Chapter VI

6. Summing up

Atwood’s novels become heavily introspective in nature. In fact, they are so introspective that the readers get to know little or nothing about the protagonists’ physical appearance. Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, for example, is completely invisible to the readers since she, in her narration, does not say anything about her appearance but only reflects on the events in her past and the present. Similarly, the narrator in *Surfacing* remains enigmatic in the novel since there is very little information on her physical characteristics. Even in *Life Before Man*, a novel with three different narrators, Lesje is physically trivial. There is no reference in the novel to Lesje’s appearance except some vague terms describing her ‘exotic’ nature which results from her multicultural origin. Nevertheless, when there are considerable and recurrent references to the appearance of the protagonist, they are invariably about some sort of physical defect, such as Joan’s obesity in *Lady Oracle* and Rennie’s scar on the breast in *Bodily Harm*. By and large, Atwood’s protagonists, whose consciousness permeates the novels, seem to remain physically inconsequential.

The relative physical indefiniteness of the female protagonists enables Atwood to effectively link individual problems with the general defects in/of the society. Readers – both women and men- can easily identify with the female protagonists. In other words, Atwood’s novels are not just stories of individual women who try to live in the society as free individuals. They are also narratives of social progress. They also allude to Canada’s quest for a distinct identity and freedom from her overbearing
neighbor. The paucity of information on protagonists’ outward appearance also helps the readers to focus closely on the inner lives of the central characters. The ways in which the external social practices are internalized and assimilated into the protagonists’ subconscious are described in detail. The central female characters exist in the novels mainly through their thoughts and, therefore, Atwood’s novels lend themselves to interpretation using psychoanalytic theory. To interpret Atwood’s protagonists and the feminist ideology that they symbolize, one needs to understand Atwood’s special language; a language of the unconscious, of the suppressed desires, fears and the fragmented self.

Furthermore, the dearth of references to protagonists’ physical features, most notably the positive ones, indicates a very serious psychological problem. The female protagonists, who tell the stories, are made to feel inadequate as women (and even as human beings). They feel they are not up to the expected social standards on femininity. In the beginning of the novels, almost all of them suffer from a sense of alienation. Though they long for social acceptance, they often try to obscure (or even disguise) themselves. Therefore, they mostly avoid describing their own physical features. It is their obsession with social expectations, rather than modesty, which results in their invisibility. Due to their sense of inadequacy, they feel greatly surprised and jubilant whenever they happen to know that they are physically attractive. Joan Foster (Lady Oracle) is the most pathetic example of this. When Paul exploits her helpless situation to deprive her of her virginity, Joan does not feel cheated or victimized. Instead, the sexual exploitation at the hands of a middle-aged man, whom she does not love, makes her feel ‘fulfilled.’ She feels happy and relieved that a
man can find her physically and sexually normal: “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). Similarly, in *Bodily Harm*, Rennie’s sense of inadequacy disappears when Paul touches her with passion: “….she’s grateful, he’s touching her, she can still be touched’ (204). Thus, the patriarchal social system makes unreasonable demands on women’s physical appearance, making them feel inadequate and forcing the sensitive ones to remain hidden.

For all protagonists, it is this sense of inadequacy which paves the way for their initial subjugation. In gender relations, they promptly take on the victim roles, passively endure the oppression and anxiously strive to gain male acceptance. Interestingly, all the female protagonists analyzed in this research study, except Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, start their adult life as traditional women who are subservient to their men. They fully conform to the stereotypical images of feminine behavior. They always put the needs of their men first and lead their miserable lives. In *The Edible Woman*, when Peter wants to have sex in the bathroom to show his “youthfulness and spontaneity” (68), Marian goes with him tamely and endures the physical discomfort. Similarly, Rennie in *Bodily Harm* is used by her lover Jake to fulfill his violent rape fantasies. She accepts the humiliation and pain by saying “[...] a secure woman is not threatened by her partner’s fantasies....As long as there is trust” (105). Thus, Atwood makes it very clear that the women who evaluate themselves using patriarchal standards are always anxious to please men, thereby making themselves vulnerable to male sexual exploitation.
The ways in which Atwood’s female protagonists are socially conditioned to adhere to patriarchal gender norms seem to follow a pattern. Their ‘gendered’ behavior and attitude are always ascribed to their childhood experiences. Almost all the protagonists have to turn to their childhood memories to understand and rethink their adult behavior which makes their adult life miserable. Despite the fact that Atwood, like other feminist thinkers, rejects Freud’s phallus-centered explanation of human sexuality, she seems to have imbibed his concepts of social and emotional development. One of the most important psychological ideas that Freud brought to the forefront is that a person’s childhood experiences have very significant effect on his/her subconscious mind and determine the person’s adult behavior and attitude. The effects of childhood experiences on a person’s psyche are spotlighted in Atwood’s novels too.

In *Surfacing*, the nameless narrator grows up as a child watching her forceful father and her docile mother. In her school, it is worse for a girl to ask questions than for a boy. The boys in the school often chase and capture the girls and tie them up with their own skipping ropes. This violent game which humiliates girls is a regular after-school activity. Since the narrator is more reclusive and frightened than other girls, the boys tease her much more brutally. Her initial resentment towards the gender inequities is curtailed by her mother who wants her to conform to the social expectations and be “civilized” (69). Similarly, in *Lady Oracle*, Joan is raised by her mother who is a victim of the intimidating standards created by the male-dominated society. She tries to transform Joan into a slender beauty and imposes many restrictions on Joan’s diet and lifestyle. She also tries to transform herself by putting layers of make-up. In fact,
she names her daughter after Joan Crawford, a beautiful film star and this shows her allegiance to the patriarchal gender stereotypes. Later, Joan says that this name has left in her a feeling of guilt for not living up to her mother’s expectations. Lesje’s Ukrainian and Jewish grandmothers in Life Before Man and the old-fashioned town Griswold in which Rennie is brought up in Bodily Harm are also good examples of the repressive elements that shape the protagonists’ early mental development. In general, the constricting role played by the family and the sense of fear and inadequacy it creates are manifest in Iris’s remark about her grandmother Adelia: “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.” (The Blind Assassin, 78).

However, Atwood considers the problem of gender conditioning within a wider context. In her novels, there are many powerful socializing elements outside the family, such as childhood friends and they play important roles in conditioning the protagonists to be socially acceptable. They either reinforce the traditional values learned at home or negate the effects of liberal family background. Elaine Risley in Cat’s Eye, for example, spends the first eight years of her life in Canadian wilderness with her parents who are liberal and individualistic. That means she remains absolutely free from social conditioning during her formative years. However, this does not help her grow into a progressive adult. When her family returns to Toronto to lead a settled life, Elaine, as an eight year old girl, is subjected to a very painful socializing process monitored by her girl friends. Grace, Carol and Cordelia make Elaine feel like a barbarian. Elaine is made to believe that there is something totally wrong in her upbringing. They always observe Elaine and point out her mistakes and
deficiencies. As a result, Elaine gradually starts to behave in a ‘socially appropriate’ way to remain acceptable to her friends. Similarly, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred’s liberal family background does not enable her to lead a dignified life in the repressive social system of Gilead. The freedom of her soul does not help her in a society which makes her physically submissive. On the whole, it is evident from the lives of Atwood’s protagonists that the agents of socialization are very powerful and that they may stem from the family as well as the outside world.

Rigorous gender conditioning during the early life makes Atwood’s protagonists malleable as adults. Atwood very vividly shows how their malleability and passivity encourage others to mould them into various shapes. For example, Peter in *The Edible Woman* uses his camera as a pretext to impose limitations on Marian. Jake in *Bodily Harm*, on the other hand, tries to transform Rennie into a spineless sex object. He pins her hands down and hurts her during sex. Besides men, there are domineering women who change the protagonists into their hand puppets. In *Cat’s Eye*, Elaine’s girl friends maliciously restrict Elaine’s movements: Similarly, in *The Blind Assassin*, Winifred controls Iris’s mannerisms dictatorially. These examples clearly demonstrate that women who have internalized patriarchal values are an easy target for patriarchal oppression.

Without doubt, Atwood’s feminist concern and its impacts on her female protagonists is very intensive, convincing and unbiased. It is also important to note that the protagonists yield to social pressure only superficially. Within every protagonist, there is a rebel. The subversive forces and optimism for the future persist in the subconscious. This creates a tension between the desire to be ‘acceptable’ in the
society and the inner urge to discard all the meaningless gender norms and the classification. Atwood’s central female characters, therefore, behave neurotically. Marian’s eating disorder, Lesje’s dinosaur fantasies, Joan’s gluttony and Elaine’s ‘purposeful’ fainting are some of the examples of irrational acts which indicate that the protagonists are “rebelling against the system” (The Edible Woman, 236). This is an important developmental stage in Atwood’s feminist ideology as it transforms a subconscious aversion into a perceptible weirdness. This helps the protagonists realize that they can never live in conformity with the gender norms of the society.

The individuation process is very tough and disheartening for the protagonists, but they all triumph ultimately by means of various subversive strategies. Many of them prove that they can be as talented and efficient as men. They refuse to be victimized by the patriarchal social system. They successfully redefine their position in the society without seeking supremacy over men. Through their social interactions with different types of people and their subconscious rebelliousness, Atwood’s protagonists gradually develop the spiritual power to transcend gender; they rise above the gender duality and successfully carve out a special place for themselves in the society as liberated women. Interestingly, the attainment of selfhood takes several different forms in the novels of Atwood. Selfhood, in a feminist context, generally denotes a liberated mental state in which patriarchal gender polarization no longer colors a person’s self-awareness. All the protagonists examined in this research finally achieve this inner freedom, but the means of achieving this is different for every one of them. For Lesje, for example, it is achieved through motherhood. Rennie, on the other hand, carves out her place as a subversive reporter. Presenting the history in feminine
gender makes Iris an emancipated woman. Only Offred achieves it in a purely physical way. She escapes from the repressive Gilead to achieve her freedom, because she, unlike other protagonists, has always remained spiritually liberated and only needed to be freed from external impediments.

For Atwood, selfhood involves only the rejection of the cultural stereotypes of traditional and desirable femininity. It does not however mean rejection of femininity. The women who triumph over patriarchy do so without rejecting their feminine power. Atwood’s rejection of radical feminism is made very clear throughout her writing career. She does not want women to take on male roles, nor does she want them to become lesbians. She only wants women to live with a distinct feminine identity. It is worth noting here that the oppressive women like Ainsley, Elizabeth and Zenia do not evoke any admiration in the minds of the leading female characters. Instead, they only evoke fear and hatred. Moreover, these oppressive women, who represent male domination, finally bite the dust, indicating that extremist ways of achieving women liberation do not work. Similarly, Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* does not like Moira’s lesbianism. Through the sensible and pragmatic tactics of her female protagonists, Atwood shows that the goal of women liberation is not to create a matriarchal culture, but to enable women to integrate with the society and to live with men without losing their sense of self. Men, therefore, are crucial elements in Atwood’s feminist theory.

In an interview, Atwood says that people expect men to be supermen: “Even women—even feminists—take points off them when they aren’t. They don’t take equal points off women for having failings, because women are expected to be imperfect” *(Bran,*
Atwood very clearly understands that men, too, are governed by the rules of gender. This understanding is implicit even in her representation of the most ‘villainous’ men in the novels. The oppressive men like Peter and Jake represent the uneasiness of the ‘male’ self which has no content of its own. They are placed in the novels in such a way that they cannot exist without reference to the people. They subjugate and exploit. In other words, their existence depends on the oppression of others, especially women. Therefore, gender duality is inevitable for these men to remain powerful. Consequently, they are the main factors that sustain the patriarchal gender constraints, and so in Atwood’s narrative structure, the protagonists’ progress / quest towards selfhood is paralleled by their gradual disengagement from the sway of these ‘masculine’ men.

In contrast, the ‘powerless’ men like Duncan play a very constructive role in Atwood’s feminist narrative. In the present research, they are also considered ‘the individuals’ and placed among the female protagonists of Atwood’s novels. However, there is a significant difference. Unlike the female protagonists, who achieve individuation in a gradual way, these ‘powerless’ men seem to be born rebels. These ‘soft’ men have no regard for the patriarchal gender norms. They represent Atwood’s idea of “a third thing” (Gibson, 1990: 19). For these men, the gender norms are serious impediments to their liberal lifestyle. They feel uneasy about everything that is associated with traditional ‘maleness.’ Nevertheless, being powerless and undemanding, they enable Atwood’s protagonists to be their real selves, thereby catalyzing their individuation process.
Evidently, Atwood’s main concern as a feminist writer is to highlight the patriarchal oppression of women and the alienation caused by their marginal position in the patriarchal social system. In the present research, the matriarchal deputies, the women who become ‘males’ and the passive female victims represent three types of futile roles for women. They are portrayed by Atwood as miserable and unsuccessful women. In the novels, the female protagonists are repelled by the emptiness of their lives. That means, these three types of women are Atwood’s warning signs of what will become of women if they do not try to rise above the gender norms of the male-controlled social system. However, Atwood’s feminist approach is not radical and she always pleads for healthy human relations between men and women. In her novels, both men and women are presented as piteous victims of gender stereotypes and oppressed and suppressed by patriarchal machinery though, as evidenced by the centrality of female characters in Atwood’s novels, women’s predicament is made to draw more attention.

Through the meticulous gender analysis related to Atwood’s feminist perspective and the quest for self, it is understood that the major characters in Atwood’s novels, exemplify Atwood’s feminist ideology as a wide-ranging philosophy which is concerned not only with women’s subversive strategies but also with envisioning a society where men and women can be equals at every level of existence, creating more authentic images of how women feel and how they live with social restrictions on the educational and professional opportunities open to women, representation of women’s bodies in art and fiction, social and economic exploitation of women, women’s relationships with each other and with men, women’s complicity in their own
subjugation and so on. However, it can easily be discerned from Atwood’s characterization that the eradication of gender stereotypes is the primary objective of her feminist narrative. As a person who has been influenced by people like Simone de Beauvoir, Atwood knows that the patriarchal system subjugates women by perpetuating the myth that gender roles are biologically determined. In her novels, Atwood effectively negates the patriarchal myth of biological destiny by creating true-to-life characters with atypical gender behaviors and female characters who gradually and convincingly transcend gender to achieve selfhood.