Chapter 4

Altering Boundaries: Inclusive Space

When temporality becomes the marker of change, space becomes the site where this change is recorded. By blowing apart the designations of a linear history, 'her story' maps the interruptive and alternate female spaces that can wedge into the patriarchal mainframe and create alter/nations. Mapping as a pictorial representation of territory, condenses and compresses real space using smaller scales to fit into the restrictive space of a map. Thus it is an act of reduction which gets thwarted and problematized once the multiple voices of reality make an incursion. This problematization questions and unsettles the finality of reading. Mapping as geography that aims at representation becomes a writing of a mutant and migrant subjectivity.

Adrienne Rich, in her "Notes Toward a Politics of Location" remarks, "I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history, within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist, I am created and trying to
create" (8). Then map of a nation becomes the map of the historical subjects that make up the space of the nation. Patriarchy pushes women to the peripheries of this space thereby denying them any position on the centre-stage. Voicing these mute peripheral spaces and inscribing them on the central space undermines the rigid and conclusive state of things. Patrick D. Murphy in “Ecofeminist Dialogics” remarks that “only through recognizing the existence of the ‘other’ as a self-existent entity, can we begin to comprehend a heterarchical gender dyad in which difference exists without binary opposition and hierarchical valorization”(41). This is what Atwood tries to do while mapping the geography of her nation and simultaneously the female geography. She tries to create some space in the patriarchal realm for women’s stories.

Showalter in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness, “speaks of the “wild zone” which women inhabit. Attempts are made by women to extend the boundaries of this zone so that the territory of patriarchy can be encroached upon. Showalter derives the idea from the work of cultural anthropologist Edwin Ardener who considers women “the muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by the dominant group” (Showalter 341). Showalter explains that the wild zone of women’s culture can be thought of “spatially, experientially, or
metaphysically” (341). The first is defined as “an area which is literally no-
man’s –land, a place forbidden to men” (341). In The Handmaid's Tale, the
Gileadean space of the birthroom prohibits entry for men. But this space, in
many ways, is a liberating place for many handmaids like Offred. While
being in this subversive space, Offred tries to extend the boundaries of the
rigid system that confines and constricts her, by going back to the pre-
Gileadean era. Within the totalitarian space of Gilead, Offred introduces the
pre-Gileadean space, the access to which had been denied by the male regime.
Similarly the torture of women by women as seen in Cat’s Eye is an
experience “outside of and unlike those of men” (Showalter 341). Elaine is
denied smooth access to the space of women when she first comes to Toronto.
This is at the same time, a space forbidden to men. Elaine enters an
experiential wild zone and tries to absorb aspects of female life-style that are
off limits for men. In a similar manner, Marleen S.Barr explains how Joan in
Lady Oracle enters the metaphysical wild zone (“Female Narrative” 204).
She writes herself as a new female identity in Italy. As a living deceased
person, Joan inhabits the wild zone, a space of “female life-renewal”
(“Female Narrative” 263). As she is alive, she lives within patriarchal
culture. But since for patriarchy, she is dead, she lives outside reality’s
cultural imperatives. Thus she reduces the boundary between the two.
Entering the liberating zone of the wild, these characters try to break free from the limiting social spaces where women can write their desires. Atwood thus records the attempts of the subaltern subjects to redraw the maps that have shaded and blackened the destiny of the victimized ‘weaker sections.’

As a female writer and as a Canadian, Atwood seems doubly drawn to the natural world expressing through that affinity, “her resentment and fear of a perceived patriarchal civilization symbolized so well by the city that conquers the landscape by imposing an alien and abstract pattern upon it” (Gracc 195). The wilderness often acts as a unifying myth in the Canadian woman’s search for identity. As Northrop Frye remarks, “the nostalgia for a world of peace and protection, with a spontaneous response to the nature around it, with a leisure and composure not to be found today, is particularly strong in Canada” (The Bush Garden 239). Early efforts by Canadian poets like Henry Drummond and Pauline Johnson contributed to the belief that “the distinctively Canadian was to be found in the natural world rather than in the city” (Brydon 281). In such a situation a technological encroachment on the wilderness, destroying its primitive beauty can be a sensitive issue for the Canadians. Robert Kroetsch has remarked that Canadians seem most drawn imaginatively by the “great, unstructured spaces surrounding [them]” (Canadian Writers 46). Again, Sherril E. Grace in Violent Duality has
pointed out that Canada’s best painters are primarily landscape painters and “one of the distinctive features of Canadian art in general is its preoccupation with the immense, silent and rugged northern landscape” (206).

The destruction of the Canadian wilderness, in Atwood’s novels like Surfacing, depicts the analogy of the US as male/culture. As Judith Plant remarks, “the rape of the earth, in all its forms, becomes a metaphor for the rape of woman, in all its many guises” (Ecofeminism 5). In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist says, “I can’t believe I’m on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south....” (Surfacing 7). The disease caused by the American technological invasion points to Canada’s victim complex, its posture of the innocent and helpless victim. As she moves through the wilderness, the narrator is appalled by the way in which the natural landscape has been destroyed. She denounces the American tourists for killing the heron but later comes to realize that they were Canadians. As Margaret Wimsatt remarks, “Americans, even those born in Canada are the enemy; diseased birch trees are just one sign of their approaching occupancy. They are the ones who cut trees, who fish wholesale, from motor boats and helicopters. They raise the level of the lake, destroying the totems; malignancy creeps up from the south” (“The Lady” 484). The aggressive
Americans and the Canadians with the American attitude to nature, have no “conscience or piety” (Surfacing 127). The protagonist’s brother finds pleasure as a child in capturing animals and insects and then slowly killing them. Sometimes the narrator used to free the animals without her brother’s knowledge. Her brother’s violent attitude towards the wilderness is repeated in the attitude of the American hunters who destroy nature and the natural for sport and for development. David and Joe, with their indifference to the whole act, represent the consumerist, commercialist American Canadians. The woman protagonist alone is moved by the sight.

I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it: one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd.... In a way it was stupid to be more disturbed by a dead bird than by those other things, the wars and riots and the massacres in the newspapers. But for the wars and riots there was always an explanation, people wrote books about them saying why they happened: the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted. (Surfacing 150)

If the destruction of human world is to some extend explained, the harm done to non human nature often goes unnoticed.
The forest and the lake provide the landscape for the novel, emphasizing the relationship between man and his environment. For the protagonist, a return to this place is a return to her past, a digging up of memory. For her "the island in a lake constitute both the green world of childhood remembered and a locus of transformation, or rebirth" (Pratt 150). Simone de Beauvoir speaks of a special relationship that exists between woman and nature. A young girl, according to her, "finds in the secret places of the forests a reflection of the solitude of her soul and in the wide horizons of the plains a tangible image of her transcendence; she is herself this limitless territory..." (Second Sex 386). The protagonist's sympathy with nature must have been an escape from the demands and restrictions imposed by an urbanized society. But they are never two separate polarities for Atwood. The two, the natural and the cultural are connected and as the protagonist integrates the two in the end, the latter becomes an extension of the former.

Throughout Surfacing, the readers are made aware of the damage done to the Canadian landscape and its primitive past by modern American technology. The countryside is spoiled in the name of economic progress. The quest for the narrator's father is in a way a quest for her own rootless self and an escape from the city and the "pervasive menace, the Americans" (Surfacing 223). The North becomes a metaphor for the protagonist's search
for her inner as well as outer self. As Atwood in an interview with Jim Davidson says, “North is ...the place where you go to find something out. It’s the place of the unconscious. It’s the place of the journey or the quest”(Conversation 204). As the protagonist moves from Toronto to the northern wilderness, Atwood maps the frontiers of rural Canada. However the narrator is not satisfied by the forms of the past or of the rural. Though it had a therapeutic value, she decides to return to the present, with a clearer vision of reality. There is a final integration of the city and the bush. The boundaries are extended to include the excluded and the conflicting.

Towards the end of Surfacing, the protagonist becomes a part of nature, being capable of incorporating its powers into herself. She enters the forest naked. She says:

My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water... I come out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock (Surfacing 206).

She sees visions of the forest before the trees were cut and also of her mother who was always “ten thousand years behind the rest” (58). In Survival Atwood speaks of the insanity which occurs when one merges human identity
with nature. This is what the narrator finally does. After being impregnated by Joe in the primitive forest, she psychologically recovers from the abortion. Motherhood and procreation become a way of integrating the natural and the cultural.

However this is not the case in The Handmaid’s Tale where procreation and maternity are “simultaneously idealized and dehumanized” (Rubenstein 102); revealing the ambivalent stand that Atwood takes. In Gilead because of the high rate of pollution, sterility has become very common. So the state has to depend on the handmaids for its existence. However these handmaids are condemned as unwomen after three unsuccessful attempts at pregnancy. And if delivered, the baby becomes the property of the Commander and his wife. Thus if pregnancy and childbirth are given high importance, the mother is left out of the scene soon after the delivery. The natural order of things is subverted. Procreation in Gilead is professionalized and is institutionalized for the sake of the state. Offred says, “we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary… we are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sexual vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Handmaid’s Tale 73). Sterility, in Gilead, is always the fault of the woman. “There is no such thing as a sterile man… there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law”(Handmaid’s Tale 57). In the patriarchal institution women are
conditioned to unconsciously subject themselves to such a situation that confinement becomes natural for them as part of their ideological being.

Once it becomes conscious and the realization dawns on the citizens, ideology begins to be thwarted. Space as a site for the presentation of these contradictory impulses functions as an ideologeme and it both repeats the ideological functions of patriarchy and lays them bare in an effort to effect their overthrow. Patriarchal space, becomes an expression of the penchant to contain and delimit. Subaltern space, on the other hand, attempts to question this delimiting ideology and to break down the horizons of its circumscription, by creating alternate spaces in all its constructional strategies. Thus space while functioning as a trace of the particular ideology, also acts as the locus of its overthrow.

Rubenstein remarks that “from the central issue of procreation to the language and imagery that form the substructure of Offred’s narrative, The Handmaid’s Tale demonstrates multiple inversions and violations of nature and natural. Not only is the female body used as a tool for reproduction, but bodies in general are objectified and described in terms of parts rather than as wholes” (“Nature and Nurture” 103). There are also references to plants, animals and other objects associated with nature. The change of seasons in Gilead brings no solace. But flowers are among the good things that Offred
incorporates in her narrative. The animals in Gilead are however repugnant. Rubenstein says,

A virtual menagerie of insects, fish, fowl, and beasts parades, figuratively, through the narrative: ant, beetle, spider, fly, worm, oyster, mollusk, rat, mouse, fish, frog, snake, pigeon, hawk, vulture, chicken, turkey, pig, sheep, horse, cat, dog, elephant..... Often the animal references suggest the debased, denatured, dismembered human body as mere flesh. ("Nature and Nurture" 107)

Offred walking after a rainy night on a path through the black lawn that suggests "a hair parting," observes half-dead worms, "flexible and pink, like lips." Again, Offred speculates, whether Janine’s baby will be an "unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog’s or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet" (Handmaid’s Tale 122).

Male dominance and female oppression are justified by the Commander as "natural." The night club called Jezebels satisfies the sexual hunger of the powerful men. As the Commander says to Offred, "everyone’s human, after all... you can’t cheat Nature... Nature demands variety, for men... Its part of the procreative strategy. Its Nature’s plan" (Handmaid’s Tale 248). The biblical precedent justifies the polygamy that Gilead advocates and which it calls "natural." The Commander says: "All we have done is to return things
to nature’s norm. Invoking a biblical past as well as a pre-Christian past where Offred appears as the “whore of Babylon” (Handmaid’s Tale 227), Jezebel’s becomes the space where the rarefied, ritualistic sex of Gilead gets transformed into an excessive play, a festivity. However, even this festivity reiterates the male dominated system which Gilead follows, though it is meant to be an escape from the strict sexual codes that Gilead purports. This carnival revives and restores the repressed primitive instincts and desires and affirms the traditional role allotted to women in the game of sex. Roberta Rubenstein observes how the ‘natural’ is denaturalized in Gilead and how it is restored at the Jezebel’s. Nature is also invoked in Gilead as justification for male sexual dominance and female oppression.

Offred’s Commander advises her that the era of romantic courtship and marriages based on love-the older dispensation - was “an anomaly historically speaking ....All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm.” This “norm,” however, leaves something to be desired for men who still prefer sex in the old manner, as conquest rather than duty... Even at Jezebel’s, the ubiquitous... Aunts preside... reinforcing the sense of sexual slavery that prevails in Gilead. The “forbidden” is accommodated, but only to serve
traditional assumptions about male, not female, sexuality.

("Nature and Nurture" 111)

The Commander appears “delighted” and “pleased” by this “walking into the past.” But this delight is, according to Moira, that of “just another crummy power trip.” According to Madonna Miner, Jezebel’s, the night club, brings back a past in which “women are on display for men and are dependent upon men” ("Romance Plot" 156). Offred carnivalizes the very concept of this sexuality by distorting visibility. She finds the whole disguise and make up “bizarre” and “antique,” like a theatrical costume from a remote past. She considers this “power trip,” a ”juvenile display”, a “pathetic” act (Handmaid’s Tale 222). By realizing its true colour, she undermines the Commander’s intentions. The mirror in the washroom which has not been removed since “you need to know, here, what you look like” (Handmaid’s Tale 226), reveals her own identity, the nakedness beneath the tag of the “evening rental.” Thus Offred questions the intentions that the disguise requisitions in the space of Jezebel’s – a space where the pagan confronts the Christian and visibility clashes with invisibility.

The threat to the natural environmental concerns, also forms a key issue in The Handmaid’s Tale. The pre-Gileadean era was the age of “R-strain syphilis” and “AIDS epidemic” which “eliminated many young sexually
active people from the reproductive pool” (Handmaid’s Tale 226). Stillbirths, miscarriages and genetic deformities were widespread while infertility was one of the major problems that caused the decline of the Gileadean state. The academicians and scientists have linked this threat to several factors:

The various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, of which there were many thousands, both legal and illegal and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays. (Handmaid’s Tale 286)

The cost that man has to pay for his indifference to nature is thus highlighted in the novel. This threat to nature is identified with the status of women whose subjugation is the major focus of the novel. The technologically advanced society’s materialist, consumerist and inhuman attitude condemns nature and the natural. At the same time, this patriarchal culture looks down upon women restraining their natural tendencies. In the Gileadien society, women become mere functionaries in the hands of the powerful elite just as nature becomes lifeless with the human world. Thus the struggle against patriarchy is placed in the larger context of nature, thereby intertwining the
dyads male/female and culture/nature. This is what the Ecofeminists have also tried to do.

Ynestra King argues that the “hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing” (“Ecology of Feminism” 18). Androcentric thought relegates woman and nature to the borders, picturing them as non-speaking ‘other.’ However as Bakhtin says in “Speech Genres,” “any speaker himself is a respondent to a greater or lesser degree” (69). As we have seen earlier, the theory of differences implies the presence of the ‘other’ even when the ‘self’ tries to negate it. The subject is not unified or singular, it is multiple and plural. Ecofeminism attempts to render both women and nature as speaking subjects by subverting it as well as proposing other centres. As Murphy says, “the struggle is not to abolish any type of centering, but to recognize the relative nature of centers and their dynamic relationship with margins” (“Ecofeminist Dialogics” 51). The ecofeminists consider life on this earth an “interconnected web,” not a hierarchy” (King 19). Therefore the connection between all forms of domination has to be established. The ‘other’ in the traditional paradigm is, according to Corine Kumar D’Souza, “woman, the non male, the non powerful, the no human” (“A New Movement 30). The exploitation in one domain will be simultaneously registered in the other.
However, Simone de Beauvoire and many others have rejected the analogical bending of ‘Woman’ and ‘Nature’ saying that it will only limit the opportunities available to women. Beauvoire speaks of “an enhanced status for traditional feminine values, such as woman and her rapport with nature, woman and her maternal instinct.” According to her, “this renewed attempt to pin women down to their traditional role,...[is] the formula used to try and keep women quiet... Once again, women are being defined in terms of ‘the other,’ once again they are being made into the ‘second sex’” (Conversations 103).

Ecofeminists believe that the earth was called ‘Mother Earth’ because of her agricultural fertility and seasonal cyclicity. But the critics of ecofeminism argue that, “these associations were created by stereotype patriarchal cultures to debase women. These stereotypes freeze women as merely caring and nurturing beings, instead of expanding the full range of women’s human potentialities and abilities” (Biehl 15). Atwood’s politics combines these different and conflicting aspects thereby revealing her ambivalent stand.

If in Surfacing childbirth becomes a metaphor for the birth of a new self to the mother herself, pregnancy is condemned as imprisonment in Edible Woman. However, in the same novel itself, conflicting ideas are mouthed by Ainsley and Marian. Even when in high school, Marian had thought of
marrying someone and having children. She believed that life was run by adjustments and that "you can't continue to run around indefinitely; people who are'nt married get funny in middle age, embittered or addled or something...." (Edible Woman 100). Ainsley, on the other hand was "decidedly anti-marriage," though she wanted to have children. She tells Marian: "I'm not going to get married. That's what's wrong with most children, they have too many parents.... The thing that ruins families these days is the husbands" (Edible Woman 34). In The Handmaid's Tale, the 'Natural' is institutionalized and unnaturalized and procreation is a blessing as well as a curse. Giving birth becomes the prerogative of the professional breeders, the handmaids. But as soon their job is done, they are left out of the picture and the baby becomes the property of the commander and his wife. Thus though the handmaids are blessed in the sense that they are not condemned as "unwomen," they are a cursed lot bereft of the joys of family life. Again, Atwood sees both men and women as the destroyers of the wilderness in Surfacing and they can be Americans or Canadians.

Thus the overlapping of roles indicates a more dynamic participation from the constitutive paradigms. She points out that the right to difference can be effectively and agreeably coalesced with an equipollent coexistence. The demand for difference and distinction need not necessarily institute the
kinds of dangerous nihilism that the critics of feminism fear. Atwood's, in that sense, is a more fundamental feminism that has matured and graduated into a criticism of the formative deep structures. By presenting such a bleak situation, as that in Gilead, Atwood discloses how women must discover their identity in a totally inhospitable environment where they become mere objects to be consumed by the desires of a more powerful lot. The female space is intruded upon, crushed and diminished by the all encompassing Male.

In this male space, under the gaze of the man, the woman is objectified and is rendered powerless. Looking is the way in which we visualize space. In the patriarchal culture it is the man who often controls the look, the woman being his object of desire. As Rosalind Coward observes, "the look confers power, women's inability to return such a critical and aggressive look is a sign of subordination, of being the recipients of another's assessment" (Female Desire 75). In Western philosophy, 'female' is something which cannot be represented. Woman is the 'other,' the negative of the male philosopher's own reflection. It is in such a situation that women like Marian in Edible Woman see themselves "small and oval, mirrored in [Peter's] eyes" (Edible Woman 82).

In the commercial, consumerist society, women are often prized for their beauty and are packaged as objects in the marriage market. It is the lack of
beauty and money that forces Rukmani in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*, to marry somebody from a lower class. Woman “is to be the beautiful object of contemplation,” as Irigaray says in “This Sex Which is not One” (352). The dictates of the patriarchal culture make women remodel themselves and make themselves up to be aesthetically appealing to the looker. “Women look so often in the mirror because their primary market value in the marriage exchange depends upon the allure of their images” (Bromberg 14). The specular image that one sees during the mirror stage, according to Lacan leads to the recognition of the other. This in turn leads to the “larger question of the meaning of beauty as both formative and erogenic” (*Ecrits* 3). Women, thereby develop the notion that a beautiful image is the prerequisite for recognition and love. Pecola in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* spends “long hours… looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised…” (39) by her schoolmates and teachers. Lacan notes in *Ecrits* that “the mirror image could seem to be the threshold of the visible world” (3). Self-recognition, according to Lacan, occurs between eighteen months and six years. When the child first looks into the mirror, it confuses it’s reflection with that of the parent. Gradually it realizes that it is only an image and that it is different from other images. With this understanding, identity and language are formed. However
"this 'I' in the mirror is from the start a very vulnerable thing, kept intact only when the child learns to use language in ways that more or less support, not destroy that elusive identity, ways that enable the child to satisfy desire in so far as that is possible" (Henger 37). Inability to get rid of other images, forces one to live with split identities. Whenever Joan in *Lady Oracle* looks into the mirror her former self reappears and she is confused. Besides she is also unable to separate herself from her mother's image. Similarly Marian in *Edible Woman* confuses Duncan's image with that of her own and he is like an other half to Marian in the novel. In an identical manner Elaine and Cordelia are "like the twins in old fables, each of whom has been given half a key" (*Cat's Eye* 411). The story that Cordelia reads to Elaine presents a situation where duality penetrates a person. The story is about two sisters, a pretty one and one who has a burn covering half her face. "The pretty one has a ... mirror" (*Cat's Eye* 211).

In all these cases it is the mirror that augments duality or multiplicity. Elaine portrays this condition in the painting that she made of Cordelia. It is titled "Half a Face" and shows how Cordelia occupies a part of Elaine's identity. "Cordelia is afraid of me, in this picture. I am afraid of Cordelia. I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places, and I have forgotten when" (*Cat's Eye* 227).
Though Elaine tried to separate herself from Cordelia she could not, she says, “I am not free, of Cordelia” (*Cat’s Eye* 360). Finally in the last chapter, we find Elaine asserting that “You are dead, Cordelia. No I’m not, yes you are you are dead. Lie down” (*Cat’s Eye* 414). She becomes conscious of the fact that it was Cordelia’s presence that destroyed her and she is able to free herself from this influence. A same realization occurs to Joan and Marian and they are also able to get rid of the devastating images that have ruined them.

Joan, who creates different identities for different men, is a typical example of a female who desperately goes in search of love which was denied to her in her childhood. For the simple reason that she was obese, Joan was rejected by her mother who wanted her to be slim and beautiful. As Bartky remarks, “under the current” tyranny of slenderness” women are forbidden to become large or massive; they must take up as little space as possible” (*Femininity* 73). Joan resisted her mother’s attempts to make her conform to society’s norms of a beautiful woman. Joan is disturbed by the image of the altered body that she sees in the “distorting mirrors of the Fun House at the Canadian National Exhibition. There were mirrors that “stretched you and shrank you. I didn’t want to be fatter than I already was, and being thinner was impossible” (*Lady Oracle* 97). Although later she loses weight, she carries on with her, her past image. Whenever she looks into the mirror, she
sees the old Joan there. She even dreams of her mother who was obsessed with mirrors, sitting at her triple mirror dressing table, reflected as a three-headed monster. Finally she realizes that she had been carrying along her mother’s image for too long, “she’d never really let go of me, because I have never let her go. It had been she standing behind me in the mirror” (Lady Oracle 363). Once she manages to free herself from this trap, she becomes a changed person with a new perspective of things.

Similarly Marian is entrapped in Peter’s powerful gaze during the beginning of the novel. She is sandwiched between the men and machine at Seymour Surveys and is not sure of her place/space in society. She feels that she cannot become one among the men upstairs or the machines downstairs. She is in the “gooey layer” in between. M.F. Salat observes that the three layers represent three planes of reality: mind, body and matter. The men who are rational are the minds, the women consumed by society are the bodies. This hierarchical distribution places women above matter but below mind. The confused Marian’s quest is to become “neither a man nor a machine but a woman with an independent as against a relatively defined identity” (Edible Woman 96). When Peter proposes, she submits herself willingly before him at the same time losing her appetite. She sees her distorted image reflected not only in mirrors, but also on other surfaces. Once, while having dinner with
Peter in a restaurant, Marian gazed down at the small silvery image reflected in the bowl of the spoon herself "upside down with a huge torso narrowing to a pinhead at the handle end. She lifted the spoon and her forehead swelled, then receded. She felt serene" (Edible Woman 150). She imagines herself becoming like Clara, "a swollen mass of flesh with a tiny pinhead," after her marriage" (Edible Woman 118). For Peter's party Marian goes to the hairdresser and buys a new red dress as insisted by Peter. Then she thinks of her head as a cake, "something to be carefully iced and ornamented." She is a "draped figure imprisoned in the filigreed, gold oval of the mirror" (Edible Woman 215). However she shows the courage to insist on inviting her friends and when Duncan arrives, he finds it difficult to join the "masquerade" (Edible Woman 24). Marian too escapes even before allowing Peter to take her photograph, before being, "stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance unable to move or change" (Edible Woman 252). She returns home and engages herself in baking the cake. Marian has, finally become the sculptor rather than the lifeless statue erected in the name of beauty" (Bromberg 18). When Peter refuses to eat the cake, she consumes it and becomes active once again, joining the divided halves of her self, the split mirror images.
The mirror as symbol of the self’s division, recurs in Atwood. Anna in *Surfacing* is a made up self which she preserves for the sake of David. Every morning she has to get up before her husband does and don all her make up because he doesn’t like to see her true self. “Being in the mirror,” she is “closed in the gold compact” until finally she realizes that she has to “see” but not herself. Susan Gubar remarks that, “if female creativity has had to express itself within the confines of domesticity..., women could at the least paint their own faces, shape their own bodies, and modulate their own vocal tones to become the glass of fashion and the mold of form” (“Blank Page” 249). The fragmented or dismembered self becomes a trick done with mirrors. Once the woman realizes that she is “torn apart” and decides to make herself whole, the significance of the mirror diminishes. Rigney speaks of the trick done with mirrors: “The mirror becomes a symbol of the split self and one’s own reflection functions like a kind of negative doppelganger. Presumably, the mirror provides a distorted image of the self, thus stealing one’s sense of a real or complete self, robbing one of an identity” (*Madness and Sexual Politics* 94). These images of the split self that recur in Atwood might also be a reflection of the fragmentation that marks Canada. It is heterogeneity that pervades the country as a “polyglot, pluralistic state,” where the “cultural ‘melting pot’ does not exist” (Weibe 22). Being religiously Protestant and
Roman Catholic and culturally Anglo-Saxon and Gallic (Weibe 22), Canada has always asserted its multi-cultural stand.

Like the mirror, the camera also becomes a device in Atwood’s hand to depict the division of the self, as symbols of seeing and being seen. As Sharon R. Wilson remarks:

[Atwood’s] characters and personas often seem to view life through a celluloid film. Seeing themselves, the past, and other people as photograph trophies or the raw material for popular journalistic pieces on life styles, they fear the attack of camera guns which turn them into products for consumption, and yet, paradoxically, they seek validation in being seen, trying to escape “massive involvement” by creating tourist-brochure reality. (“Popular Art” 136)

If Marian sees Peter’s camera as a gun waiting to shoot her down, David and Joe force Anna to reveal her nude body before their camera for a snapshot for their ‘Random Samples.’ However, the protagonist in the end acquires the courage to throw the film into the lake thereby thawing the images that the men had frozen.

I unwind the film, standing full in the sun, and let it spiral into the lake... the film coils on to the sand under the water, weighted down
by its containers; the invisible captured images are swimming away into the lake like tadpoles, Joe and David beside their defeated log, axemen, arms folded, Anna with no clothes on, jumping off the end of the dock, finger up, hundreds of tiny naked Annas no longer bottled and shelved. (*Surfacing* 192)

When the lens becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of the man, photographs imprison, freeze and trap women. The photo series taken by David and Joe symbolize their desire to frame the world.

While in the other novels, cameras are operated by men, in *Bodily Harm*, it is Rennie who carries the camera with her. Rennie, as a journalist, always carries a camera with her. But she often shrugs back from looking into the depths. As David Lucking remarks, Rennie exhibits a "tendency to experience the world not at first hand but as filtered through the cliches of a media-ridden civilization. She habitually thinks in terms of films or photographs or pictures, or the various other civilized strategies by which events are framed and neutralized and rendered innocuous" (*Bodily Harm* 81). Though she is a photographer, she is also a victim of Jake's 'packaging.' Meanwhile she is asked to do a piece on pornography from the woman's point of view. Through a viewer, she sees life-sized mannequin tables and chairs featuring women muzzled and locked into demeaning positions. Though at
first she tries to be detached, when she has trouble making love with Jake, she comes to realize that she too is part of the raw material. In the final part, as she lies in prison and looks through the bars into the courtyard and sees the deaf and dumb man being beaten, she no longer thinks of picturesque photographs or television programmes or movies which need it lie switched off. Instead she understands that past, present and future will no longer be separate. She thinks of pornographs that show the skill of the photographer. If she cannot stop such dehumanizing camera shots, she should at least be able to look into the depths. “It’s intended, its not done with ketchup, nothing is inconceivable here, no rats in the vagina but only because they haven’t thought of it yet, they’re still amateurs” (Bodily Harm 256). Rennie is able to break herself out of the framed photograph and the distorting and filtered camera vision “what she sees has not altered; only the way she sees it. It’s all exactly the same. Nothing is the same” (Lucking 264). This metamorphosis from non-involvement to ‘mass involvement’ is a welcome ‘change that many Atwood women undergo.

According to Rigney, those who use the camera to victimize others are “themselves victims of faulty vision” (Madness and Sexual Politics 95). The lens which clouds and distorts becomes their only medium to see reality. This is what happens to Peter, David and to some extent, Joe. Even Rennie
possesses a blurred vision of things while she moves about with her camera. Her sight is only surface deep. She wants to be uninvolved, “to look at things without touching them” (Bodily Harm 54). Sherrill Grace remarks that “the exclusive reliance upon the visual sense separates objects in space, splits things off from their contexts, isolates the viewer from the thing viewed. By simply looking at something we are able to keep ourselves at a distance, uninvolved” (Violent Duality 18). The failure to ‘see’ things is a problem that many Atwood characters encounter. The conflict between the surface and the hidden depths, recur throughout Atwood’s work.

Annette, in the short story, ‘A Travel Piece,’ from the collection Dancing Girls is also a writer of travelogues like Rennie and always carries a camera. She too goes in search of a place where “unpleasant things did not happen” (Dancing Girls 131). However, the plane crashes and the passengers find themselves floating on life boats. Annette finds some of her co-passengers slit open, the throat of a young fellow being. At first like Rennie, she watches everything from a distance. But soon she realizes that the “sunny sky” and the “indecently blue ocean” are “a giant screen flat with pictures painted on it to create the illusion of solidity. If you walked up to it and kicked it, it would tear and your feet would go right through, into another space which Annette could only visualize as darkness, a night in which
something she did not want to look at was hiding” (*Dancing Girls* 132). She realizes that she has been keeping herself away from things and her parched senses are brought back to life. Like Rennie, Annette too decides to do away with surface reality and go in search of the deeper essence of things. Sharon Wilson remarks:

> To a greater extent than Marian, the narrator in *Surfacing* and Joan, Rennie experiences a metamorphosis that is political as well as personal… no longer finding it necessary to cut away part of herself in order to see everything. Rennie has penetrated to the centre… thus camera image in Atwood’s *Bodily Harm* not only dramatize the fragmented self but also initiate the process of a metamorphosis which seems to continue even beyond the frame’ of the book. (”Popular Art” 145)

Thus breaking frames to include more things becomes Atwood’s device of incorporating the neglected.

In *Cat’s Eye* Elaine’s paintings do not contain themselves. The frames are extended to bring in meanings that deny any fixity or closure. The ‘Cat’s Eye,’ for instance, which she labels a “self-portrait of sorts” (*Cat’s Eye* 407) shows Risley’s aging face in the foreground, with the younger Risley’s kinds and her three tormentors framed in a convex pier glass that looks “like an
"Eye" (Cat’s Eye 327). The past and the present overlap refusing to limit the portrait and confine it within the prescribed frame. ‘Picoseconds,’ the first of her five paintings done in one year, depicts mainly a landscape, with her young parents in the corner. The portrait of the parents is stretched so far as to include their surrounding environment. The title is a tribute to her brother whose language she has used. Thus it brings back his memories as well, ‘three muses,’ are the three adults who were in a way kind to Elaine, Mrs. Finestein, her Jewish neighbour, Mr. Banerjee, an Indian scientist and her father’s colleague, and Miss. Stuart, her teacher. They appear as presenting gifts to someone outside the frame. The absence of the receiver denies any restriction imposed on the picture.

Meanwhile, like the ‘Picoseconds,’ the ‘Unified Field Theory,’ also is titled in Stephen’s (Elaine’s brother) jargon. This portrays Virgin Mary, ‘Our Lady of Perpetual help’ who had saved Elaine from the ravine. An oversized cat’s eye marble is clearly shown at her heart. The vision of Mary that she had is translated into three paintings. The second shows the power of Mary, a lioness, “fierce, alert to danger, wild” (Cat’s Eye 345). The third is a humanized version thereby creating a fusion. Elaine’s subversive portrait of Madonna can be a visual representation of the power of women that has been
so far suppressed. "Cora Kaplan in "Language and Gender" speaks of a painting by Odilon Redon of a "wraithlike Madonna":

The face is still, and at the same time full of intense activity, she holds two fingers to her hips, and, perhaps, a cupped paw to her ear. The picture is titled Silence ... Enjoining silence, she is its material image. A speaking silence-- image and injunction joined. She is herself spoken, twice spoken we might say--once by the artist who has located his silence on a female fig, and once again by the viewer who accepts as natural this abstract identification of woman = silence and the complimentary imaging of women's speech as whispered, subvocal, the mere escape of trapped air...shhhhhhh.

Elaine's Madonna questions the traditional, artist's view of the silenced women and endows her with fire and energy.

Elaine herself criticizes the feminists' attempts to limit the meaning of the paintings as well as that of feminism. In an article, 'Writing the Male Character,' Atwood voices her disgust of those who hold the attitude that "only the pain felt by persons of the female sex is real pain" (428). As Elaine remarks, for some lesbianism is the "only equal relationship possible for women" (Cat's Eye 378). But Elaine is "terrified to get into bed with a
woman" (Cat's Eye 378). If women become as powerful as men, they won't resist from misusing. Both can be equally ruthless. Elaine in a way rejects the extreme views of these feminists. Charna, one of the feminists, describes the three Muses as Elaine's "disconcerting deconstruction of perceived gender and its relationship to perceived power, especially in respect to numinous imagery" (Cat's Eye 406). However Charna's very limited and narrow feminist concerns do not suffice to describe the feelings that Elaine had while doing the work. Elaine's resistance to the narrow critical readings that her paintings have elicited can in one sense be seen as Atwood's hesitation to reduce and classify. This is evident in the extension of spaces that are usually confimed.

In The Handmaid's Tale Offred distends the subversion of closures into the physical space of the metropolis by mapping its streets and glossing it with the other spaces of memory during her visits to the shops. Shopping is one of the major activities that constitute the routine existence of the handmaids in Gilead. In an attempt to cover up and cancel all traces of history, the State has removed the names of shops and signs are used in their place. During her daily visits to these shops, Offred tries to reinscribe on the spaces, what has been "painted out" (Handmaid's Tale 24) by Gilead. Her penetrating eyes perforate the signs and the coat of paint and reveal the
lettering behind them. She records how “Lilies of the Valley” used to be a movie theatre and festivals were held there for students. The chicken, “wrapped in butcher’s paper and trussed with sting,” that she got from ‘All flesh,’ reminds her of the plastic shopping bags about which Luke and herself used to quarrel. Luke used to get angry with her for storing those bags which, according to him, were dangerous for their child. As Offred walks down the lanes of Gilead, she creates parallel roads internally—the memory lanes that take her to an expunged past and reveal her urge for freedom. Lennard J. Danis remarks:

Space in novels... must be more than simply a backdrop... novelistic spaces must have dimensions and depth; they must have byways and back alleys; there must be open rooms and hidden places; dining rooms and locked drawers, there must be a thickness and interiority to the mental constructions that constitute the novel’s space. (53)

Different spaces intervene during the shopping... it is during these daily walks that they usually visit the wall where hanged criminals are displayed as a spectacle. Offred carefully looks at each body to ensure that none of them is Luke’s. “What I feel is that I must not feel. What I feel is partly relief, because none of these men is Luke” (Handmaid’s Tale 32). They are not
allowed to go to the river which in earlier times used to have a boathouse on its banks. People used to sit there and watch the water. “When we think of the past it’s the beautiful things we pick out. We want to believe it was all like that” (Handmaid’s Tale 29). Thus every space in Gilead creates for Offred an alternate space from the past, the entry into which is prohibited by Gilead. Painting scenes from this glorious past and trying to incorporate it into the restricted frame that Gilead permits, Offred attempts to break down those constrictive frames.

Offred’s memory superimposes upon the space of her room, the spatial demarcations of the hotel room where she used to meet Luke before their marriage. Her very existence in the room iterates her pre-Gileadean existence. The triangularity in Offred’s relationship with the married Luke is repeated in her relationship with the Commander, where, according to LeBihan, she causes “a rupture in the nuclear family unit” while at the same time trying to bridge the deficiency in the unit:

In Gilead, the handmaid’s space is between the Commander and his wife: The sexual act is transformed from the containment of the nuclear family in the pre-revolution, when two metaphorically fused to form one, into a multiple fission of the familial unit, with the handmaid standing for the wife but precisely positioning herself in
between the wife and the Commander as a rupture in the once
traditional coupling. 102

During the pre-Gileadean as well as the Gileadean relationship, Offred’s
position is that of an appendage, an attachment. But the difference lies in the
fact that while the one is approved by biblical authority, in the hotel room
though there were “Bibles in the dresser drawers... no one read them very
much” (Handmaid’s Tale 48). Offred used to “waste not want not.”
However, as Offred carefully explores each section of her room, she revokes
the “wasting” of the past. “I explored this room, not hastily, then, like a hotel
room, wasting it” (Handmaid’s Tale 48). Thus the space of her room is
transmuted and the hotel room is superimposed on it. As she waits in the
room, it becomes a waiting room and when she goes to bed it gets
transformed into a bedroom (Handmaid’s Tale 47). This small room lacks the
decorations that the earlier room had. The chandelier has been taken out and
a blank space confronts her as she looks up to the ceiling. Paintings in the
hotel room had landscapes and “women in period costume” (Handmaid’s Tale
48) pictured in them; but her present room has a single watercolour picture of
blue irises “framed but with no glass” in order to prevent cutting edges
(Handmaid’s Tale 7) that can incise the order of Gilead. The extra
dimensions those frames add on to the flat two dimensionality of Gilead bring the surplus determination that unsettles univocal and monolithic structures.

Nick’s room also becomes the venue for Offred’s illegal underground activities that define her quest for freedom. The clandestine relationship with Nick brings back to her the pleasant memories of her relationship with Luke. The room becomes an ambiguous space which, while being one of the most dangerous places if caught, also gives her the safety and security of a cave (Handmaid’s Tale 253). It makes her feel that there is no need to cross the boundaries of Gilead to attain freedom. “The fact is that I no longer want to leave escape, cross the border to freedom” (Handmaid’s Tale 255). She admits that she wants to be with Nick and “recognize[s] this admission as a kind of boasting” (Handmaid’s Tale 255). The room thus becomes another space of freedom, of liberation, where Offred is able to express her desires. As she walks towards Nick’s room, she remembers a time when big houses had such apartments, called a ‘bachelor’ or a ‘studio,’ rented out to students or a Young single person with a job” (Handmaid’s Tale 244). The rooms were displayed in advertisements as ‘separate entrance’ which “meant you could have sex, unobserved” (Handmaid’s Tale 244). This “unobserved” and clandestine sex is what goes on in Nick’s room. Thus Offred, in a way, tries to reinscribe an erased history. Her room is the space where sex is frustrated.
Though she discovers clear evidence left behind by people “of love or something like it, desire at least, at least touch” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 49), she knows that it is not possible to restore it. “I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me, but there wasn’t room” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 49). The only thing that took place in bed was “sleep; or no sleep” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 7).

In contrast to this, in Nick’s room she finds the space to give vent to her suppressed feelings and she thus frustrates the regulated sexual act that Gilead permits within its borders. Though it is Serena Joy who instigates the relationship (as a functional one meant merely for reproductive purposes), Offred goes to the extent of visiting Nick, even avoiding Serena’s eyes: “I went back to Nick. Time after time, on my own, without Serena knowing. It wasn’t called for... I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely. I didn’t even think of it as giving myself to him, because what did I have to give? I did not feel munificent, but thankful, each time he would let me in. he didn’t have to” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 252).

There is a revivification of the pleasure of sex, which has been reduced to a mere function in Gilead. Nick is the only person in Gilead to whom Offred reveals her true name. His room becomes the “other” room, where the oppositions confinement/liberation is further dynamised by the birth of Offred’s pre-Gileadean identity. It is also the place where she exaggerates the
freedom Serena conditionally grants for clandestine sex beyond its authorized limits to break down delimitation, in the form of desire that distends and dissolves.

Offred’s travels are the itineraries of her spirit of freedom. All her various excursions within the physical space of Gilead, along with their attendant incursions which map her rambunctious selfhood, are preparatory to the final move she makes in the novel. They are also as ambiguous and double-edged, and are symptomatic of a subversive programme. On the one hand, her travels are part of Gilead’s project for the acclimatization and ideological victimization of the handmaids. The shopping trips thus are their passage to a reductive commercialism, which diminishes them to the condition of mere customers forced to purchase only sanctioned wares in a heavily controlled market. Offred’s peregrinations to the Commander’s room, Nick’s room and Jezebel’s trace the trajectories of desire in the novel, registering Gilead’s strategies of detention.

But, on the other hand, Offred’s travels are also her expeditions into the unauthorized spaces; the spaces of the clandestine nexus among those who resist. In her trips to the shops, Offred stretches and dilates the geography that inscribes the spatial designations of her Gileadean subjectivity. The Commander’s room being a venue for the articulation of language as a
simulacrum for physical sex, Offred’s course to the room also trains her for the oral performance that rescues her finally from total erasure and deportation. Apart from this evasion, Gileadean confinement of desire is dissipated through its symbolic satiation in Nick’s room, and its carnivalization in the Jezebel’s. Jezebel’s with its ostentatious display of sex overthrows the Gileadean intentions of controlling it. Offred thus constantly wriggles out of the confined space that Gilead draws and maps her own alternate spaces.

Working against closures, Atwood has also carefully avoided narrative closure in her novels. Though at the end of The Edible Woman, Marian is able to resist domination, it is not said as to what she decides to do in the future. With her fiancé gone, she is at the crossroads with Duncan. Whether she goes with Duncan or continues her job at Seymour Surveys, is left for the reader to decide. Similarly in Surfacing even though the unnamed protagonist has decided to reintegrate herself into society, she has not decided how to do it. At the end of the novel, she is still left alone in the Quebecian wilderness. The conclusion of Lady Oracle is even more complicated. If Joan herself is not sure of her future, she is also unable to impose closure on the book that she is writing. Other endings like that of The Handmaid’s Tale and Bodily Harm are also problematic. Thus Atwood explodes closure and as Nathalie
Cooke remarks, she “resists the two endings frequently reserved for a novel’s heroine, marriage or death” (CLC 107). She writes beyond the conventional endings many writers choose.

Apart from this Atwood has “consistently shown her discomfort with narrative conventions by unwriting the novelistic forms she takes up the quest in Surfacing, the gothic in Lady Oracle” (Cooke 107). The novels lack a consistent and continuous structure. They are non-linear, fragmented and unpredictable. The images are drawn from different points of time as well as different locations of space. As Philip Kokotailo remarks, “they seen not to be helping to order the reality that the [narrators present] but instead to be emphasizing its discontinuous phenomenological variety” (“Form in Surfacing” 160). This narrative resistance to closure is a reflection of Atwood’s objection to closure of all kinds.

Violation of spatial closure occurs in many ways in the novels. In Bodily Harm, Rennie’s bedroom is broken into by an unknown intruder. Also, while she is in the Sunset Inn, sounds from the adjacent room, reach her ears, breaking barriers. A similar thing happens in Surfacing where the narrator hears Anna’s cries from the next room. While men like Jake attempt to lock women in cages, Atwood points to the fact that no cage can remain locked forever. Women can “take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in
dissolving it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structure” (“Laugh” 887). By distorting the boundaries of space, women attempt to step into territories till new forbidden to them.

However though Atwood is labelled as a feminist, never has she been one who does not care about her male characters. At the same time she resists all hegemonic and homogenizing power structures. Patriarchy considers women inferior and her self-perception is distorted. Thus conceptualized historically as inferior, whatever associated with women - emotion, nature and the body - are devalued. At the same time, whatever associated with men - reason, culture and the mind - are elevated. Woman is “structured as a commodity through the opposition of private space to public world, interchange with nature to interchange with society mind to body, quantity to quality and ideal to material” (Donaldson 124). Atwood highlights the crippling emphasis that society places on the female image as a consumer item, as a blank page to be written on. She points out how these blank pages are filled in by women themselves, how women write their own personal stories on the palimpsest of history. To quote Irvine:

A three part movement seems, then, to define the production of a female text: a recognition of the silence imposed on the castrated
body by patriarchal rules; an illustration of the use the male pen has made of the female body as text; a final enlightenment that gives birth to an independent and complete female body. When this birth occurs, the female text is ready to be written. ("Murder and Mayhem" 98)

However feminist ideas of keeping women on a separate plane is not Atwood’s sole concern. Her focus is on developing a reciprocal relationship, a relationship of mutual trust, concern and understanding. It is a complementary rather than a conflicting existence that she advocates. Problems should be encountered bravely. The self should not be subjected to the mechanics of civilization. Her’s is a plea for a “fresh understanding of a ravished and misunderstood human landscape” (Trikha 84). The relation that Atwood points out, to the world of culture as well as to the world of nature, is one that includes the excluded. In an interview with Gibson, she has said that, “the ideal would be somebody who would be neither 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” (Eleven Canadian Novelists 27). Throughout the conversation, Atwood repeatedly stresses the need for a third choice in situations where it is assumed there are only two options.
A vision of woman within environment should transform the codes of oppression into a new system of dynamic interrelatedness. Coming out of their victimized state, women should discover their own space/place in society. By altering the traditional boundaries drawn by patriarchy, women in Atwood try to leave the margins and enter the space of the nation. The journey of the Atwood women parallel, Canada’s journey to find its own space in the cultural, economic and political map of the world, by shaking itself free from the domineering presence of the United States. Thus, by altering boundaries, alter/nations are created.