ABSTRACT

Canadian Literature is a literary output arising out of a confluence of the two main streams in the English language – British and American. It soon asserted its nationalism and developed an independent tradition. It gained, down the years, a unique identity of its own, transcending cultural and racial barriers. The twentieth century has seen Canada’s plenty in fiction writing, and it is remarkable that women writers outnumber the male writers in Canada. In keeping with the sweeping changes taking place on a global footing in relation to the woman’s self, position, power and politics, women writers of Canada took up the rights, responsibilities, prospects and problems of women as the prime motif. It is the selfsame theme that captured the imagination of Margaret Atwood.

Margaret Atwood is the most prominent figure in contemporary Canadian Literature as a poet, novelist, critic, short story writer and winner of more than fifty literary awards including the prestigious Booker Prize for Literature. Although a great deal of attention has been given to some of the major aspects of Margaret Atwood’s novels such as images, visions, language, narrative designs, duality, alienation, subjectivity, psycho analysis, feminist poetics and sexual politics, certain themes have not been fully explored. While Atwood has explored the survival theme in Canadian Literature as such, the same theme in her novels has not been given due
attention. This study critically examines the politics adopted by Atwood's women protagonists to survive.

The object of this thesis is to highlight the main aspects of the survival of women in the novels of Margaret Atwood and to establish the thesis that Atwood's women are different, in that they refuse to be victims and thus survive their predicament. An interpretation of the strategies adopted by the protagonists to survive has been made. Within the limited canvas available for expounding the thesis, the study confines itself to five of her major novels.

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter begins with an introduction to the intellectual atmosphere of her age. It gives a brief sketch of Margaret Atwood's life and achievements. The term "survival" is defined and the treatment of the same theme by novelists other than Canadian is touched upon. It also brings into focus how women use their language in voicing their sufferings.

Chapter Two entitled "Surviving Consumerism" analyses the politics of female survival in The Edible Woman. The novel is an indictment of what can be regarded as the "male consumption" of women in a patriarchal, capitalistic and consumerist society. It exposes how even an economically independent woman takes a long time to be conscious of her marginalization as the 'second sex'. It asks the question: "What is a woman in a consumer
society?" The novel’s ending denies the answer that she is a seductively packaged female, both hunting for and hunted by the hungry male. Life itself is a consumer / consumed process; we may not live to eat but we must certainly eat to live.

Chapter Three, which has the title “Surviving Duplicity,” is a brief survey of the politics of female survival in Lady Oracle. Through this novel, Atwood seems to comment on the pretences of women, who sacrifice themselves to please others. The novel calls upon women to be pragmatic and face life head on. To survive in this society you need to contribute to your life in your own way, not in the way someone else decides. For women to survive, their co-dependent behaviour should be weakened, and their own inner directives should be strengthened. Lady Oracle exhorts women not to barter reality any longer for a pseudo security promised by males. It encourages women to exercise their autonomy and be free to pursue interesting and challenging careers.

The Fourth chapter, bearing the title "Political Survival", elucidates Bodily Harm as a travelogue that addresses itself to the nature and violence of the victimization of women. It exposes the wickedness of men on the one hand and the brutality of the state on the other. The novelist advocates the need for a jail break and re-creation. In this way, a possible resistance can be made in order to turn the individual and national dreams into realities.
Chapter Five, headed "Surviving Theocracy" is devoted to the women's struggle for survival in The Handmaid's Tale. It is a “dystopian”, cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society based on theocracy where women are denied the basic rights. It also recognizes that the structures that cause and perpetuate woman's oppression are arbitrary. In this way, Atwood tells us in her cautionary tale something that we need to know about the human capacity for survival, so that the novel becomes a canonization of feminism.

The penultimate chapter bearing the heading "Surviving Childhood Victimization” highlights how Atwood explodes the myth of childhood innocence in the novel Cat's Eye. The novel is unusual as it builds upon the most detailed and perceptive exploration of young girlhood. It is the story of how the little girl who got bullied by her girl friends was able to respond to other people when she grew up. The journey of her life helps her see the negative effects of being overwhelmed by others.

The concluding chapter, in addition to being a summing up, attempts to focus on the new woman. The new woman portrayed by Atwood is thus in the process of emerging. What is new is the essential awareness that women have long been exploited and the feeling that it is time to become human. Atwood's female protagonists in all these five novels are identical in refusing to be victims and survive their predicament. Survival for them
means that there is no dominance or submission, but that all individuals are free to determine their own lives as equals.

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 by them in order for them to realize the strength they never knew they had. Their victimization has become their empowering gifts of life. Through the horror 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 shaped 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.
NOTE ON THE TEXT

The investigator has made extensive use of the following texts and quoted passages from the five major novels of Margaret Atwood in Chapters II, III, IV, V and VI respectively.

THE EDIBLE WOMAN
By
Margaret Atwood
(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969)

LADY ORACLE
By
Margaret Atwood
(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976)

BODILY HARM
By
Margaret Atwood
(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981)

THE HANDMAID’S TALE
By
Margaret Atwood

CAT’S EYE
By
Margaret Atwood
(Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988)

The novels The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle, Bodily Harm, The Handmaid’s Tale and Cat’s Eye are referred to by the abbreviations EW, LO, BH, HT and CE respectively.