Chapter II

2. Atwood and her Basic Victim Positions

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada in 1939. She is the second of three children of Margaret Dorothy and Carl Edmund Atwood, an entomologist. The nature of her father’s profession made a tremendous impact on Atwood’s inner self, which later manifested itself in her literary creations. Her father’s continuous research in forest entomology made the family spend much of its time in the woods of Northern Quebec. Indeed, Atwood could attend full-time school only when she was in grade eight. The extensive use of animal imagery and the vivid description of Canadian wilderness commonly found in Atwood’s writings are usually attributed to her unsettled childhood in Northern Quebec. In her secluded childhood, she developed a strong fascination for reading; the books that she read as a child such as Grimm’s Fairy Tales, Canadian animal stories and Dell pocketbook mysteries had a strong impact on the thematic structure of her novels, short stories and poems.

She graduated from Leaside High School in 1957 and then started studying at Victoria College in the University of Toronto, where Atwood was deeply influenced by the literary and critical views of her professors Jay Macpherson and Northrop Frye. In 1961, she graduated from Victoria College with a Bachelor of Arts in English. She obtained her master’s degree in 1962 from Harvard’s Radcliffe College. Atwood has also taught in various prestigious institutions such as University of British Columbia, York University in Toronto and New York University. She also holds honorary degrees from several prominent universities like the National University of Ireland,
Oxford University, Royal Military College of Canada and several other Canadian universities.

Atwood’s marriage with Jim Polk ended in divorce in 1973, and soon after this, she developed a lasting relationship with fellow novelist Graeme Gibson. Their daughter Eleanor Jess Atwood Gibson was born in 1976. Atwood is now among the most renowned authors of fiction. She has been shortlisted for the *Booker Prize* five times and has won it once. She has also won *Governor General’s Award* twice. She founded *Writers’ Trust of Canada* to encourage young aspiring Canadian writers. Her well-known critical work, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, has significantly contributed to the theorizing of Canadian identity and making Canadian literature distinguishable. Although Atwood is best known as a novelist, she is also a renowned poet. In fact, she won the 1966 *Governor General’s Award* for one of her poetry collections, *The Circle Game*. The *Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), *Power Politics* (1971) and *Two-Headed Poems* (1978) are three of her poetry collections, which have received great critical acclaim. Atwood has also been famous for her contributions to Canadian Literary criticism, children’s literature, short story writing and anthologies.

From a purely Canadian perspective, Atwood’s earnest endeavors and contributions towards the recognition and propagation of the distinctive features of Canadian literature are quite exceptional. She feels that Canadian literature is the key to Canadian identity and as long as Canadian literature is compared and contrasted with other literatures, Canadian identity will remain vague. On the importance of literature in the formation of cultural identity, Atwood remarks:
Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been, we need such a map desperately; we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. (Atwood, 1972: 19)

Atwood’s views on Canadian literature and identity are very much influenced by Northrop Frye’s theory of ‘garrison mentality.’ Being aware of the fact that Canadian literature is replete with ‘victim positions’, Atwood posits that Canadian literature (and Canadian identity) is characterized by the notion of ‘survival’. In other words, Canadian identity is characterized by a fear of obstacles to survival. Atwood clearly points out that the obstacles to survival, which were external such as the climate, the land and so on in the past, have now become internal and harder to identify. “They are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being” (Atwood, 1972). What is interesting here is that Atwood’s unique feminist ideology, which can readily be labeled ‘nationalist feminism,’ links the predicament of women to that of Canada. Therefore, the spiritual survival of Canada is also about the spiritual survival of women. In Atwood’s feminist ideology, Canada’s struggle to preserve its identity in the face of American domination is likened to women’s struggle to protect their individuality within the patriarchal structure of power and domination. Therefore,
“the narratives of her women characters become, by implication and extension, the narratives of the nation” (Salat, 1993: 63).

Since Atwood’s views on Canadian identity is inextricably interwoven with her feminist principles, the basic victim positions that she identifies and explains in her critical work *Survival: A thematic guide to Canadian literature* (1972), are therefore important critical guidelines to understand the level of emotional autonomy of people who are constantly repressed by the male-dominated social system. They can also serve as useful analytic criteria for classifying major characters in Atwood’s feminist novels. In the present research, they are interpreted as four major ways in which individuals respond to the gender constraints imposed by patriarchy.

According to Atwood, there are four basic victim positions. In position one, the person will deny the fact that she/he is a victim. This position is occupied by victims who are not aware of the sources of their oppression and they think they are in a privileged position. They are little better off than the other victims and this gives them a false sense of power and superiority. They do not want to think about their victimization for fear of losing the advantages they possess. They always feel compelled to explain their domineering behavior and account for the difficulties suffered by the rest of the victims. They come across as the most powerful people in Atwood’s novels. The dominant men, such as Peter in *The Edible Woman* and Richard in *The Blind Assassin* are typical examples of this category. Women such as Cordelia in *Cat’s Eye* and Winifred in *The Blind Assassin* also exhibit the characteristics of this victim position. They are all oppressive, self-centered and unaware of their own victimization.
People in Position Two, on the other hand, acknowledge the fact that they are victims but they “explain this as an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea” (Atwood, 1972: 37). These justifications move the cause from the real source of oppression to something else. Since the cause is insurmountable, they can neither be blamed for their position nor be expected to do anything about it. They are willing victims and they always feel frustrated at their plight. They are angry with themselves and fellow victims, but do not do anything to change their situation because they think it is impossible. Clara in *The Edible Woman* exemplifies this victim position. Joan’s mother in *Lady Oracle* and Elizabeth’s mother in *Life Before Man* can also be classified into this type.

Victim Position Three is a situation where people acknowledge the fact that they are victims but reject their victim role. The real source of oppression is identified for the first time. Anger is directed against the real source of oppression and energy is channelised into productive acts. Atwood says that it is a dynamic position rather than a static one, because from this position one can move on to Position Four or, if locked in the anger and fail to change the situation, might go back to Position Two. Almost all protagonists in the novels of Atwood go through this stage and many of them successfully move on to Position Four. Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, however, seems to get back to Position Two as her awareness of the real sources of oppression and her energy do not help her liberate herself from the gender dichotomy; instead, she simply moves from a submissive female position to an oppressive male position and this does not enable her to become a non-victim.
Position Four denotes complete emancipation from the gender constraints. This position is occupied by people who have never been victims, or ex-victims. People in this position do not oppress others nor do they get oppressed by others. All the external and internal causes of victimization are removed in this stage. “Energy is no longer being suppressed (as in position one) or used up for displacement of the cause, or for passing your victimization along to others as in position two […] nor is it being used for the dynamic anger of Position Three” (Atwood, 1972: 38). People in this position are able to accept their experiences for what they are rather than having to falsify them to make them match up to others’ expectations. Marian in *The Edible Woman*, for example, exhibits the qualities of this position after baking *the cake woman* towards the end of the novel. In Atwood’s feminist ideology, this position should be the ultimate goal that every oppressed person should pursue.

The application of the above framework for the interpretation of Atwood’s fictional characters is implicit in the present research. It is done with an awareness that Atwood’s characters are so true-to-life and complex that they do not always fit into these positions precisely. The idea of basic victim positions, therefore, is not the major and sole analytical tool in the present research, though it is a supplementary concept used to analyze some characters. Nevertheless, the victim positions still represent the general nature of Canadian literature and Canadian identity and therefore deserve an important place in the introduction.

Having understood Atwood’s views on Canadian literature, Canadian identity and the link between the predicament of women and that of Canada, one can explore the reasons why the novels of Atwood lend themselves to a comprehensive feminist
research into the patriarchal gender system and its impacts on identity formation.

Firstly, a cursory glance at the themes of her novels in a chronological order would reveal Atwood’s consistent feminist slant. *The Edible Woman* (1969) is about a young woman whose sense of alienation results in a serious eating disorder. She finally succeeds in disengaging herself from the clutches of her lover who is an oppressive and manipulative man. *Surfacing* (1972) deals with national and gendered identity. It is about a nameless female narrator, who, after being exploited by the male-dominated society, encounters her past in her childhood house and is driven into the state of madness. Joan Foster, the protagonist of *Lady Oracle* (1976), is initially an overweight child who is scorned by her mother. As an adult woman she always tries to run away from the oppressive world of self-centered and abusive men. *Life Before Man* (1979), which has three principle characters, portrays the futility of modern life and how men and women exploit each other unsympathetically. The novel also explores the problems of atypical gender characteristics.

In *Bodily Harm* (1981), Rennie is sexually exploited and abused by her dominant lover Jake. She later travels to Caribbean island as a travel reporter and witnesses horrendous brutalities of an unfair and oppressive social system. What Rennie sees in the island awakens her feminist consciousness and leads to her transformation. *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is a speculative novel set in the near future in a totalitarian Christian society. It envisions a patriarchal society with unrestrained power over women. *Cat’s Eye* (1988) shows how women, who are loyal to the patriarchal power, can be detrimental to the dignity and liberty of fellow women. In *The Robber Bride* (1993), Atwood explores the effects of imitating male attitude and behavior on
women’s individuality. The novel is also about women who make themselves vulnerable by their constant desire to conform to social expectations. *Alias Grace* (1996) is centered on a servant woman, Grace Marks, who is convicted of murdering her masters. The novel describes how the society vilifies women who transcend traditional gender norms. *The Blind Assassin* (2000) narrates the story of Iris Chase who carves out her own space through her writing career.

*Oryx and Crake* (2003) has a forceful vision of the future and represents a deviation from Atwood’s predominant feminist focus. It shows how mankind’s obsession with scientific advancements, especially genetic experimentation, leads to the destruction of the human society. *Penelopiad* (2005), on the other hand, is unmistakably a feminist work. It is the story of Odysseus from the perspective of Odysseus’ wife Penelope. In other words, it is a feminist reply to Homer’s *Odyssey*. In this novel, Atwood makes a woman, who was marginalized in Ancient Greece, the central character. However, *The Year of the Flood* (2009) is again apocalyptic in nature and thematically connected with *Oryx and Crake* which deals with the extinction of human race.

It is obvious that Atwood’s novels primarily deal with women’s struggle against the patriarchal oppression and gender issues. Moreover, her novels are based on a strong sense of local identity. In other words, she writes about Canadians, Canadian cities and towns, and Canadian wilderness. “This sense of geographical location is the basis of Atwood’s realism” (Howells, 2005:10). However, *Oryx and Crakes*, it seems, marks a new direction in Atwood’s fiction. It is the first novel in which Atwood’s primary focus is not on feminist issues; it deals with environmental issues, the problems of globalization and so on. Also, with this novel, Atwood has moved out of
her usual Canadian setting and talks about global issues. In general, Atwood’s novels are satirical accounts of social norms and identity issues. Her protagonists are modern urban women who suffer from a sense of alienation due to their inner conflicts. They are often creative—they are writers or painters. They suffer years of oppression at the hands of the patriarchal society, but their sufferings only strengthen their resolve to liberate themselves from the gender constraints. In her novels, Atwood criticizes not only men for being domineering and manipulative but also condemns women for their participation in their own subjugation. In fact, “Atwood sees in woman’s (or Canada’s) will to be victimized, the most serious and severe obstacle to the satisfactory resolution of the identity-crisis” (Salat, 1993: 65). Atwood’s feminist approach, therefore, is very balanced and objective.

Atwood always comes across as an author who presents gender conflicts in an unbiased manner. On the surface, Atwood’s novels seem to narrate women’s journey through social impediments to achieve freedom from gender role stereotypes. However, a deep analysis of her works reveals that both men and women are depicted as prisoners of the patriarchal social system which creates and sustains stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity. Though the male and female characters, who anxiously try to conform to social norms, are portrayed satirically and amusingly in Atwood’s novels, her concern over the immense power wielded by the patriarchal social system is easily discernible.

Atwood’s feminist ideology is very much influenced by Simone De Beauvoir (“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman”) who is one of the proponents of the sociological construction of gender. The distinction between biological sex and
gender enables people like Atwood to question the traditional gender system because there is no essential connection between a person’s biological sex and gendered behavior. That Atwood considers gender a social construct is very clear from some of her characters who perform gender roles which do not conform to their biological sex and the cultural stereotypes. For example, Elizabeth in Life Before Man and the Aunts in The Handmaid’s Tale epitomize the patriarchal oppression and therefore play ‘male’ roles. In contrast, men like Nate and Chris in Life Before Man are oppressed and manipulated by Elizabeth and these men play ‘female’ roles in the novel. It is therefore very clear that Atwood’s feminist ideology is not built on any animosity towards men, because “the ‘male’ for Atwood, becomes a metaphor for all the de-humanizing and despotic attitudinal and behavioral patterns that can as well issue from a woman as from a man” (Salat, M.F., 1993: 69).

Any research on gender issues and feminist perspective in the novels of Atwood should take note that men play crucial roles in Atwood’s quest narrative. Atwood deals with the problems of women mainly by problematising gender. Her main aim seems to be the repudiation of gender role stereotypes. However, it has to be remembered that “gender, both as an analytic category and a social process, is relational” (Flax, Jane 1987: 628). That means the problems of the gendered existence of women, the leitmotif of any feminist work, can be understood properly only in relation to that of men. Men and their gendered existence, therefore, are very important and relevant in Atwood’s feminist ideology.

Atwood’s attitude towards men (and women) in her novels is absolutely unprejudiced. She does not paint her male characters in bad light in order to earn sympathy for her
female characters. Her commitment to fairness as an author and as a feminist is evident from her own definition of her feminist approach: “I’m defining my feminism as human equality and freedom of choice” (Bran, Jo, 1990:142). The men in Atwood’s novels are true-to-life and each one of them is unique. However, in terms of their socio-economic and gender status, they fall into two broad types.

There are men who play typical male roles in Atwood’s novels. They are dominant and signify patriarchal structures of power. In Atwood’s feminist ideology, these men are always associated with America, a strong, ambitious ‘male’ country which victimizes its weaker neighbor, Canada. These ‘Americanized’ men “represent the group of more or less traditionally powerful Canadian men who have always opted to link Canada’s mixed economy more firmly with American capitalism” (Hengen, 1993:42). From a psychoanalytic point of view, these ‘typical’ men are narcissistic. Narcissistic persons depend on others to endorse their self-esteem and they cannot live without an admiring audience. For example, Peter in *The Edible Woman* and William in *Life Before Man* exemplify all the characteristics mentioned above. They are powerful, dominant and always want to be marveled at by others, especially by their girl friends. However, a careful analysis of their behavioral patterns reveals that their glitz and glamour hide their inner fears and insecurities. They are so concerned about their stature and their ‘male’ image that they always feel inadequate as men. This sense of inadequacy stems from their “unregulated self-esteem, that which represents subjects as uncomfortably inadequate” (Hengen, 1993:36). Due to their anxiety to conform to the gender norms, these men take an oppressive approach in their dealings with women, thereby striping women of their freedom and dignity. Though they are
portrayed as malevolent characters in the novels, Atwood, as an author of impeccable sensibility, makes their inner sense of insecurity discernible. Through the negative representation of these powerful male characters, Atwood does not censure individuals; she only criticizes the patriarchal social values that pressurize people. She thinks that in the modern industrialist society, “men particularly have been amputated. Women haven’t been amputated as much relatively, because absolutely they’ve been amputated a lot more […]” (Gibson, 1990: 17). Atwood recognizes that the patriarchal system, which subjugates women, is more ruthless towards men. Talking about the tremendous social pressure on men to conform, Atwood says, “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 the women for having failings, because women are expected to be imperfect”(Bran, Jo, 1990:146). Therefore, Atwood is fully aware of the fact that “men worry much more about their maleness than women worry about their femaleness” (Hammond, 1990:102). However, the oppressive nature of the powerful ‘male’ characters in Atwood’s novels is never justified. Their tyrannical behavior is skillfully portrayed so as to throw light on the destructive effects of gender stereotypes on women’s dignity and freedom. Besides, the sense of insecurity that these powerful men suffer from is used to show the futility of conforming to traditional gender norms.

Nevertheless, there are also men in Atwood’s novels, who do not conform to traditional gender norms and this indicates her aspiration to smash gender stereotypes. As a feminist writer who is influenced by Beauvoir’s notion of ‘transcendence,’ Atwood tries to liberate women (and men) from social prejudices mainly by
subverting the gender stereotypes. She tries to achieve it by creating characters that
defy gender duality that broadly sorts all people into males and females or victimizers
and victims. Atwood talks about this ‘third’ gender on many occasions. In an
interview with Graeme Gibson, she says, “you can define yourself as innocent and get
killed, or you can define yourself as a killer and kill others. The ideal would be
somebody who would neither be a killer nor a victim, who could achieve some kind of
harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony, rather than a
destructive relationship towards the world” (Gibson, 1990: 16-17). Men like Duncan
in The Edible Woman, Joe in Surfacing and Nate in Life Before Man have one thing in
common: they exist outside of established gender norms. Though they are sexually
normal men, they do not have the psychological will and the socio-economic status to
have power over women (or anyone, for that matter). In other words, they do not play
‘male’ roles in the narrative. First of all, unlike the ‘macho’ men, they do not want to
be admired and venerated by women; they only seek support and comfort from them.
They never see themselves through others’ eyes, a trait that characterizes narcissistic
men. Secondly, they do not have any aptitude for earning money and consequently
cannot be breadwinners. Professionally, they are all failures; what they do for their
livelihood is very different from what successful men do. This socio-economic failure
makes them gender misfits. Social roles are classified according to gender stereotypes
and this segregation makes men and women to participate in different activities
leading to beliefs about what is appropriate for men and women. Men like Duncan,
Joe and Nate are not ‘males’ because they financially depend on women. It is
interesting to contrast the oppressive men, who are associated with American
capitalism, with these ‘softies’ who, in Atwood’s narrative, denote Canadian weakness. Hengen (1993) observes that the unaffected nature of these powerless men in Atwood’s novels can be “associated with Canadian men who historically have argued to preserve the Canadian difference, men who like Atwood, though less explicitly, promote left-nationalism” (42). Since they do not possess the oppressive qualities associated with the ‘male’ gender, they do not generally pose any threat to women’s dignity and freedom. However, like the oppressive men, they too have feelings of insecurity. They are neither socially ‘male’ nor biologically suitable to be ‘female.’

Similarly, Atwood objectively analyses in her novels the disposition of women who occupy different social positions enjoying varying degrees of social power. Atwood does not believe that the only purpose of feminism is to prove the righteousness of women. As Howells (2005) notes, “feminism also means looking at the ways in which women use the powers traditionally granted to them and how they have attempted to enlarge the scope of their influence; it also means looking at the effects on women of not having legitimized power. That lack can turn them into victims or manipulators or it can launch them into guerrilla warfare; all of which are positions explored in Atwood’s fiction” (17). For example, there are women who, by dedicating themselves to defending patriarchal values, gain some power. Unfortunately, all these women use their power to oppress other women. For example, Joan’s mother in *Lady Oracle* and the Aunts in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are custodians of traditional femininity and so they stand for patriarchal oppression. Atwood makes their gender behavior paradoxical; they definitely play typical ‘female’ roles in the novels but represent male
oppression. Women like Clara in *The Edible Woman* and Anna in *Surfacing*, on the other hand, do not exhibit any fascination for patriarchal values but remain passive ‘females’ and let themselves be exploited by their husbands. The idea of gender is further complicated by women like Elizabeth in *Life Before Man* and Zenia in *The Robber Bride*. They are biological women who play typical ‘male’ roles in the novels. In order to escape the agonizing effects of male oppression, these women switch to ‘male’ roles and start oppressing men. They imitate male behavior and repressive strategies and succeed in wreaking havoc on men’s’ lives. All these characters are portrayed by Atwood in an ironic and disapproving way since, understandably, they do not represent her feminist ideals. Atwood’s feminist ideology, however, is epitomized in a tacit way by the female protagonists of her novels. They are sensitive and talented. They all sincerely try to live in the society as respectable individuals by carving out their own space. Towards the end of the novel, they all become sensible ‘women’ who have successfully risen above the cultural stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. In other words, they all learn to ‘survive’ in the society with their individuality and freedom. Praphakar (1999) says, “Atwood’s feminist thought, which is positively pro-woman and not anti-man, seeks to offer a ‘life-affirming’, ‘survivalist’ and ‘human rights’ approach for placing woman on equal footing with her male –counterpart. The basic premise of Atwood’s feminist thought is survival which shows to women the ways of struggle and the means of survival in an antagonistic, male chauvinistic and sexist society” (30).

Through the frequent portrayal of male and female characters with deviant and indeterminate gender behavior, Atwood makes the notion of gender duality
questionable. Besides, the male and female characters with traditionally accepted gender behavior are presented as failed and ridiculous people to show the futility of gender norms. This type of characterization enables Atwood to shake the very foundation of patriarchal dominion – the gender system. The tangled gender issues highlighted by Atwood certainly help her achieve her feminist aim, namely the demolition of gender system, but a research into peoples’ gender behavior is likely to be hampered by this gender chaos in her novels. Being aware of the general complexities of Atwood’s narrative style and characterization, therefore, is of great importance for anyone researching Atwood’s feminist principles.

In general, any attempt to understand Atwood’s feminist ideology and her views on gender has to encounter a number of challenges which are posed by Atwood’s ingenuity and sophistication as a writer. First of all, Atwood does not take the simplistic feminist position that all women are good and all men are oppressive. Her critics call her a ‘humanist’ rather than a feminist, since she writes with a deep understanding of the complexities of gender politics. Her realistic feminist approach takes into account the problems faced by both men and women in the repressive patriarchal gender system. Her feminist objectives include complex tasks like helping individuals –both women and men- to recover from the falsehood of gender polarization. Hengen (1993) thinks that Atwood, in the course of her career as a feminist writer, tries to join the two segments by redefining both terms. “Power (“American,” “Male”) without love becomes as harmful as love (“Canadian,” “female”) without power” (16). Since Atwood sees the benefits of this
interconnection, it is slightly difficult to see with whom her authorial sympathies lie in every novels.

Secondly, her feminist messages are likely to be eclipsed by her realism and the engaging narrative strategies. Howells (2005) points out that “the social dimensions of Atwood’s fiction are always underpinned and sometimes undermined by representations of individual behavior” (2). Besides, in every novel, she adopts the styles of a different narrative form. For example, in Lady Oracle, she uses the conventions of gothic romance and The Robber Bride is a parody of the fairy tale The Robber Bridegroom. This innovativeness, rather than the moral, might attract the attention of the readers. Reynolds (2002) says, “…not one of Atwood’s fictions comes to us just by itself. There is always another story behind the story, or inside the story, or reflected in the story” (7). Atwood enjoys reshaping and revisiting myths and archetypes. The problem is that a number of moral values, which are very crucial to the successful existence in the modern society, come from an author who does not want to write simple moral tales. In an interview, Atwood says, “My characters are not role models. I don’t try to resolve the problems of living, deal out the answers” (Sandler, 1990, 54). This shows that Atwood, besides having her feminist responsibilities, is truly interested in experimenting with innovative narrative strategies which are her own adaptations of traditional literary genres of the past. Atwood’s passion about her own literary inheritance and her love for resurrecting the themes of the past is revealed in her non-fiction Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing: “All writers learn from the dead. As long as you continue to write, you continue to explore the work of writers who have preceded you; […] The dead may
guard the treasure, but it’s useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more [...]” (Atwood, 2003: 178). Therefore, a very perceptive analysis of Atwood’s novels is necessary to be able to grasp her feminist views which are usually concealed beneath her interesting narrative styles and lifelike characters.

The interpretation of Atwood’s novels is further complicated by her relentless ironic style. Readers therefore have to be careful not to be deceived by the surface meanings. They have to consider all the contextual clues to grasp the underlying meanings. Moreover, the endings of Atwood’s novels do not have any conclusiveness; such endings may appear contrived in the realistic and unprejudiced narrative. The endings of her novels only indicate some changes in attitudes, some new insights into the nature of life and so on; however, they do not show any scenes of jubilation or definite physical advancement. Overall, in Atwood’s novels, as Howells remarks, “there are always gaps to be negotiated, by the characters in the novels and also by the readers” (2005: 8).

The present research, which is done with a complete awareness of the intricacies and the unconventionality of Atwood’s narrative style, examines the impacts of social gender conditioning on individual behavior. Its primary objective is to study how Atwood’s female protagonists gradually and methodically liberate themselves from the patriarchal gender constraints and achieve selfhood. These women are the exemplification of the feminist position that Atwood supports. 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.

A unique feature of the present research is that it 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. Psychoanalytic, social and existential feminist theories are used to analyze the characters and to understand their gender position in sexual power politics. The research is based on nine different novels by Atwood. Only the novels which have clear feminist focus are used. This explains why Atwood’s recent novels like *Oryx and Crake*, which primarily focus on environmental issues, are not included in the study. The study does not claim to include all the fictional characters of Atwood, though most of the interesting and representative characters from Atwood’s novels are examined in the study.