Preface

The main aim of this research is to study how Margaret Atwood’s female protagonists gradually and methodically liberate themselves from the patriarchal gender constraints and achieve selfhood. However, to set the female protagonists’ journey to selfhood in context, the gender behavior of other major characters in Atwood’s novels is also analyzed and included in the study. The emphasis given to all major characters in the study, rather than only the female protagonists, is in keeping with Atwood’s feminist ideology which is concerned not only with women liberation but also with the predicament of all people—both men and women—in the oppressive patriarchal society. The study attempts to classify the major characters of Atwood’s novels into six categories, based on their gender positions. Though this classification draws its inspiration from Atwood’s Basic Victim Positions, it is intended to be a unique categorization which is more comprehensive than Basic Victim Positions postulated in Atwood’s Survival (1972). Various feminist approaches such as psychoanalytic, Marxist, socialist, postmodern and existential feminist theories are used to analyze the characters and to understand their gender position in sexual power politics. The gender analysis of her major characters reveals that by the frequent portrayal of male and female characters with deviant and indeterminate gender behavior, Atwood shakes the very foundation of patriarchal oppression, the gender dichotomy. Besides, by creating true-to-life female characters who gradually and convincingly transcend gender to
achieve selfhood, Atwood sends positive signals to women who want to live as liberated and dignified individuals.

Atwood is concerned with the treatment of woman as a normal human being. She criticizes the social system that assigns roles to the sexes and then categorically labels them as inferior. She is intensely preoccupied with women fighting against the family norms of life – sexuality and dichotomy between career and the claims of the family. Most of her novels deal with gender politics and with women’s existence in a male-dominated society. She exposes the silent and hidden operations of gender and confronts its politics. In fact, she demands demolition of gender system.

Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969) revolves around the theme of women’s place in a society. She links together ideas of marriage and consumerism. Its central metaphor is that of woman as food. *Surfacing* (1972) deals with the theme of confronting layers of the self. It shows how gender politics has neglected women artists to a lower order. It represents the feminine consciousness and shows a woman’s struggle to free herself. *Lady Oracle* (1976) is the portrait of the writer as a woman and a survivor in a patriarchal society. *Bodily Harm* (1981) shows the condition of women in a patriarchal society. It deals with gender/sexual power politics. *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is an examination of sexual oppression in Gleadian society, where women are treated as procreative machines with viable ovaries. *Cat’s Eye* (1988) deals with the interaction between adulthood and childhood.
The present research on Atwood’s novels under the caption *Feminist Ideology and the Quest for Self in the Narrative Perspective of Margaret Atwood* is divided into six chapters.

The first chapter, “Introduction: Gender Constraint and the Evolution of Feminism”, examines the gender roles and the evolution of feminism. Its main thrust is that men and women are often stereotyped according to the characteristics they are supposed to possess by virtue of their biological constitution. Gender stereotypes have given rise to many social theories regarding the typical traits of men and women. It includes theories like Functionalism, Essentialism, Freud’s theory of psychosexual development, different types / kinds of feminism and most prominent feminist critics. It also scrutinises Atwood’s feminist ideology and her victim positions as related in her work, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*.

The second chapter, “Atwood and her Basic Victim Positions”, explores the life and works of Atwood besides detailing on the victim position as given by Atwood.

The third chapter, “The Parts of Patriarchal Machinery and the Matriarchal Deputies: An Examination of Feminist Ideology”, focuses on her men characters in order to understand how the patriarchal domination oppress and suppress women and also how matriarchal deputies (the powerful women who assume the status of a powerful male among female) cause threat and danger to the lives of frail and innocent women.
The fourth chapter, “Powerful Women, Passive Victims and Powerless Men: Quest for Self”, is an autopsy of how powerful women succeed in their lives and how they establish their identity. It also examines the women’s victim status and why some men in her novels become powerless before their counterparts. It is done with a view to assert that Atwood’s feminist ideology is much more thoughtful and pragmatic than the popular notions of feminism in which women are supposed to lose their femininity and become male-killers.

The fifth chapter, “Assertion of Feminine Self: End of the Quest”, asserts the fact that Atwood’s feminist perspective means defining an individual selfhood without being hampered by the patriarchal myths of traditional femininity and masculinity. It proves that all the major characters taken for study prove that they can transcend gender discrimination as they resort to some kind of psychological escape to create for themselves an illusion of emotional well-being.

The last chapter, “Summing up”, sums up the findings of the study and proves that 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. It also shows that Atwood effectively negates the patriarchal myth of biological destiny by creating true-to-life characters with a typical gender behaviours and female characters who gradually and convincingly transcend gender to achieve selfhood.