difficult for her to transform herself into a dignified person: “I didn’t know I was about to be left with her [her mother] idea of me; with her idea of my goodness pinned onto me like a badge, and no chance to throw it back at” (117).

Certainly Iris is one of Atwood’s most memorable characters. She has lived most of her life to fulfill other’s expectations. She has been powerless to identify her own likes and dislikes. She is a victim of the male-dominated society where her father sells her to an immoral man just to protect himself from financial troubles. From this, one can gradually understand that behind her passivity and complacency, Iris has always retained her inner urge to be free from all social and gender restrictions and her writing
career and maternity finally enable her to carve out her own space within the unjust social system. She has lived for fifty years with the secret of Laura’s death and her story. Her story is a personal memorial to Laura and Alex, people who denote free will and noncompliance. Iris attains selfhood through storytelling “for this is history in the feminine gender, which offers an alternative perspective on the master narrative of official history” (Howells, 2005: 156).

Hence, it is understood that Atwood’s women are able to review various things in their formative years and progress towards selfhood. They have to relocate and quell the phantoms of their past in order to gain strength and moral courage to stand against the dominant patriarchal structure which is stifling them and has driven them to their madness. They thrive hard to achieve a complete sense of self. So, they set on their journey into the making of their present personality. They discover and rediscover their true selves. They interpret their lives in a meaningful way and assert their personality and identity. They remain objective observers of their lives. In short, they realise their power in their quest for self.