Chapter VII

Summing Up

When Margaret Atwood published her first novel in 1969, she had a ready audience in Canada because of her strong reputation as a young poetess. Her fiction was to give her a popular international readership during the next decade chiefly because of her wry feminine perspective on contemporary domestic life. This does not mean that she is particularly a feminist writer. An overview of the five novels discussed here shows that she is a more broadly based novelist, an ironist who examines many facets of victimization and the possible ways of survival.

The study confines itself to the exploration of five novels for it is only in her novels that she has presented her survival theme elaborately. The wide fictional canvas has given her ample scope to view the existing reality from different angles not only to present its multidimensionality, but also to project a unified vision. While Atwood’s non-fiction (Survival, Second Words and Conversations) form the theoretical frame work of the theme of survival, her fiction is the illustration of her ideas.

In Atwood’s fiction, from Marian to Elaine, women undergo a slow transformation. The mutation extends from being naïve and ignorant about the world’s motive and outlook, to awakening to the realization that it is time for them to be on guard, to be alert so as not to fall a prey to the victimization of the oppressive.
Thus *The Edible Woman* is a comic-satiric commentary on modern day consumerism as it traces a few months in the life of Marian McAlphin who suffers peculiar consequences to an unsuitable engagement. *Lady Oracle* traces the multiple life of Joan Foster, once an ungainly fat girl, now the secret author of costume gothic and a glamorous over-night sensation as a poet. *Bodily Harm* explores the traumatic aftermath of a mastectomy. It also traces in small and large ways masculine aggression, atrocity and terror. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood examines some of the traditional attitudes embedded in the thinking of the religious right, which she finds particularly threatening. *Cat’s Eye* offers an alternative art history which foregrounds women’s achievement as artists. It is like an oasis in a desert for those whose creativity is prevented from blooming. Thus, each novel explores a conventional aspect of young adult experience in somewhat unconventional terms. Each novel incorporates women and their battles for certain roles in society.

Atwood’s first novel, *The Edible Woman*, is perhaps still her most entertaining work even though she fails to give her central character the same novelistic substance of the next protagonists discussed in the earlier chapters. Marian’s increasing personal difficulties are heavily counter pointed with the defection of friends and acquaintances, who are the caricatures of Atwood’s consumer - conditioned society.
Marian’s job as a questionnaire editor at Seymour Surveys provides a wide range of bemused commentary on the inner working of professional consumerism. “Her association with Peter provides an increasingly biting view of the young professional set on the rise”.¹ She consistently identifies him with advertising images of the anonymous well-dressed young bachelor and she thinks of his friends collectively as “the soap-men” (although only one of them actually works for a soap company). Her encounter with a curious young man, Duncan, introduces her to the eccentricities of English graduate student life with its own special forms of intellectual “production-consumption”.

Most pervasive in the novel is the woman’s world, conveyed through witty sketches, “some mere sustained than others, counterpoising Marian’s character and circumstances”.² There are the wistful ‘office virgins’ at Seymour’s, Lucy, Emmy and Millie, each in her own way desperately anxious “to emulate Marian’s good luck at landing Peter”.³ There is Clara Bates who married young, now palely enduring her third pregnancy, and whose chief conversation is the alimentary habits of her offspring. But most dramatic of all there is Ainsley Twekes, Marian’s apartment-mate, currently a tooth-brush tester, who is determined to manipulate some unsuspecting male into fathering her child. Ainsley succeeds by the coy seduction of Marian’s womanizing college friend Len, only to learn that all children need the male model of fatherhood as well. These portraits and their related
episodes do not so much advance the main action concerning Marian’s worsening emotional and physical condition, as thicken the general delineation of the consumerism theme in its particular focus on feminine perceptions of and responses to contemporary middle class expectations.

Over all, The Edible Woman works as well as it does in its comic and ironic effect because of Atwood’s gift for aptly witty language through which Marian expresses her responses to the consumer environment. Even her observations on people suggest consumerism in its many facets-exemplifications throughout the novel. For example, Ainsley, carefully dressed in an innocent girlish fashion in order to trap Len, to Marian demonstrates “the inert patience […] of a pitcher-plant in a swamp with its hollow bulbous leaves half-filled with water, waiting for some insect to be attracted, drowned, and digested” (EW 75). Clara in her seventh month of pregnancy “looked like a boa-constrictor that has swallowed a watermelon” (EW 31). The egocentric Duncan in repose “sat holding the cigarette before him, his hands cupped, like a starved Buddha “burning incense to itself” (EW 51).

For Peter is reserved the mixture of synthetic images that reflect the basic confusions of Marian’s involvement. He has for her the physical charm and poise of a magazine model that she quite often likes, although even in a casual mood he strikes her as too consciously dressed for the occasion. “Here is the language of the ordinary commercialized techniques
familiar to her form her work, might personally affect her, does her peculiar breakdown set in. More and more she thinks of herself as a kind of commodity in Peter’s eye, epitomized by the frivolous red dress she buys for his party and the hair style from a beauty salon where “they treated your head like a cake; something to be carefully iced and ornamented” — all in a girl who, in Ainsley’s observation normally wore her clothes like a camouflage.

Creativity is both the politics and process by which an individual acquires and asserts autonomy. “Creative activity of any kind gives a sense of control over one’s own life, validates one’s existence and enables one to come out of the situation of victimization and become a non-victim”. As a creative non-victim takes shape within her she shapes a cake woman as an image of her former self as a victim — the edible woman for man’s consumption. She exorcises all the former victim elements from within her and projects them on to her artistic creation. Addressing the cake-woman, Marian addresses her self: “You look delicious, very appetizing. And that’s what will happen to you; That’s what you’ll get for being food” (EW 300). If a woman makes herself consumable, she will be consumed. Thus what might have been a conventional story of self-discovery is instead, the frightening vision of a struggle for survival. Marian’s journey is through powerlessness and inaptitude to power and aptitude.
While Joan Foster, the heroine of Lady Oracle, suffers and survives versions of the same conflicts and complications of Marian of The Edible Woman she is presented in a less studied and decidedly more extravagant manner. Essentially Atwood is here indulging in an amusing expansion of her previous fictional motif of the concentric escape. Joan, who secretly writes escapist costume gothic novels, is herself ‘an escape artist’ almost by nature and certainly in practice.

Joan’s first escape at eighteen is from the clutches of her mother. She runs from her first lover Paul, when she falls in love with Arthur, who later becomes her husband. She runs from the Royal Porcupine when he proposes to settle down with her. She runs to Terremato from everyone in her life including Arthur, when her situation finally becomes more than she can bear. “I’d sometimes talked about love and commitment, but the real romance of my life was that between Houdini and his ropes and locked trunk; entering the embrace of bondage, slithering out again. What else had I ever done?” (LO 335). Her departures are always sudden and her disappearance complete, leaving nothing but a trail of ingenious deceptions behind her.

Joan here is shown to will and create her own traps, her own illusions in love and life. With each escape, she assumes a different name until she becomes multinamed. Joan has recourse to extra-marital affairs. This dramatic choice affects her life. The consequences of these affairs are
painful to her. Her names multiply until she is cornered. The central theme
of the novel, from here becomes the resolution of these multiple
personalities. Joan has to learn to acknowledge the various personalities she
has always kept separate. She begins to think of ways and means of
improving and reforming her life. Her steps to survival start with her
speculations about her mistakes. She decides to be pragmatic and face life
head on.

Rennie Wilford of *Bodily Harm* is a more mature version of Marian
and Joan. Several of the interiorized fears of Marian and Joan are here
externalized through plot line in a manner which suggests that Atwood is
trying to create a different kind of synthesis of private and public worlds.
There is a new concern with questions of public awareness and social
responsibility. Personal adjustment, compromise and resignation are no
longer sufficient.

Male aggressiveness and violence treated in *The Edible Woman* and
*Lady Oracle* become a darker matter in *Bodily Harm*. The fear has explicit,
not imagined causes and it is permanent in its scars. In addition, Rennie’s
fear takes on more than simply a personal meaning in her life. The novel is
explicitly a feminist novel in that its subject is violation. Violation of the
female by the male becomes a principal metaphor, although not merely as
the expression of narrow feminism. Violation is not limited to women
victims. Barbara Hill Rigney observes:
Atwood’s point in this story is that we are all somehow guilty of being human and that malignancy is, quite possibly a metaphor for the human condition. Atwood argues [...] for a recognition of and a commitment to that human condition, no matter how brutal or absurd.  

‘Massive involvement’ is for Atwood a term which reflects positive action. Thus, Atwood forces her readers to see beneath surfaces, to confront a kind of reality that is revolutionary.

Rennie who had been proud of her liberated and independent existence becomes aware of the still traditional attitude once she steps into the Caribbean. She realizes that women have not progressed at all, and also that men are basically dangerous: “She’s afraid of men; and its simple, its rational, she’s afraid of men because men are frightening” (BH 290). Women, she finds, be it in Canada or Caribbean in the 1980s are still physically mutilated, as Lora is, just for the pleasure of men. In the Caribbean chopping up or beating one’s wife or woman is forgiven, for it is seen as a crime of passion and so pardonable. Rennie is totally disappointed and distraught, her single aim, like the traditional woman, being to save herself.

It becomes obvious that the theme of victimization and survival that are replete in Bodily Harm are not just feminist concerns but that they are also the political issues that determine the survival of their country. As a
woman writer, Rennie draws the reader's attention deliberately towards the issues of suffering and survival as conditions of both the Canadian experience and female experience.

Atwood portrays three successive generations and the gap between each generation which reflects the gradual change in Canada. Rennie's grandparents are strict disciplinarians who stick to old values. The relationship between Rennie's mother and father reveals a state of degeneration and the abandoning of old values in favour of the new. Rennie is paralyzed with a kind of fear which threatens her from within and without. Canada's inherited traditions and customs are seen in Griswold where, "the standard aimed at home was not beauty but decency" (BH 54). Rennie, a modern woman, drinks and smokes much against her tradition. Her generation reflects Canada under colonialism. Lacking a common racial, religious, linguistic or political heritage, the people of Canada find it difficult to achieve a Canadian unity. Through Bodily Harm, Atwood reveals that despite these differences, it is a lack of interest and self-confidence, and a lack of patriotism which make the Canadians fail in their endeavour to find a Canadian identity.

Lora, who has resorted to prostitution for her own and Rennie's survival and who has been brutally beaten, directs her: "Tell someone I'm here [...] Tell someone what happened" (BH 289). To tell, to report, to bear witness, then, is Rennie's politics of survival. By the end of the novel,
Rennie realizes that she is “[...] a subversive. She was not once but now she is, a reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report” (BH 301). The same necessity, the same indication of political commitment, also validates the experience of the heroine of The Handmaid’s Tale.

In The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood expands her political view to encompass a world in which both men and women are caught up in the struggle to see “who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death” (HT 144). Oppression in all its manifestations, both physical and psychological is Atwood’s subject in Bodily Harm and The Handmaid’s Tale. Both novels are profoundly political. Both represent the confrontation with power and to universal forms; dictatorship, tyranny, torture and the reality of violence.

To ‘pay attention’, to look beneath surfaces, to touch and to tell are also imperatives of Offred of The Handmaid’s Tale. Not paying attention, in fact, is the great fault of Offred’s entire society and the price exacted is the loss of freedom. By remaining uninvolved, by maintaining innocence, the people of a nation have forfeited human rights and become slaves in the near future society of Gilead, a dystopia dominated by the horrors of theocracy.

What was true for Rennie in her non-involvement, is here true for an entire society:

There were marches, of course, a lot of women and some men [...] But I didn’t go on any of the marches [...] I had to think
about them, my family, in him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking (BH 189).

Offred and other women have waited too long, have protested too little. They are reflections of Atwood’s basic concern that victimization, in a real sense, is at least partly a matter of choice.

There is one heroic woman in The Handmaid’s Tale, an equivalent to Lora in Bodily Harm who does rebel. Moira protests repeatedly, escapes periodically, is tortured, but presumably survives. She represents an ideal for Offred. Like Moira, Offred too survives, perhaps not at all in control of her world, but at least in control of herself, and certainly with the recognition that “political confrontation is not merely a choice, but a human responsibility”. Her responsibility is to report, to warn another world. Reporting validates her own existence. It gives her a sense of control over her life. Narrating a story thus becomes an active strategy of survival for oneself and others in a patriarchal universe.

Atwood turns from the life of the buried, smothered women to examine the other side of the coin, the woman who has fought her way to freedom as an artist. Elaine Risley in Cat’s Eye, Atwood’s semi-auto biographical novel, can escape the situations that entrap her, like Joan Foster, and like Rennie and Offred she is driven to bear witness to what she
knows and feels. Unlike any of the previous narrators, Elaine finds the means to shape her most painful memories into works of art.

Elaine is like Rennie in *Bodily Harm* in that she feels quite in control of her career and her relations with men. Elaine is thus a feminist in a popular sense of the term. However, she is bewildered by her relations with other women, until she reunites with the central figures in her youth: her mother, her friend Cordelia, and another friend’s mother, Mrs. Smeath. Having existed for forty years only as unconscious and profoundly compelling subjects for her art, these women must enter Elaine’s conscious memory in the novel’s climactic moments. As always in Atwood’s fiction, such moments reconnect the central character with her feelings, especially her emotional bond to other women.

As Elaine’s mother is dying, Elaine reveals her feelings: “I’m aware of a barrier between us. It’s been there for a long time. Something I have resented. I want to put my arms around her. But I am held back” (CE 397). Then, at the opening of her show, Elaine admits frankly: “I am swept with longing, I want my mother to be here” (CE 351). Soon after that admission, Elaine begins to believe, for the first time since her youthful trauma, that perhaps another woman “really does like me” (CE 411). One of the organizers of the Retrospective tells Elaine: “We’re all very proud of you” (CE 410), and Elaine perhaps begins to believe that.
The malicious, unfeeling aspect of Elaine’s personality seems clearly linked to the figure of Mrs. Smeath, and it is this aspect that, ironically enables Elaine to survive her young adulthood and indeed forsters her success as a painter. But its harmful effects are also shown in Elaine’s judgemental treatment of her associate Susie, a young woman who becomes pregnant by the lover whom she and Elaine share, their art teacher, Josef. When Elaine answers Susie’s desperate call and finds Susie near death as the result of a self-induced abortion, Elaine echoes thoughtlessly the words of Mrs. Smeath once directed at her: “It serves her right” (CE 321). Only when Elaine has fully accepted the legacies of the other two powerful figures from her youth, her mother and Cordelia, can she temper the harshness of her attitudes toward other women, attitudes learned through Mrs. Smeath’s treatment of her.

Cordelia has “power over” (CE 113) Elaine. “This power lies in the wonderfully imaginative quality of Cordelia’s girlhood plots, a quality that helps to shape Elaine’s own imagination and contributes to Elaine’s decision to pursue a career as an artist”. 10 She muses in the end upon what she has just been able to acknowledge as lacking in her life. Having finally brought to consciousness the repressed memories of her childhood traumas, she can again feel the full range of her emotions. On the airplane enroute to her Vancouver home after the retrospection, Elaine realizes her loss, looking at the people in the seats next to hers, “this is what I miss, Cordelia” (CE 421).
Elaine had been successful and in control, but at the expense of denying her connection with other women. She will revise her views of Mrs. Smeath, her own mother and Cordelia.

Thus, the dominant theme in Atwood’s fiction is survival. Atwood theorizes that the dominant image in Canadian fiction is survival, the unheroic survival of victimization:

[…] the main idea is the first one: hanging on, staying alive.

Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed: the aim is not to see whether he will live at all. Our central idea is one which generates, not the excitement and sense of adventure or danger which The Frontier holds out […] but an almost intolerable anxiety. Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience – the North, the snow-storm, the sinking ship – that killed everyone else. The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of this survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life.9

The novels discussed in Chapters II, III, IV, V and VI, however, do provide a series of portraits of women, each of whom achieves an appreciable level of self-realization, despite the psychologically devastating effects of the male supremacist societies in which each protagonist lives and
in which women are often victims and lunatics – losers in the war of sexual politics.

Atwood condemns these social systems, both political and private, which deny individual freedom and contribute to psychological fragmentation, alienation and madness.

Atwood indicates that women in particular suffer from more or less obvious form of schizophrenia, being constantly torn between male society’s prescriptions for female behaviour, their own tendencies towards the internalization of these role, and a nostalgia for some lost, more authentic self.¹¹

How to prevail as an authentic self against such role prescriptions, how to survive psychologically and assert individuality, is the major consideration of Atwood.

For the female individual to survive, she must recognize or reject not only the social arrangement, but her own participation in these arrangements as well. Atwood’s protagonists ultimately achieve such a recognition. Each affirms, at the end, a superior sanity based on personal order and the discovery of at least the potential for an authentic and integrated self.

Atwood spells out what is new in her protagonists: “In a novel I’m interested in seeing characters put in position in which they have to make choices. I mean choices that really affect them, not like what they’re going to have for breakfast”.¹²
According to Atwood, society limits the choices of women, and she prefers to portray women who make clear-cut dramatic choices. What is different about these women is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices. “They are constantly engaged in the dialectic of survival”.

It is essential for them to redefine the term survival, which is not a mere continuance of life in the same old traditional fashion. It is for them a challenge to better their own personal existence.

The new woman who has been explored in this thesis reveals that she is not the ‘ideal’ or the ‘best’ woman. She is new by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society and in exploring her true potential, along with “the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs”. The survival theme thus establishes a Canadian woman’s voice and vision.

Her new identity would help her to survive patriarchy neither as a victim nor as a victimizer, not even as a victor, but as an equal. Thus Atwood’s focus is based on emancipatory practices on creative non-victim positions, on the articulation of alternatives and opposition. Her novels offer less negative visions of female futures from similar pasts, through a mature acceptance of the pain of living and of having lived. Atwood’s feminist thought is positively pro-woman and not anti-man. It seeks to offer a life-affirming, survivalist, and human rights approach for placing women on equal footing with their male-counterparts.
Scope for Study:

The available critical materials also show other areas of study that can be attempted in Margret Atwood’s fiction. Postmodernism, Ecofeminism, Nature, Images and Metaphors, to name a few. She is a renowned poetess and hence a comprehensive study of her poems can be made. Her short stories are challenging too.

To revert to the novels once again, the tone of Atwood’s novels as a whole is, of course, dark. A reader must face the fact that, to a large extent, the tone is undeniably sombre and negative, and that it is both a reflection and a chosen definition of the national sensibility. That is, the artist takes her colouring from her environment, though she may intensify it by adding a little mark of her own. However, there are elements in her novels, which, although they are rooted in this negativity, transcend it. The characters make a halting but authentic breakthrough from their almost hopelessly trapped environment. The moments of affirmation neither deny the negative ground, nor succumb to it.

"Twentieth century writers have produced more dystopias than utopias". Atwood, true to the spirit of the age and the reality around her portrays a post-traumatic stress disorder, common to so many people in today’s society. Nevertheless, these stresses in the life of the women characters in her novels have turned out to be lessons to be learned in order to realize the strength they never knew they had. Their victimization has
become their empowering gifts of life. Through the losses of their lives, they have found the honour of their lives and have learned the all important lesson – the first person you need to love is yourself. Margaret Atwood has always believed that the artist is a responsible citizen and not a passive victim. She has based her characters with a formidable drive and determination to survive. This thematic study establishes the thesis that though the protagonists of Atwood experience outward defeats, they gain inward victories.