Chapter 2

Dynamics of Marginalization and the Quest for Identity

Questioning a centralizing or totalizing system like that of the nation, in a way, calls forth the challenging of the concept of a unified Subject/Identity that constitutes the system. Decentring, according to Derrida, does not mean the reversal of the 'other,' making the margin into a new centre. Rather it is the co-existence of differences. Language produces meaning only as a system of differences. However, western thought has always operated on the idea that meaning depends on what Derrida calls, 'a metaphysics of presence.' He employs this term to suggest man's impulse to assume that there is an immanent truth underlying existence. Derrida deconstructs traditional philosophical thinking from Plato and shows how this system utilizes a series of binary oppositions, one dominating the other. The privileging of one term helps to sustain a belief in presence and guarantees an intentional unitary meaning.
Derrida attempts to undo these hierarchies by explaining how the privileged term depends on its subordinated opposite. He foregrounds his notion of *differance*, a word that fuses *defferant* with ‘difference,’ to suggest the unstable nature of meaning. Binary oppositions in a perpetual play of reversal, continually defers any one privileged meaning. As linguist Emile Benveniste observes ‘I,’ ‘he,’ ‘she’ etc are merely subject positions which language lays down. When one speaks one refers to oneself as ‘I’ and to the person addressed as ‘you.’ When that person replies, ‘I’ becomes ‘you’ and vice versa. This strange reversibility of subject positions is necessary for communication. The subject can be the doer as well as the victim, the subject as well as the object. Benveniste defines subjectivity as the “capacity of the speaker to posit himself as ‘subject’” and it is accomplished through language (*General Linguistics* 224). This is in many ways similar to Lacan’s notion of the subject.

Lacan also denies any fixed meaning to the signifier ‘I.’ Self, according to him, is a continuous deferral of identity that displaces desire from one social ideal to another. Subjective identity has no authenticating point of origin in a unitary self. Similarly, Julia Kristeva speaks of a ‘subject in process.’ In her view, the subject is not unified and each reading will reveal a new subject different from the previous one. All these, according to
Hutcheon, undermine the universally accepted ideologies of Man as "coherent," "continuous" and "non-contradictory" subject (Poetics 177). The pre-oedipal subject, in psychoanalytic theory, cannot differentiate between the 'self' and the 'other.' But once it enters the realm of language, it acquires this ability. However, the 'other' or the unconscious is often repressed by the Ego's censoring mechanism.

Freud and Lacan identify the conscious or the subject as only Male. It is absence or lack that signifies woman. Freud's explanation of the 'castration complex' dismisses the female as 'nothing.' The absence of a penis leaves her with 'no thing' that is visible. Feminine identity, in his terms, can only be defined as a lack. Luce Irigaray criticizes this notion in "Speculum of the Other Woman." She observes that the centrality of the phallus is established by equating 'no penis' with the 'no thing.' "Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing, no being and no truth"(Irigaray 148). This establishes woman in this discourse as "non-being, as deficiency, as object against which the subject asserts himself"(Irigaray 142). The presence of the phallus guarantees a unitary notion of masculine identity. In western thought this is intertwined with the unitary notion of truth. However the phallus has to depend on its subordinated 'other' to acquire fullness of meaning. Masculinity as wholeness has to be supported by femininity as absence.
In the male dominated world women are conditioned to be victims, the objects of the male self's power. They are subordinated to the principle of Identity conceived as masculine sameness. Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, “for him she is sex -- absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is incidental, as opposed to the essential... He is the Absolute she is the Other(xvi). She speaks of the peculiar position in which women find themselves in the patriarchal tradition.

Woman becomes the target of two mutually exclusive discourses; on the one hand, she is constructed as an autonomous subject like men are, but on the other hand, is burdened by myths of femininity that construct her as the alien, defiled 'other' against which man has felt compelled to define himself. Woman therefore sees herself not as a subject but as an object paradoxically endowed with subjectivity. *(Second Sex 718)*

So Beauvoir conceives a woman as “hesitating between the role of object, other, which is offered her and the assertion of her liberty”(33). If this ‘other’ has to assert her liberty, to express her subdued subjectivity, she has to speak through the gaps and learn to exploit the contradictions with in “a system that cannot afford to acknowledge its own self division”*(Nation and Narration*
Atwood’s protagonists face this dilemma of creating an identity of their own as they confuse themselves in multiple roles and create a chaos around them. Through ways, differing from one to another, they come to realize their denied liberty and struggle to come out of the muddy puddles that surround them.

When we first meet Joan Foster in Lady Oracle, she has just fled to Terremato in Italy, having contrived most intricately, her own death. As the story unravels, we are told of the events that have culminated in this; a series of role playing, of separate identities, of deceptions that Joan has been practising for long. Ann Parsons observes:

The novel explores the struggle of an insecure woman playing hide and seek.... Joan is presented as a victim of sexist social pressures, but the novel richly extends this theme in its probing of how Joan as a writer can draw an exuberant creative energy from the same sources as those which prompt the devious, deceitful, frightened chameleon behaviour. (“The Self-Inventing Self” 108)

The oracle voices the feminine experiences relegated to the margins of discourse by patriarchal culture. Showalter points out that the problem is “not that language is insufficient to express women’s consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language” (“Wilderness” 338).
Cixous argues that woman “must write her self, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies”(“The Laugh” 875). Joan tries to escape the constraints that the men in her life impose on her. In order to publish her work, she has to submit to the definitions of the male publishers who are unable to appreciate her literary merit but can only think of monetary gains. Her life itself is a pack of lies, a history rewritten several times. According to Christian Bok, Joan’s attempts parallel the attempts of Irigaray and Cixous “to rewrite the feminine roles historically forced upon women. Atwood...participates in a similar project of feminist rewriting by revising the terms of reference for genres that have traditionally highlighted both the strength of man and the frailty of woman”(“Sibyls” 87). The text of the novel shows how Joan enacts a continuous deferral of identity by displacing one with another.

To the Polish Count Paul, Joan is an “innocent, simpleminded” child, who consents to move into his apartment and be his mistress, and who is not in the least upset on losing her virginity. From Arthur she conceals her relationship with Paul as well as her past and creates fictitious and “more agreeable” stories. As Ann Parsons remarks, she “becomes adept at creating and enacting new selves, usually with detailed fictitious autobiographies, in
response to each new situation and each new man she meets” ("The Self-Inventing Self" 104). Under Paul’s influence she starts writing costume gothics under the name, Louisa K. Delacourt. Fearing that Arthur would not approve of this, she chooses to play the role of a devoted wife for him. In the pretext of doing some university courses, she continues writing. She attempts to keep her different identities separate and this makes her life all the more messy. When she is with Arthur, the Royal Porcupine becomes a daydream and in the company of Chuck Brewer, Arthur is reduced to an “unreal...insubstantial ghost” (Lady Oracle 289). Torn between her love for Arthur and her literary aspirations, her reluctance to confine herself as an obedient and submissive wife, her desire for economic independence, and her sexual fantasies, she is confused and at a loss to define her own path. She says, “For me there were no paths at all. Thickets, ditches, ponds, labyrinths, morasses, but no paths” (Lady Oracle 169).

Art becomes a medium for Joan, to escape from this real life full of anxiety, fear and conflict. While creating and annihilating selves, she always had the fear that her protective shell of secrets will be broken and she will be despised and condemned. She remarks, “I told lies, but they were not watertight. My mind was not disciplined” (Lady Oracle 177). As her fears become uncontrollable, we find that the boundary between her real life and
her art slowly vanishes. Fantasy and reality intrude into each other's territory. As Barbara Godard remarks, "Joan's life is increasingly taken over by that of her fictional creations when she, as Felicia, moves into the labyrinth. Ultimately there are no boundaries, only perpetual metamorphoses, for the writer is intrigued by the point at which one thing becomes another" ("Subversion" 217). 'Escape literature' (as Joan herself describes her work), she feels, should be an escape for the writer as well as the reader. She offers "a vision of a better world, however preposterous," to her readers for whom escape was not a "luxury" but a "necessity" (Lady Oracle 35). At the same time this also helps to keep her hopes alive.

In Joan's novel in progress, 'Stalked by Love,' there is Charlotte the stereotype female, who confirms to the requirements of femininity and Felicia, who fails to "contain" herself. She is the nonconventional, angry, powerful, grandiose woman, neglected by her husband. Redmond had become tired of the extravagance of Felicia, "of her figure that spread like crabgrass, her hair that spread like fire, her mind that spread like cancer or pubic lice...but Charlotte with her stays and particular ways...her coolness, intrigued him" (Lady Oracle 319). Joan reflects this duplicity in her. There was always a "shadowy twin" within her. Susan J. Rosowski argues that Atwood performs a "feminist parody of the gothic" in the novel ("Fantasy"
197). Contrary to the helpless female victim in a traditional gothic, Atwood presents a defensive woman, who can secure her independence. Joan calls her ‘Lady Oracle,’ a “Gothic gone wrong” (*Lady Oracle* 234). As Bok remarks, “Atwood uses the rules of masculine genres to satirize the rules of masculine genres” (“Sibyls” 88). Thus there is always a chaotic deep within a calm surface and this is reflected in most of Atwood’s characters.

Joan’s success as a poet creates a new self for her, a double self in literary field too. The spiritualist group, whom she visited as a child, with her aunt, prompts her to try her hand at automatic writing. While acting out a scene from her novel, Joan enters a trance like state and writes a word “in a scrawly handwriting” (*Lady Oracle* 220). She is stunned and excited and repeats the process for months. She says, “There was the sense of going along a narrow passage that led downward, the certainty that if I could only turn the next corner... I would find the thing, the truth or word or person that was mine, that was waiting for me” (*Lady Oracle* 221). It was this search for truth that led Joan on and on to play different roles. As she gets rid of Paul, she gets anonymous calls and messages and finds dead animals at her doorstep. She suspects Paul, but his denial convinces her and she feels that it is Arthur who does all this. “He’d been watching me all along, not saying anything, it would be like him not to say anything. But he’d made a decision
about me finally, a pronouncement, thumbs down. I was unworthy, I would have to go, and this was his plan to get rid of me” (*Lady Oracle* 292). It is at this point that the Royal Porcupine, her current lover asks her to marry him. But Paul too returns in search of her. A blackmailer reporter also troubles her. All these force her to fabricate the suicide and to leave for Italy where she had once stayed with Arthur.

In her Italian house Joan buries her old clothes to completely get rid of her past identities and disguises herself. Soon she realizes that her life had become “a snarl, a rat’s nest of dangling threats and loose ends.” She comes to know that the landlord and the people around her have recognized her. That night her mother appears before her in a dream. This disturbs her all the more and she contemplates, “why did I have to dream about my mother, have nightmares about her, sleepwalk out meet her? My mother was a vortex, a dark vacuum, I would never be able to make her happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time for me to stop trying” (*Lady Oracle* 330). Joan decides to stop acting and to face life as it comes in all reality. As Pamela S Bromberg remarks, “letting go of her mother may enable Joan to accept her real self, past, present and future” ("The Two Faces of the Mirror”22). In the quiet ambiguous ending of the novel we find Joan telling her story to the reporter and speculating on writing science fiction rather than romances. Furthermore
she tries to understand the similarities she shares with her mother, in spite of her struggle to create a separate identity.

Joan’s emotional and psychological strain can be traced to the alienation that comes from having neither a loving mother nor a true home. Lack of familial and deep ties makes her feel isolated with nothing to hang on to in times of crises. As a child she was excessively fat and lacked the feminine physical attributes as demanded by patriarchal ideology. This becomes a matter of great concern for her mother and she reproaches her. Joan’s problems spring up from this issue.

It is Joan’s traumatic childhood dominated by her “monstrous” mother and “absent” father, that to a great extent shapes her self. She says, “I kept waiting for [my father] to give me some advice, warn me, instruct me, but he never did any of these things” (Lady Oracle 77). If it was her father’s absence that worried her, it was her mother’s presence that disgusted her. Her obesity makes her the “embodiment of her mother’s failure and depression; a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything…” (Lady Oracle 67). In their “professionalized” relationship, her mother was the “manager, the creator, the agent” and she was the product (Lady Oracle 67). Deprived of a happy and carefree childhood, in a series of houses that corresponded to her father’s salary increase, she feels lonely and
isolated. She is alienated in this world of artificiality where plastic covers keep the furniture clean for visitors and where her mother wanted everything “static and dustless” (*Lady Oracle* 70).

Joan is unable to forgive her mother for the cruelties that she had unleashed on her. She was deeply hurt when her mother succeeded in persuading her teacher to remove her from the much awaited butterfly dance, as her figure was unfit for that. Her false wings are taken off and she is given the role of a mothball. This wound never heals. She vividly remembers her mother’s remarks, “You’re disgusting, you really are; if I were you, I’d be ashamed to show my face outside the house” (*Lady Oracle* 124). This pains, and at the same time infuriates her. She becomes revengeful and starts eating steadily, doggedly, and stubbornly. She says, “the war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body” (*Lady Oracle* 69). Joan rejoices in the fact that she put on more and more weight when her mother tried her best to reduce it. She says; “I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes...in this at least I was undefeated” (*Lady Oracle* 70). She gains a morose pleasure out of her obesity.

In such a bleak world, the only person Joan can identify herself with, at least in some respects, is her Aunt Lou. She takes Joan to movies and exhibitions and spends time with her, which is a great relief for Joan. Aunt
Lou’s will forces Joan to reduce weight and losing weight makes her the object of desire for men. As she leaves home after a physical encounter with her mother, she is aware that her “second self” is beginning. Until then she did not have the “usual female fears” and was confident that nobody would find her desirable since molesting her would be like “molesting a giant basketball” (Lady Oracle 140). As she conforms to the societal norms, she is exposed to unwelcome advances from the opposite sex. She says, “at these times I felt very lonely; I also longed to be fat again. It would be an insulation, a cocoon.... Without my magic cloak of blubber and invisibility I felt naked, pruned, as though some essential covering was missing” (Lady Oracle 141). Joan starts her new life in England. But even when she is slim, she is always haunted by her past.

Whenever Joan looks into the mirror, she finds her former body still surrounding her “like a mist, like a phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on [her] own” (Lady Oracle 214). She wanted to forget the past, but it seemed as if the past refused to forget her. She feels that her right shape and “wrong past” cannot go together. The mental image of herself as fat does not leave her and the change becomes incomplete. This results in the fragmentation of the self through multiplication, the polar oppositions of the fat girl and the thin girl engaged in
a series of disguises. Joan moves between the first person and the third person voices as she alternates past and present. She resists the temptation to "contain," changing her identities in a continuous effort to avoid closure.

This fragmentation or disintegration is something that we find in most Atwood heroines. Rennie in *Bodily Harm*, is considerably disturbed and worried after her mastectomy. "She's afraid to look down, she's afraid she'll see blood, leakage, her stuffing coming out" (*Bodily Harm* 22). She feels that her "head is the size of a watermelon, soft and pink, its swelling up, she's going to burst open" (*Bodily Harm* 286). In *Life Before Man*, Elizabeth feels that she is living like a "peeled snail" and once she describes herself as "a nude descending the staircase, in cunning fragments" (*Life Before Man* 227). Similarly, the unnamed narrator in *Surfacing* feels herself cut into two. Thus it is through disintegration that the characters finally acquire a sense of their own identity. Marian, in *The Edible Woman* imagines herself dissolving in her fiancé's image, after marriage. She feels as if she is disintegrating and losing her self, "coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle" (*Edible Woman* 224). Once Peter proposes and she accepts, her mind becomes "as empty as someone had scooped out the inside" (*Edible Woman* 84).
If Joan’s rebellious search for identity results in an obsession with food, Marian “suffers drastic revulsions from food” (Woodcock 168). She allows herself to be a passive object, “small and oval, mirrored in Peter’s eyes” and consumed hungrily by him. The novel depicts the problems of women whom society defines as submissive wives and mothers. Marian’s friend Clara’s husband points out the plight of a woman when “the core, the centre of her personality, the thing she’s built up, her image of herself,” is destroyed through marriage.

Her feminine and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her…. So she allows her core to get taken over by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she doesn’t have anything left inside, she is hollow, she doesn’t know who she is anymore; her core has been destroyed. (Edible Woman 246)

In high school, Clara was everyone’s ideal of “translucent perfume advertisement feminity,” but now the pregnant Clara is, Marian thinks, being dragged slowly down into the “gigantic pumpkin like growth.”

Though Marian’s job at Seymour Surveys gives her economic security, she is unhappy and doubtful about her future prospects. The company as she describes, is layered like an “ice-cream sandwich.” Out of the three floors,
the top floor is occupied by men and the ground floor by machines. Her department is the “gooey layer in the middle” and she feels that her career cannot grow here. “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... as that would be a step down” (Edible Woman 13). Marian thus faces the problem of ‘becoming,’ of creating an identity in the midst of the few defined roles assigned to women. The women she sees around her, Ainsley, Clara and the office virgins only point to this deplorable condition. At office, “the thick Sargasso Sea of feminity” that surrounded her suffocates her and she longs for something “solid and clear, a man” (Edible Woman 171). So she is very happy and comfortable in the company of Peter who is in her words, “ordinariness raised to perfection.” After they decide to marry, she lets Peter choose even her food for her. A “soft flannelly” voice in her cedes all power to choose and desire to him. She sees him as a “rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability” (Edible Woman 89). Part I is narrated in the first person and ends after Peter proposes to her and she desires to get “organized.” She feels contentment at the prospect of marrying Peter who is, according to her, “an ideal choice” (Edible Woman 101).

In the second section of the novel, we find Marian losing, step by step, her “identity as an independent, active self and drift[ing] passively toward her
fatal metamorphosis into Peter’s wife” (Bromberg 15). In this section the narration also changes to third person indicating Marian’s psychic disintegration. Ellen Peel calls this “alternating narration,” that which results from the “female protagonists’ uneasy view of themselves as both subject and object, both self and other” (“Feminist Aesthetics” 108). In part II Marian starts realizing that she has become an object for Peter. She identifies herself with the helpless rabbit, pursued and killed by Peter during one of his hunting trips. She is horrified and gradually withdraws herself from the consumer society by refusing to eat. She reaches a stage when she associates meat with the living animal and imagines the shriek of a carrot when it is pulled from the soil. J. Brooks Bouson observes that “just as Marian’s fantasies of her body/self as distorted and dissolving give evidence of her extreme narcissistic vulnerability, so her anorexia concretizes the fragility of her self” (“Anxiety of Being Influenced” 233). Though her subconscious warns her, she is unable to act.

However, self-realization of the victim position is an important step towards a transformation. In the end, she bakes the cake and offers it to Peter as a substitute for her. When he refuses she eats it ignoring Ainsley’s comments that she is “rejecting [her] feminity” (286), and thus comes back to the “so-called reality.” She becomes a “consumer” and tells Duncan of her
decision to find a new job. M.F. Salat observes that "the three parts quite
mathematically appear to show Marian's evolution from romantic/subjective
impressionism to objective assessment, to finally, regeneration and
reformation" ("Delicious Fare" 102). Each part thus represents a stage in
Marian's journey towards self-realization.

In this reformation, Duncan, whom Marian meets at the laundromat,
plays a vital role. As a foil to Peter, he helps Marian in "recognizing how
fully she has internalized society's gender roles and how artificial and stifling
those roles can be" (Lorsch, 473). Ever during her early meeting with
Duncan, Marian finds herself very comfortable and was able to sit in "not a
lady like position" (126). He instills a new confidence and assurance in her,
helps her to jettison her crippling former relationship and makes her assert a
more liberated self. Sherril E. Grace raises the idea of the double or
"doppelganger" in the novel (Violent Duality 93). Freud's explanation of the
irrational in man, has propagated the idea that every person has an
unconscious, irrational second self beneath the rational and civilized
conscious self. Duncan thus appears as Marian's double, "a symptom of her
mental breakdown and escape from reality" (Lorsch 465). He is that part of
her self that points to the follies and foibles of her that she had so
conveniently ignored.
The rebellious self that Marian had repressed to submit herself devotedly in her role as wife surfaces after her encounter with Duncan. In his presence, she felt an “irrational gladness” (Edible Woman 127). Duncan with his unconventionality and his non-patronizing attitude towards her, forces her to be herself and admit her own capabilities. Once while coming out of the laundromat, Marian says, “I paused for an instant at the entrance, but he made no move to open the door for me so I opened it myself” (98). Duncan, in a way, teaches her to assert her self, rather than hide herself in the cocoon of conventional femininity that required women to “serve solely as mirrors for men while effacing themselves” (Lorsch 470). During Peter’s party she runs away to the laundromat, finds Duncan there and spends the night with him in a hotel. The next day as she wonders what to do, Duncan tells her; “self laceration in a vacuum eventually gets rather boring. But its your own personal cul-de-sac, you invented it, you’ll have to think of your own way out” (Edible Woman 277). With renewed vigour, Marian goes back to her apartment and when Peter calls, invites him to tea. But he leaves without eating the cake substitute. However Duncan comes and she shares the cake with him, symbolizing her return to “so-called reality” (Edible Woman 293).

Meanwhile, though Marian decides not to marry, Ainsley in spite of all her feminist clamourings, decides to marry Fish, as she realizes that only
marriage can provide a stable future for her child. So the novel, with its different stands on the question of marriage, complicates it without providing a suitable solution. There is the transformed Marian who feels that marriage and childbirth can only curb a woman's liberty. Bim Das, the protagonist of Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* does a similar repudiation of marriage. She says, "Instead of marriage. I can think of hundreds of things to do. I won't marry"(140). She wants to be independent and decides to be a college teacher and remain a spinster. She says, "I shall work – I shall do things, I shall earn my own living and look after Mira – masi and Baba and be independent"(140). She thus tries to be a good teacher, to "train her students to be different, from what we were at their age – to be a new kind of woman from you or me" (155). Contrary to both Marian and Bim, there is Ainsley who at first goes after men in order to become pregnant but later changes her views. Finally there is Clara who appears to be somewhat insensitive and unemotional about the whole thing and has willingly or unwillingly acquiesced with her present situation, complacently playing the traditional role of wife and mother. Atwood's different attitudes to the issues of marriage and childbirth, as put forward in the different novels point to the fact that she believes in multiplicity. Identity is not something that can be universally
concretized. Subject positions differ and it is difference that makes up meaning.

Ainsley in the earlier parts of the novel observes that “every woman should have at least one baby. Its fulfills your deepest femininity” (Edible Woman 40). It is the proof of this ‘femininity’ that determines the survival of a certain class of women in the Handmaid’s Tale. The women in the hierarchical authoritarian society of Gilead are divided into different groups, some more equal than the others. There are the ‘unwomen’ at the lowest rung, those who are incapable of giving birth. Then there are the Marthas or the housewives, Econowives or the working class, wives, handmaids and the Aunts who form the controlling group. A uniform identifies each group and the handmaids clad in red are the professional breeders. If Marian was running away from marriage and childbirth, in her search for an authentic selfhood, handmaids like Offred are forced to reproduce in order to survive.

Birth becomes a crucial metaphor in the novel and it is one of the incidents that every woman in Gilead looks forward to. Though the handmaids are forced to live a life of minimalist pleasure, pleasure reduced to the size of an egg, it is the egg that ironically sustains them and provides them pleasure. As a veritable carnival for the pleasure of the egg, it acquires great significance in Gilead. Bakhtin in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics points
out carnival as the space for a displacement of hierarchies. It is on the carnival square that “laws, prohibitions and restrictions which determine the system and order” usually remain suspended (101). In Gilead, though the capacity to give birth has chained the handmaids, the same oppressive measure effects in undermining and overthrowing it.

The loud chanting, the formulaic and ordered speech that is allowed in the permissive space of the birth room, acts as a cover for the handmaids to voice and whisper their muted and repressed secrets. Whispering breaks open, the regularity of chanting by forcing itself through it, and as the language of the marginalized, it opposes the silenced space of Gilead where free speech is reined. As Offred says, “sometimes we can find things out on birthdays” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 117). Through the section entitled Birth Day, the text traces this brief episode of freedom that only women folk are allowed to experience. Men are prevented from being partakers in this incident and they usually go to some “hideout” on such occasions. The red birth mobile proclaims “joy to the world” and the handmaids become one as sharers of this joy, their happiness being partly due to the pleasant memories of a glorious past. It is the time when erased proper names are resuscitated and reinvoked and except Offred, the others are identified by their, pre-Gileadean names.
This time of celebration of the handmaids’ victory brings back to life images of the pre-Gileadean era as well as of an immediate past in Gilead.

The birth of Janine’s child is for Offred, a reminder of the time when she herself endured the pain and joy of becoming a mother. “What I remember is Luke, with me in the hospital, standing beside my head, holding my hand … that night he couldn’t go to sleep at all, he said he was so high” (Handmaid’s Tale 119). The excitement also brings back to her, the memories of her mother, the time when she herself was born. She recollects the tall claims her mother, as an active feminist, used to make about the hardships she had to undergo in her fight for women’s rights. By reinstating these memories, Offred re-inscribes a history that is erased by Gilead. Thus birth’s carnivalesque space provides Offred a suitable arena for voicing her own subjectivity by adding a soundtrack to the silenced history of Gilead.

So when Marian sees pregnancy and childbirth as constraints, nailing women to traditional submissive roles and destroying their subjectivity, Offred in her circumstances, converts this constraint to liberty, whereby she can construct an identity within the limited confines of Gilead. American history of the feminist era, when single parents clamoured for the liberty of womanhood and came forward to disprove patriarchal hegemony, is rewritten.
by Gilead which replicates the idea of single motherhood in a quite different sense.

Giving birth becomes crucial also to the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* in her search for an authentic selfhood. As an intellectually and emotionally oppressed woman she represents the powerlessness of the exploited class. Her professional ambition is destroyed by her male art teacher who feels that her aspirations are “cute but misguided” since “there have never been any important women artists” (*Surfacing* 58). So she ends up as an illustrator of children’s books, the choice of colours and images being dictated by her teacher. Besides destroying her identity as an artist, he also succeeds in crushing her identity as an individual. Offering false promises he seduces her and when she becomes pregnant, forces her to abort the child which, according to him, is nothing more serious than the “removal of a wart” (*Surfacing* 65). But for her it was an emptying, a splitting of her self. She says, “I was emptied, amputated; I stank of salt and antiseptic, they had planted death in me like a seed” (169). It shakes her thoroughly and she feels detestation for city life.

The disappearance of the protagonist’s father forces her to return to Quebec, to her roots and once she reaches the wilderness, she feels the contrast. She says, how have I been able to live so long in the city, it isn’t
safe” (*Surfacing* 81). However she is reluctant to meet her father if he is alive. She thought that her parents never forgave her. “They didn’t understand the divorce; I don’t think they ever understood the marriage which wasn’t surprising since I didn’t understand it myself” (*Surfacing* 33). The fact that the marriage and divorce are fictitious is revealed only later in the novel. The abortion often described in terms of cutting, splitting and amputation, had crippled her and it was difficult for her to accept the fearful truth that she was a party to the murder of her child. She says, “I couldn’t accept it, that mutilation, ruin I’d made, I needed a different version” (*Surfacing* 169). Her sense of guilt frustrates her and like Joan, she fabricates her past, camouflaging her true self and loses herself in the maze of these lies.

The quest for the narrator’s father, in a way, becomes a quest for her own ignored and forgotten past, an attempt to surface from the chaos in which she is submerged. During her search for clues, she discovers several cave drawings that her father had collected. The clues lead her to the underwater caves. As she dives into the lake, she finds her father’s corpse floating at the bottom of the lake, unable to surface because of the weight of his camera. It is at this point that the truth about the abortion is revealed. The dead body becomes for her a vision of her dead child and she says: “then I recognized it... it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled...
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” (*Surfacing* 163). She feels that she had been carrying this death along with her ever since, “layering it over, a cyst, a tumor, black pearl” (*Surfacing* 165). The boundary between her conscious self and the other half “sliced off from [her] like a Siamese twin,” is collapsed. She accepts the truth and feels gratitude for the “Gods on the shore or in the water unacknowledged or forgotten [who] were the only ones who had ever given [her] anything [she] needed; and freely” (*Surfacing* 166).

As Atwood herself describes it in *Survival*, drowning, here becomes “a metaphor for the descent into the unconscious” (392). The narrator’s plunge into the lake is a descent into that part of her own psyche which had remained submerged. She realizes that her father’s gift to her is the “map to a genuine sacred place where each person confronts his or her own personal truth” (Rubenstein 395). Her anaesthetized numbness recedes and she starts feeling. However, in order to be whole, to be complete, she thinks that she should search for a lesson from her mother also. Her mother’s power had saved her brother from drowning and it once enabled her to fend off a hungry bear. She says, “It was impossible to be like my mother, it would need a time warp; she was either ten thousand years behind the rest or fifty years ahead of them” (*Surfacing* 58). Without the “legacy...simple as a hand” left by her mother,
she can never be complete. So she goes through her old scrapbooks, and finds a drawing that she herself had made in childhood. "On the left was a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail" (*Surfacing* 180). The baby she drew then was herself and the man was meant to be God. When her brother told her about the Devil with tail and horns, she felt it advantageous for God to possess them too. However, like her father's "guide," she tries to inject new meanings into the drawing also. "They were my guides she had saved them for me, pictographs, I had to read their new meaning with the help of the power" (*Surfacing* 181). She thus gets the message to act and how to act. She realizes that "nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive" (*Surfacing* 182).

The narrator who had never wanted to marry Joe and had rejected his advances, strongly feels that she should be impregnated. She finds Joe's incompleteness desirable. "He isn't anything, he is only half formed and for that reason I can trust him" (*Surfacing* 223). But even then she was not been on making any commitments as she believes that in marriage one becomes "part of a couple" and not a whole. She thinks of her constructed marriage as like "jumping off a cliff." She writes: "that was the feeling I had all the time I was married; in the air, going down, waiting for the smash at the bottom."
However Rubenstein remarks that then the sexual power that Joe represented “carried the negative valence of death; now, altered by her own transformation, it carries a positive valence” (396). She imagines that motherhood can make her whole again.

The union with Joe in the moonlit forest, kindles a new fire in the narrator. She gives up the signs of civilization and returns to the uncanny, pre-human world of animals. She says:

I’m impatient, pleasure is redundant, the animals don’t have pleasure. I guide him into me... I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long.... This time I will do it myself... the baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I’ll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full. In the morning I will he able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words. (Surfacing 187)

The seed of death has been removed, and the seed of life is planted in her.

Though the narrator’s artistic creativity was violated by her male teacher, imagining a biological creativity seems to promise for her a positive way of expression. A similar situation can be found in Margaret Drabble’s The Waterfall. The poet heroine laments her victimization, “I was unnaturally
aware of my own helpless subjugation to my gifts, my total inability to make a poem at will.... I resented this helplessness as I resented a woman’s helplessness with man” (114). In the end her creativity is however released by giving birth to a child. Thus regaining the power to create need not mean a curtailing of a woman’s freedom. It can also signal the regaining of a separate space for women where men are unable to intrude.

Though at first the protagonist in Surfacing thinks that she should not return to the city, later she feels that it would be a running away from challenges. “This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless.... The word games, the winning and losing games are finished... withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death” (Surfacing 222). She acquires the courage to face the challenges in life so as to survive with dignity. To quote Carol P Christ:

The source of her newly discovered power is two fold. First, she renounces the fictitious memories that held together her delusions of innocence and powerlessness. Letting go and allowing her true past to surface is itself a source of tremendous energy. Second, her grounding in her own past and in the powers of the universe provides
her with a sense of authentic selfhood. ("Refusing to be a Victim"

50)

Recovering her lost past, rejoining her fragmented self to be whole, she tries
to come to terms with the present. Sherril E. Grace remarks:

The most unalloyed positive result of ‘Surfacing’ is Atwood’s
unearthing of “double-voiced discourse,” her use of both paternal
and maternal codes, and her release of the initially “muted” search
for the mother/self from within the familiar “dominant” search for the
father... she privileges the mother, without denying the father.

("Quest" 42)

The journey in search of the father thus symbolizes a more difficult journey
to the “wilderness” of the self. The lost and isolated female voice finds a
space to articulate while negotiating “difference and sameness, marginality
and inclusion in a constant dialogue” ("Quest" 36).

The narrator escapes the insularity of the male world and learns the
proper language to understand her own self. Knowledge of the self, according
to Jonathan Culler, depends on the “intersubjective/[intrasubjective] processes
of articulation and interpretation by which we emerge as part of a world” ( "On Deconstruction" 264). In Lacanian terms it is language that signals the
entry of an individual into the world as an independent Subject. Thus
language forms "the basis of subjectivity" (Benveniste 222). This language, at first, is a constraint to the narrator in her quest for selfhood. As a child she was taught to speak English while being brought up in a French speaking colony. "Translating badly," often she had to encounter "a dialect problem." Possessing a different language, she was never given an opportunity to use her own in social gatherings. So she finds herself an alien and "socially retarded." She says:

I should have used my own [dialect]. In the experiments they did with children, shutting them up with deaf-and-dumb nurses, locking them in closets, depriving them of words, they found that after a certain age the mind is incapable of absorbing any language, but how could they tell the child hadn’t invented one, unrecognizable to everyone but itself? (Surfacing 88)

Like the isolated child, the narrator in the midst of the unrecognizable social voices, tries to cultivate a language that can liberate her.

The protagonist remembers the time when her mother found it difficult to converse with the neighbours. "Neither knew more than five words of the other’s language and after the opening Bonjours both would unconsciously raise their voices as though talking to a dead person" (Surfacing 22). When the narrator returns to the same place after a long absence, she tries to make
use of the little French she knew, but is made fun of at shops. She reflects that "if you live in a place you should speak the language" (Surfacing 28). As she listens to the "rudimentary language" of the birdsong she feels that she should have studied linguistics rather than art.

In her dealings with Joe, also she thinks that language is a problem. She is unable to say a definite 'yes' or 'no' to his constant inquiries as to whether she loves him. She speaks of her problem, "it was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine. He must have known what he meant but it was an imprecise world; the Eskimos had fifty two names for snow. There ought to be as many for love" (Surfacing 122). She finds language unsuitable to express her true emotions.

Her art teacher through his male power of articulation had convinced her to give up her artistic aspirations and later to see her pregnancy as an "accident" and to terminate it. This language disgusts her and so she changes her "experience to fit the language shaped by her society" (Ewell, 190). She rewrites her own past and constructs a new one with selected parts from the other and piecing them together like a collage. "A faked album, the memories fraudulent as passports; but a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I'd lived in it until now" (Surfacing 164). Through her play
with language the narrator takes the reader also for a ride, revealing the reality only towards the end.

As the protagonist comes across the drawings of her father, she is unable to translate them and thinks he had gone mad. This visual language seems “unintelligible” for her. But later as she is transformed she is able to decipher their meaning. Susanne Langer observes that the principal distinction between linguistic and visual representations is that one is serial with elements having independent significance while the latter is simultaneous, the meaning of its elements wholly contextual (86). So verbal language which “divides us into fragments” is undesirable for the narrator who wants to be “whole.” Language, according to her, creates an illusion of separatedness, like the word ‘neck’ which is used to denote the separation of the head from the body, which are in reality inseparable (Surfacing 87). “The language is wrong, it shouldn’t have different words for them” (87). This language with all its inconsistencies becomes a barrier rather than a boon for her.

However the gift of her father does not satisfy her fully. She must learn “not only how to see, but how to act” also (179). Quite surprisingly her mother’s gift is also visual. She “immerses” herself “in the other language” and decodes their new meaning (181), which according to her is possible only after the transformation. This transformation is something impossible for her.
companions, David and Anna. But Joe because of his somewhat silent nature can still aspire to attain this power. "For him truth might still be possible, what will preserve him is the absence of words; but the others are already turning to metal, skins galvanizing, heads congealing to brass knobs, components and intricate wires ripening inside" (Surfacing 181). They exist as mechanized robots, distancing themselves from nature in the process of civilization. The narrator, after the union with Joe burns all remnants from the past, including her fake wedding ring. She even relinquishes her clothes and plunges naked into the lake integrating herself with the environment. "The animals have no need for speed, why talk when you are a word. 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" (210). However she realizes that even her now acquired "other language" cannot be complete. It is only "one kind of truth, one hand." There is no "total salvation, resurrection" here also (22). So she decides to return to the realm of the old language but with a fresh realization of its incompleteness.

This incompleteness and inconsistency of language disturb Elaine in Cat’s Eye also. Because of her "confusion about words," she turns into a painter in order to express herself (168). Painting becomes the medium to give vent to her feelings of hatred, anger, despair and disappointment that she
had nursed from childhood. Now at the age of fifty, as she prepares herself for the retrospective, she travels down life’s experiences, trying to recover a complete and unified self-image.

Brought up in an unconventional way and later forced to settle down in Toronto, life becomes hard for her. Even in the company of her three best friends, Elaine often becomes a victim of mockery and torture inflicted by the others who are socially superior to her. She finds it difficult to get along with them. Their vocabulary and manners seem quite unfamiliar to her. Words like ‘twin set,’ ‘chintz,’ ‘hairdressers,’ ‘cold wave’ etc. have never been used by Elaine (Cat’s Eye 51). “I see that there’s a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to me ...” (Cat’s Eye 54). Contrary to the “effortless” relationship that she is able to establish with boys, she feels “awkward” with girls. “Its girls I feel I have to defend myself against; not boys” (Cat’s Eye 237). Cordelia often leads the others in civilizing Elaine and in this guise, torments her. Once she is even left to freeze in the snow at the bottom of a ravine and it is the vision of Mary that saves her.

However, though unable to familiarize the feminine language of Cordelia, Grace and Carol, she feels that she has the visual powers of the cat’s eye marble that she always carried with her.
Cordelia] doesn’t know what power this cat’s eye has, to protect me. Sometimes when I have it with me I can see the way it sees. I can see people moving like bright animated dolls, their mouths opening and closing but no real words coming out. I can look at their shapes and sizes, their colours, without feeling anything else about them (Cat’s Eye 141).

Through the marble she sees them but does not hear them and their shapes and gestures devoid of voices seem less frightening.

Elaine can only visualize retaliation since she cannot speak about her cruelties to anyone. She is reluctant to tell her brother, as she is sure that he will only tease her “for being a sissy about a bunch of girls, for making a fuss about nothing” (Cat’s Eye 156). Talking to her mother also seems out of question because of her indifferent attitude and her reluctance to talk openly. “There’s a great deal they don’t say. Between us and them is a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down. It’s filled with wordlessness” (93). Elaine feels that her mother knew what was going on, but did nothing to reduce it.

She must have realized what was happening to me, or that something was. Even towards the beginning she must have noted my silences, my bitten fingers, the dark scabs on my lips where I’d pulled off patches of the skin. If it were happening now, to a child of my own, I
would know what to do. But then? There were fewer choices, and a
great deal less was said *(Cat's Eye* 150).

Having no one to talk to, she feels suffocated and isolated and she begins
chalking out ways of escape. She tries to bunk school on the pretext of some
illness and faints deliberately when she wants to get out of situation. Unable
to do anything against Cordelia, she inflicts pain upon herself. She peels the
skin from her feet, gnaws the cuticles from around the fingernails and chews the end of her hair. The pain gave her "something definite to think about,
something immediate. It was something to hold onto" *(Cat's Eye* 114).

Verbal language has often been a barrier for Elaine. When she overhears
Mrs. Smeath saying that she deserves torture and punishment because she is a
heathen, she starts “losing confidence in God.” Mrs. Smeath, she thinks, “has God all sewed up, she knows what things are his punishments. He’s on her side, and it’s a side from which I’m excluded’ (181). She is filled with hatred
for Mrs. Smeath and feels that she can go to hell but she cannot forgive her.
She decides to do something “dangerous rebellious, perhaps even blasphemous” (181). Attending Protestant church services with the Smeaths,
Elaine has been told not to worship Virgin Mary as Catholics do. However
Mrs. Smeath’s attitude thoroughly shakes her. At home beside her bed,
Elaine kneels down to pray to Mary but words fail her. She says, “I don’t
know what to say. I haven't learned the words for her” (*Cat's Eye* 183). Learning the right words has often been a problem for her. Though after Cordelia's departure, Elaine becomes aggressive and powerful, words only confuse her and she finds herself unable to express her feelings.

Painting then becomes for Elaine, the channel of expression, her “lifeline,” her “real life.” (*Cat's Eye* 290). She had always been interested in visual aspects and confesses that she was alive only in her eyes. It was with the eyes of an artist that she looked at people and things. As a teenager she was very comfortable in the company of boys who were her “secret allies.” Some of her brother's friends used to call her and a “long conversation goes on that is mostly silence” (237). It was silence pregnant with meaning, rather than meaningless speech that interested her. She says:

I don't listen much to the words but to the silences, and in the silences these bodies re-create themselves, are created by me, take form. When I am lonely for boys, it's their bodies I miss, I study their hands lifting the cigarettes in the darkness of the movie theatres, the slope of a shoulder, the angle of a hip. Looking at them sideways, I examine them in different lights. My love for them is visual. That is the part of them I would like to possess. (*Cat's Eye* 240)
Once she becomes an artist, she writes herself into her paintings and survives the confusion and fragmentation that she had to face in childhood.

A series depicting Mrs. Smeath as the evil woman expresses her most intense feelings that were suppressed for long. All the venom that she had carried on her bosom is released onto the canvas, in painting after painting of her tormentors. At that time it was a great relief for her and she was able to compose her self. But years later as she reviews her paintings during the exhibition, she sees new meanings in them. Mrs. Smeath was in Elaine’s paintings, “bigger than life, bigger than she ever was. Blotting out God.” But now she finds her a “displaced person” trapped in a “small-town threadbare decency” (*Cat’s Eye* 405). She might also have been the victim of a society that victimized Elaine. So instead of “vengeance” she thinks she should have gone for “justice.” An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness. A maturer Elaine, in a way, realizes the importance of kindness and mercy towards one’s fellow beings.

Elaine wishes to meet Cordelia at the retrospective. But she doesn’t come. However she absolves Cordelia of all her past cruelties. Before she leaves Toronto, Elaine visits the bridge under which she had almost died. She confesses that she needs love and acceptance as does Cordelia, whose friendship she now misses. If her paintings had once helped to give vent to
her suppressed self, now it instigates new meanings and renewed connections with the other women. She feels ashamed of herself for the “dour, cynical thoughts” that she had entertained so far (411). Thus a review of the paintings helps in pasting together the disjointed fragments of her past, adds new dimensions by extending the frame of the present and thereby provides a clearer and better vision of the future.

As Elaine constructs her self through her own language of art, Offred in the Handmaid’s Tale, exerts her individuality through a game of scrabble, an exercise of language. Her clandestine game with the Commander becomes symbolic in the sense of the birth of her subjectivity through language which is banned in Gilead. Offred’s attempts to compose her self and to give birth are resonated in the words ‘gorge’ and ‘zygote’ she creates through the game. Being a language game in the context where free speech is banned, it reinscribes Offred’s lost subjectivity and attempts to compose her self. The words that are constructed during the game echo the numbing power of Gilead that Offred tries to overthrow.

‘Larynx,’ the very first word that Offred makes, indicates the importance of the freedom of articulation that is denied by the Gileadean regime. Joseph Andriano, speaking about the scrabble game as the text of Offred, says, “The first word [she] tells us she spells in ‘larynx,’ a metonym for voice, intimating
that voice is primary... she spells the word, 'limp,' enjoying the making of the words, even though the word itself comments on the nature of her freedom" ("Scrabble Game" 93). Offred luxuriates in the "eyeblink of freedom" that she gets while playing and the "acidic" taste of the tiles, echoed in 'quince' is "delicious" for her (Handmaid’s Tale 131). The game on the first day ends with the Commander asking her to 'go home.' The text italicizes these words, pointing to the possibility of these being part of the game and rendering it with political overtones. ‘Home’ is where Luke is, where her daughter is. To go home is to go out of the confines of Gilead. As Offred herself remarks, it is conspiracy that works against Gilead and destroys the illusion of absolute power.

Scrabble, the forbidden and taboo game of the night was in an earlier period, the “game of old women, old men in the summers or in retirement villas, to be played when there was nothing good on television” (Handmaid’s Tale 130). But now this game gives Offred the power to create an identity of her own, a subjectivity that has been suppressed and silenced. Andriano says that Offred “scrabbles to keep herself from being erased” and thereby she “crosses” the text that Gilead tries to spell out ("Scrabble Game” 94)

The text of Gilead is a text of constraints and controls, of inhibitions and prohibitions. Julia Kristeva in “Women’s Time” argues that “linear time is
that of language considered as the enunciation of sentences...” (192). By abolishing language, Gilead has restricted time and Offred tries to break up this restriction. The logical order and linearity that a sentence demands is undermined by producing words that have no mutual connection. The “anarchy of words” on the scrabble board counteracts the rigidity and regularity that Gilead tries to enforce. Language gives Offred the power to demand hand lotions and magazines from the Commander. She becomes capable of asserting a sense of autonomy against the power wielders. As she remarks, “there is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities about those in power. There’s something delightful about it, something... thrilling...it deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with” (Handmaid’s Tale 208).

In Gilead, language is banned, reading and writing are illegalized and semantic freeplay is controlled. Nancy A. Walker argues, “In a society governed by the word, words are themselves forbidden. Because biblical language is used for oppression... hymns with the word ‘free’ in them are banned... and biblical language is altered and mixed with petitical slogans” (“Feminist Alternatives” 72). Gilead has consolidated its position as a version or rather, the version of the Bible by abolishing all its readings except the authorized one, that is read out by the Commanders. “He has something we
don’t have, he has the word” (Handmaid’s Table 84). But his readings are often distortions, according to Offred: “For lunch it was the beatitudes. Blessed be this, blessed be that... Blessed are the silent. I knew they made that up. I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too, but there was no way of checking” (84). By remembering another version and thus enabling herself with the capacity of detecting distortions, though there is no way of checking up, Offred proposes a history of Biblical exegesis that, even in its present impairment, problematizes the unarbitrated finality of the Gileadean word.

Martin Keuster speaks of the way in which the semiology of Gilead is different from that of the Bible. The significations of biblical words have been reread, resulting in the “brutal guards [being] referred to as Angels or sadistic supervisors, armed with electric cattle prods (as) Aunts” (Framing Truths 89). This causes a breakdown of the biblical signifier/signified relationship. According to Andriano, Offred “undercuts” the Word that the Gileadeans are supposed to have adopted, and constantly plays with words, bringing up multiple meanings, whose existence shatters the monolithic Word” (“Scrabble Game” 90). In Gilead, through a restriction of language, one’s subjectivity is curbed and curtailed resulting in an extreme case of dehumanization.
According to M.F. Salat, it is against this dehumanization that Atwood moves her pen. “Atwood’s desconstruction of patriarchal structures of power and dominion, is not gender-specific but a comprehensive criticism of all power structures that inferiorize and dehumanize individuals especially women” (The Canadian Novel 75). Through the silent speech of the scrabble game, through her constant play with words, Offred tries to regain and restore her lost individuality. “In a puritanical totalitarian state where love, passion and desire are repressed, the context for private discourse is attenuated, political rhetoric drives personal speech underground” (Stain 272). Mutual interaction between the handmaids in Gilead is limited to a small number of prescribed phrases and salutations. By creating an opposition to such a control instituted by the state, Atwood points to the fact that such institutions are ephemeral and can be overthrown when extended to the extreme. In a state where opening up oneself is a defiance of its laws, Offred opens herself up thereby opening up the text and creating the space for multiple referentiality. To erase signs of reading is to question freedom and institute authority. So by renewing the possibility of reading, the text thwarts authority and questions it.

This revolt against a system that resents and discourages multiple signification and promotes rigid referentiality, is reverberated in Offred’s play
with words, her use of puns. As she sits on a chair, she reflects on the multiple meanings it can convey. Similarly thinking about the job she had in the past and about the impossibility of acquiring one in the present, she muses, “It's strange, now to think about having job. ‘Job.’ It’s a funny word. It’s a job for a man. Do a jobbie, they’d say to children, when they were being toilet-trained. Or of dogs, he did a job on the carpet” (Handmaid’s Tale 162). Offred’s indulgence in this kind of word play, is according to Madonna Miner, a suggestion that the “signifying system cannot be arrested, cannot be contained” (“Romance Plot” 153). This prevents the readers from being constrained to a limited reading. The novel continuously “declares that there is connection, numerous connections” (Handmaid’s Tale 153).

The whole fabric of the novel is made complex by these “connections.” In the bounded state of Gilead, in her “reduced circumstances” Offred’s thoughts remain boundless and unchained, keeping alive her senses and challenging the authority that tries to chain her down. Attempts are made to create loopholes in the system by inserting a history that is more personal. The history of those of the unimportant, of the marginal, of those in the “blank, white spaces at the edges of the print,” is put forward in opposition to the history of the state. Her inner self that is very much alive always takes the utmost care to preserve the links with a glorious past, through reflections, dreams and
memories. This also marks a resurgence of the spirit of nationalism that is subdued and suppressed by the dominant central power.

The concern for the dehumanization that goes beyond mere gender specifications is what makes Atwood a unique feminist. Her particular kind of feminism desires a mutuality of relationship, a “man-woman axis” rather than a “woman only enclave,” Breaking up hierarchies and encouraging a creative co-existence of differences, is what Atwood tries to do. As Linda Hutcheon remarks, “difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion” (Poetics 61). Subjectivity, according to Teresa de Lauretis, is constituted by “one’s personal, subjective engagement in the practices, discourse, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning and affect) to the events of the world” (Feminism 159). When one group, as subjects are denied the opportunity to participate in these events, there subjectivity is questioned, and they are forced to be repressed. This social and sexual repression in an authoritarian society, according to Hutcheon, mirrors national repression, both past and present (Poetics 72). Language here becomes a major tool of the oppressor for disseminating.

If the narrator of Surfacing found herself alienated because of her inability to speak French, she also feels disgusted at the sexist overtones in David’s language. In Gilead as in the dystopian world of Orwell’s 1984, a
new language that denies free thinking and expression is introduced by the authoritarian regime. Whether nationalist, sexist or racialist, it is often through language, as Hutcheon says, that the “status of difference as eccentricity is thematized” (Poetics 73). However, verbal language is not an isolated phenomenon. It acquires meaning in specific historical, social and geographical contexts thereby problematizing the nature of the subject by “contextualizing” the self in “both history and society” (Hutcheon 84 ), the past and the present.

Atwood questions gender roles designated by society and challenges patriarchal power structures that have subsumed women's identity through ages. Furthermore, she protests against the expansionist culture of the Americans and finds in it a parallel with the patriarchal culture. The self-effacement that the women characters of Atwood face in their journey of exploration, points to a similar effacement of Canada's existence through over-Americanization. The Canadian ‘victim complex’ has stood in the way of the nation acting positively. A strong internalization of the victimized state makes the nation passive and powerless in its relation with the U.S. As Anna Swan in Susan Swan’s novel. The Biggest Modern Woman of the World says, “Indeed, to be from the Canadas is to feel as women feel --- cut off from the base of power “(qtd. in The Canadian Postmodern 120). While on the one
hand, Atwood’s work depicts the evolution of the woman protagonist, on the other, it also shows the development of the Canadian nation and its literature. As Linda Hutcheon remarks, “the two issues are not wholly distinct for Atwood” (Canadian Postmodern 138). The narrative of the protagonist also becomes the narrative of the nation.

In Survival Atwood points out that the literature of Canada is shaped by the colonial existence of the nation. The Canadian state of mind is related to the fact that the nation has been victimized. Hence survival becomes the national goal of the Canadians and the tone of Canadian literature turns “somber and negative” (Survival 245). This, Atwood says, is to a large extent, “a reflection and a chosen definition of the national sensibility,...in Canadian literature, a character who does much more than survival stands out almost as an anomaly” (Survival 245). Surfacing, according to Woodcock, is concerned with Canadian victims to such an extent that one can “identify among the fauna a majority of the types of victims described in Survival” (Canadian Writing 163). Survival was a major break through in Canadian literature and it pointed out the indifference of the Canadian culture to, and undervaluing of its own achievements. As Atwood notes, F.P. Grove, Dennis Lee, K.K. Brown and Dr. Dewart, all considered this a major hindrance to the development of a sense of an independent self.
With the powerful US being the presence, Canada was always absence. In *Second Words* Atwood remarks that a “Canadian writer was an oxymoron” and “Canadian books were routinely not taught in schools and universities” (381). However, *Survival* succeeded in creating an awareness of the existence of Canadian literature Woodcock says that the book is “interesting and exciting as an index to the development of [Canadian] literary tradition” (*Canadian Writing* 158). The Canadians began to feel the need to express themselves with a difference, to make themselves heard. In this process, women had to struggle with double intensity as they were twice marginalized and victimized as Canadians and as women.

The Suffrage movement of the late nineteenth century helped to overthrow many of the restrictions imposed on Canadian women and more and more of them took to writing. The Women’s movement in the 1960s served to create a stronger awareness among women of the necessity of self-assertion and the Canadian soil gave birth to women writers like Susanna Moodie, Margaret Laurence and Alice Munroe. This movement by women ran side by side with the quest for a distinctive Canadian cultural identity. In an interview to Graeme Gibson, Atwood says, “we have been so cut off from our social mythology that we hardly know what it is; this is one thing that has to be discovered” (Gibson 1). The characters in her novels who are rootless
and cut off from their past, engage themselves in a search for the lost tradition.

As Sudhakar Pandey remarks, “Atwood is self-consciously committed as a Canadian woman writer to demythologize the givens regarding both the woman as well as Canada and help recover a sense of self-hood and pride in one's self” (Canadian Novel 88). The homogenizing and constricting “circles and the arrogant squares, pages” (Surfacing 190) of history are redrawn and rewritten to include contradictory traditions with all their imperfections. Thus difference, plurality and heterogeneity can give way to unity, centrality and homogeneity. Derrida in his “Structure, Sign and Play,” argues that the subject is absolutely indispensable, “I don’t destroy the subject; I situate it” (112). This situating of the subject, according to Hutcheon, implies the recognition of differences, “of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and so on” and inserting them (Poetics 159) into “historically circumscribed signifying operations” (Silverman 129).