Chapter I

Introduction

We have not faded into the earth like snow before the summer sun of 'progress' nor have we stagnated in some sort of retrograde time capsule. We have survived and will continue to survive.¹

General Perspectives:

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”.² 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 women's self, position, power and politics, women writers of Canada took up the rights, responsibilities, prospects and problems of women as the prime motif.

Although these sweeping changes have promoted the status of woman, her condition has not improved much. Woman and her images are still moulded, reshaped and reoriented by man and for man. It is the awareness of her condition and the treatment meted out to her that made women writers take up the question of female identity in a male-dominated
society. The woman’s role as a writer has helped in breaking the cocoons of subordination and emerging with the knowledge of the female power. The feminist consciousness has prompted her to reflect on her ‘self’ and assert her individuality. Her crucial questions are: who am I? where am I, a woman getting to? how does society see me, a woman? how do I see myself and how should I direct my life and thoughts? These survival problems of a woman have captured the imagination of Margaret Atwood too.

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. The publication of Atwood’s book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, helped to put Canada on the literary world map. In that work she explores and names her own tradition and national identity through a study of Canadian literature. She discovers a tradition replete with images of victimization. Thus according to her, 'survival ' has been the focus of the energies of the Canadian women in the spectrum of their literature.

The term 'survival' seems self explanatory. The dictionary explains the term as ‘outliving’ or ‘to come alive through’. It stands for continuing to live or exist. A survivalist is a person who believes in ensuring personal survival of a catastrophic event by arming himself and by often living in the wild. According to Northrop Frye, the word ‘survival’ implies living
through a series of crises, each one unexpected and different from the others, each one to be met on its own terms. In the present work, however, the term refers to the survival of the spirit and not to bare physical survival. Margaret Laurence expresses it in terms of "an inner freedom" and says that it includes "the survival of human dignity and in the end the survival of some human warmth and the ability to reach out and touch others". The strategies adopted in Atwood’s novels by the women characters to survive, have been examined by the researcher in an attempt to interpret these valid problems.

A brief account of Atwood’s life and career may help in understanding her novels better. Atwood, the daughter of Carl and Margaret Killam Atwood, was born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa. She is the second of three children in a family with strong cultural roots in Nova Scotia, Sault Ste Maria, and in Toronto. As a result of her father's entomological research, she spent extended periods of her childhood with her family in northern Ontario and in the Quebec bush, and did not attend a full year of formal school until grade eight. Settling in Toronto in 1946, her parents continued to take the children into the northern woods in the summer. This childhood experience prepared and provided the background for her later novels and also for much of the thematic material in her 'nature' verse.

Atwood's writing career has fetched a number of awards and honours, including the prestigious Canadian literary prize – The Governor General's
Award. The honorary degrees were from Trent University (Litt.D.), Queens University (LL.D), and Concordia University of Toronto (Litt.D.). She was hailed by the 'Malahat Review' as the presiding genius of Canadian letters. Since winning the Governor General's Award at 27 for the Circle Game, her full length book, Atwood has created a substantial body of writing – poetry, fiction, and criticism. A prolific writer, versatile social critic and a keen and perceptive observer of life, she has produced eleven novels, fifteen books of poetry, five short story collections and four books of literary criticism. She has also written four children's books.

Her first novel The Edible Woman (1969) has been hailed as the intelligent woman's guide to survival in the contemporary world. It celebrates "the spirit of those who dare to resist the anesthesia administered by consumer society and survive spiritually in Crazyland". Her second novel Surfacing (1972) is a successful psychological exploration. In this novel Atwood narrates the experiences of archetypal figures in the collective unconscious which helps the narrator to move from a state of fragmentation to that of psychic wholeness. In Lady Oracle (1976), Atwood seems to say that even those who often fail and are unable to ascend, continue to survive with a tremendous zest for life.

Life Before Man (1979) talks of the gradual disintegration of family relationships. Bodily Harm (1985) makes us realize that negative innocence is the most appalling characteristic of evil when it appears in the actual
world of political atrocities. It challenges us to become human. The Handmaid's Tale (1985) is a futuristic fantasy. Oppression in all manifestations, both physical and psychological, is Atwood’s subject in this novel; Language in itself is the ultimate affirmation and the greatest revolution against a world of fanaticism where freedom of speech is a capital offence.

Atwood's Cat's Eye (1988) is an emotionally engaging fiction. It records the heroine's alienation and survival from childhood to middle age. Atwood's suggestions here stress that feminism must expand if it is to achieve broader relevance and create solidarity among women. The Robber Bride (1993) and Alias Grace (1996), also re-establish her as one of the world's leading women novelists writing in English today. In The Robber Bride, “Atwood is concerned not only with female romance fantasies and male fantasies about the feminine, but also with the ways such fantasizing affects women’s concepts of themselves and their relations with other women”.

The Blind Assassin (2000) has won the greatest of honours – the Booker Award. It is an extraordinarily accomplished novel, deserving the highest merit, and is clearly a work of superb artistry. The extent of Atwood’s international recognition is realized by the fact that within a month after publication, The Blind Assassin sold 185,000 copies. It is a
story of duplicities and betrayals, in the glossy pretentious world of the fashionable and the ambitious.

Oryx and Crake (2003), Atwood’s latest novel, is a dazzling book of her vision of the future, based on the notion of a single human survivor after a global outbreak of disease. But it is also a fable for our times. It chills us with presentiments of what genetic research may bring. “The novel plays with the major themes of modern culture: GM foods, cloning, cryogenics, AIDS, Viagra, species death, organ (not organic) farming”. At the same time, it recalls, with humour and intelligence, a number of literary and social ideals: the ideal human community, the conception of God, perfect love, equality, innocence, and the last man.

Her works have been translated into more than twenty languages and published in twenty five countries. More than any other Canadian writer, Atwood has attracted maximum critical attention from various parts of the world. Atwood’s most influential and controversial book is Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, was published in 1972. Even before the book was released, ‘The Toronto Star’ reported its “staggering first printing of 20,000, with college-course outlines snapping it up sight unseen”. Nearly twelve years later, it is evident that Survival itself, and the excitement created by it, were more manifestations of an intensely nationalistic period in Canadian history than permanent alterations to the national literature. The book provided a readable and witty access to
Canadian literature at a time of great public desire for such access. It was openly sociological rather than literary in its approach, seeking to use literature to define “a national habit of mind”. It provided “an illuminating approach to the kinds of poetry and fiction that Margaret Atwood and many of her contemporaries are writing and are most interested in reading”.10

A brief outline of the geographical, historical and socio-economic facts which contribute to the Canadian experience of survival is appropriate at this juncture. In his 1965 “Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada”, Northrop Frye observes that Canadians have an identity crisis with a difference for they are less perplexed by the existential question “Who am I?” than by some riddle such as “Where is here?”11 In her thematic guide, Atwood perceptively remarks:

“Who am I?” is a question appropriate in countries where the environment, the “here” is already well-defined, so well – defined in fact that it may threaten to overwhelm the individual. In societies where everyone and everything has its place a person may have to struggle to separate himself from his social background, in order to keep from being just a function of the structure. “Where is here?” is a different kind of question. It is what a man asks when he finds himself in unknown territory, and it implies several other questions.
Where is the place in relation to other places? How do I find my way around it?

Canada, with its vast empty spaces and its largely unknown lakes, rivers and islands seems a strange land even to Canadians. Thus, Canadian writers “in their search for a usable Canadian tradition, centre their discussions around two themes: history and geography. Their desire to define a distinctive Canadian tradition expresses itself as nostalgia for history and for a unique sense of place”.

Canadian writing has always been pervaded by an awareness of the wilderness:

...those vast areas of dark forests, endless prairies or trackless wastes of snow which are geographical facts and written into the History of Canada’s exploration and settlement.

Throughout the Canadian literary tradition wilderness has been and continues to be the dominant cultural myth, encoding Canadians’ imaginative responses to their landscapes and history as an image of national distinctiveness.

So deep is the effect of the landscape on, what John Moss calls, the “geographical imagination” of its inhabitants that it emerges as the prime determiner of Canadian identity.

Landscapes described in poems, novels or short stories are seldom just about nature. They are, “usually about the poet’s attitude towards the
external natural universe. That is, landscapes [...] are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind”. That the land symbolizes elements of the inner lives of its inhabitants is evident from the manner in which the Canadian psyche responds to the vast and empty northern wilderness. In her article “True North”, Atwood says that the North is always at the back of the minds of the Canadians and adds: “The north focuses our anxieties. Turning to face north [...] we enter our own unconscious. Always in retrospect the journey north has the quality of dream”. Like the unconscious parts of our inner selves, the wilderness both attracts and terrifies those who dare to enter it.

Besides being obsessed by the landscape, the Canadians are also puzzled by its diversity. The confusion experienced by them can only be understood in the light of the political and cultural history of their country. Except for its aboriginal populations, Canada is peopled wholly by immigrants and/or their descendants from across the globe. Hence, to speak of Canada is to speak of a nation made up of many nations. Historically, too, Canada has always been so, having as it does three founding fathers viz. the Natives, the English and the French who differed from one another racially as well as culturally.

Before Canada was colonized, the French, the English and the Americans periodically carried away furs, minerals and pulpwood from it. Unlike most colonial nations which have known subordination under one
‘mother’ country, Canada has been a colony paying allegiance to several mother countries. It was originally a colony of France and England. The French surrendered New France to the English after their defeat in the Battle of Plains of Abraham in 1759.

After the French English war of 1812, a sense of national consciousness may be said to have emerged in Canada even as the country itself acquired the status of a nation at the end of the Second World War. In 1867, the British North American Act established the Dominion of Canada with two official languages (English and French) and two religions (Protestantism and Roman Catholicism). Since then, Canada has slowly but surely become an economic colony of the United States of America.

Unlike the United States however, Canada did not feel the need to assert its nationhood in any significant way. As a result, people belonging to various ethnic groups attempted to preserve their respective cultures and failed to respond to the idea of Canada as a whole. In more recent years, however, it has become difficult to either perceive or project Canada in such terms. As Mordecai Richler caustically puts it: “This is a country made up of many people, thirty percent of whom are neither English nor French. And within twenty years the majority will not be English or French”. Thus “Canada is both young and old.” It is young as a nation, for it is only a little more than one hundred years old but it is old as a place of settlement for immigrants from various countries. This has led to the growth of the
country’s awareness as a nation with an independent existence, having a distinctive place at the same time in the international arena.

The status of women in a country is closely linked to its socio economic development. The status of the Canadian women was not very different from that of the Natives until the early twentieth century. They were disadvantaged both economically and legally, and were under male control. They were not allowed to keep their own earnings. Educational opportunities were also limited. Women were considered to be unsuitable to work on machines.

Both patriarchy and colonialism involve relationships of domination and suppression, assumed superiority and imposed inferiority, where the dominated is forced to take up the oppressed, exploited victim position. The dominant party makes the laws for its own benefit and advantage, to be conformed to by the dominated group, offering reward for conformity and punishment for non-conformity. Just as colonialism maintains, underlines and emphasizes the difference between the colonizer and the native, patriarchy promotes and stresses the difference between men and women.

Situations started changing after World War I. In the 1930s, women gained homesteading rights on par with men in some provinces. An increasing number of women, both single and married, started taking up paid employment. The Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s brought about tremendous changes in the lives of Canadian women.
The Movement introduced equal pay and work legislations. Property laws changed so that women were entitled to property almost on equal terms as for men.

Climate, geography, history and economics have thus caused the Canadian imagination to be “obsessed with the limitations rather than the possibilities of human experience”\(^19\) and have made “survival” the great fact of Canadian life. A preoccupation with survival is “necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival”\(^20\). Seeing the Canadians willfully casting themselves in the role of victims in fact and fiction, Atwood remarks: “Stick a pin in Canadian literature at random and nine times out of ten you’ll hit a victim”.\(^21\) Modern Canadian writers and critics attempt to help the Canadians create a more positive identity, for they strongly disapprove of the negative identity which ensures from the self-destructive survival myth. The survival mentality prevents the Canadians from respecting themselves for it is “a colonial mentality – the nation cannot act because it sees itself as acted upon, it accepts a passive role and, with perverse narcissism, perpetuates it”.\(^22\) The protagonists of mainstream writers like Atwood, Laurence, Kroestsch and Hodgins for instance, and those created by writers from the First Nations writers as well as those from racial and ethnic minorities, struggle to transcend their victim state.

The development of fiction in Canada itself had been a long drawn out process of struggle. As has already been pointed out, Canadian
Literature is “the fruit of the British seed planted in American soil”. When Canada emerged as a single nation, its literature achieved a new identity. The earliest growth of Canadian Literature can be traced to the oral voices of the original people, the Native tribes spread out in the temperate regions. Theirs was an oral tradition; their songs and stories were handed down from one generation to another. The aboriginal people, in their songs and stories talked about the world around them, for “Canada has had no heroic issues, no gigantic war or adventurous event”. So Canadian writing began with the usual early literature of exploring, pioneer settlements, collections of folk tales, and poems on Canadian landscapes, stories of immigrant life, local colour sketches and historical romance. “Thus it can be said that Canadian Literature, to start with, had only new content, but no form which is autonomous and no myth either”. In such a situation, writing started as reportage. Such writing consisting of reports and explorations led to romances.

“The mist of romantic euphoria began to be dismissed from Canadian fiction when a new effort at realism appeared in the twenties”. The animal stories of Charles G.D.Roberts - Kindred of the Wild (1902), and The Hunters of the Silences (1907) are calm, imaginative, as well as sympathetic and detached. R.J.C .Stead in his three novels – Neighbours (1922), The Smoking Flax (1924), and Grain (1926), succeeded in giving some density to the theme of human work performed against the background of the
prairies. A more compelling realistic novel is *Wild Geese* (1925) by the Norwegian, Martha Ostenso, which pictures with a harsh truth the turbulent life of the members of a family on a flax farm. The emphasis on small town life produced Stephen Leacock's nostalgic comedies, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). Another prose writer of the period is Sara Jeannette Duncan, best known for the novel *The Imperialist* (1904). The two authors might be considered "the polarities between which the best Canadian writing has often moved".27

Leacock, influenced by Dickens and Twain, wrote in the North American humourist tradition which pricked the pretences of the sophisticated and the general. Using the persona of an innocent observer he wrote humorous vignettes of provincial life. Sara Duncan wrote cosmopolitan novels making use of the distinctions between the Canadians, the Americans and the English. She had a strong eye for the structure of society, how the various English-speaking groups formed close-knit communities according to religion and ethnic stock, and how this influenced personal relations and politics. The young imperialist of her novel warns the Canadians of the need for closer ties throughout the empire to meet the challenge of the American economic expansion.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Canadian literary writing did make a mark, but it was not known to the outside world and thus failed in its content. The beginnings were marked by the voluminous writings of poetry
and a few remarkable novels. If F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith established themselves as Canadian poets, it was Hugh MacLenan and Sinclair Ross, who as novelists changed the course of the Canadian fiction. One finds the spirit of an emerging national culture in Smith’s poetry and the same consciousness can be seen in the novels of MacLenan also.

The main Canadian novelists of the first half of the twentieth century are G. Frederick Philip Grove, Mazo de la Roche, Morley Collaghan and Hugh MacLenan. Frederick Grove brought the nineteenth century European nationalism to Canada. When others wrote idylls, his books about the prairies shifted the regional literature from romance to realism. His titles are indicative: Settlers of the Marsh (1925), Our Daily Bread (1928), The Yoke of Life (1930). He portrays the poor immigrants, settlers and farmers, struggling with fate “in the form of sexual desire, innocence, and their swampy marginal farmland”. These are agrarian patriarchs, tragic in their isolation; even their economic success is ironic because they are left only with their autocratic wills to sustain them. Mazo de la Roche is much more romantic in her treatment of rural Ontario than is Grove with the prairies. The Jalna series, beginning from 1927, is an instance of the family saga covering several generations often found in the colonies.

It was with Morley Collaghan that the Canadian novel moved towards urban realism. He is skilled in using symbols to convey a complex Catholic humanism. Collaghan’s The Loved and the Lost (1951) is a landmark of
Canadian fiction in portraying Montreal as a real city which, like New York or Paris in the work of other writers, epitomises man’s spiritual dilemma. The world evoked in Morley Collaghan’s works is a bleak, industrial one, and “its smoky presence rubs off even on the countryside”. His *Barometer Rising* (1941) gives clear expression to the new nationalism that had been implicit in some of the protest writers of the 1930s such as Dorothy Livesay and Leo Kennedy and had become explicit during the war years. The end of colonialism is clearly expressed through the symbolic allegory of the novel’s plot which projects Canada in bondage to serve England during wars, and as neglected during peace.

Hugh MacLenan’s novels like *Two Solitudes* (1945) and *The Precipice* (1948) gave expression to an emerging national and nationalist consciousness. *Two Solitudes* analyses the French-English conflict; *The Precipice* analyses the difference between Canada and the United States, and *The Watch that Ends in the Night* (1959) analyses the rise of national consciousness during the Second World War.

Thus, one finds that Canadian fiction follows approximately the same development as other new nations since the late nineteenth century. It evolves from local humour through an early internationalism, historical romanticism, provincialism and realism, into a new nationalism of the early 1940s. The Canadian novel, however, begins to ‘take off’ in the 1950s with Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, Mavis Gallent and Sheila Watson.
There emerged a contrast between the romantic and the realistic, as well as between conscious mythology and social mythology. "The romances consolidated social mythology and Robertson Davies' *Tempest Tost* is a sardonic study of the triumph of a social mythology over the imaginative one symbolized by Shakespeare’s play". Davies' novels examine what Canadians are and how they became that way. Davies is aware that the real history of the country is that of the small-town Protestants. Raised in poverty they have made their cruel Puritanism a part of the national character. His trilogy - *Fifth Business* (1970), *The Manticore* (1972) and *World of Wonders* (1975) – became international successes. They trace the history of several Canadian families from the early twentieth century to the seventies. As against literary works whose primal focus was on landscape, Davies’ works present the immigrant world of thoughts, dreams and emotional responses. As R.K. Dhawan puts it: "The struggle to come to terms with a landscape, a people, and more than that to aspire for a psychological identification and imaginative oneness with their physical environment – These were Robertson's primal concerns in his dramatic works". Davies also talks about the immigrant race's intellectual pioneers and their struggle to find an artistic atmosphere.

Jewishness is the subject and the tone of all Richler’s works. His best novels *Cocksure* (1968) and *St. Urbain’s Horseman* (1971) portray the tensions of growing up in Canada's urban immigrant communities,
especially in relation to becoming an individual. Richler is preoccupied with the problem of relationship with the Jew and the Gentile, the question of freedom and survival in an indifferent world, the discrepancy between love and the power struggle and the loss of values in the modern age.

Sinclair Ross has written chiefly about the harshness of life on the Canadian prairies. His first novel, *As for me and My House* (1941), set against the draught and depression of the 1930’s is an established classic of the Canadian Literature. Ross describes the efforts of the farmers and the people of the small prairie towns to wrest a living from their bleak environment, and in his style “there is a taut, sparse quality” which is a perfect measure of man’s struggle to endure. His other works *The Well* (1958), *Whir of Gold* (1970) and *Sawbones Memorial* (1974) serve once again to chronicle man’s struggle to survive, and his inclination to dream of a better life.

In the 1960s, there was a rapid growth in the Canadian literature which paralleled Canada’s political growth. The official adoption of the maple leaf flag showed again Canada’s eagerness for recognition and self-definition and since 1960 the best Canadian writing moved gradually “away from the local and parochial”. Artists working with their own familiar regions within Canada began exploring the universal truths of life. The regional consciousness in Canada transformed itself into a national consciousness which further broadened into an international and universal
consciousness. This awakened consciousness led the writers to themes such as quest, identity crisis and self-definition.

An altogether new turn was effected with the appearance of women novelists like Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munroe, Shiela Watson, M.G. Vassanji, Marian Engel, Gabrielle Roy, Anne Hebert, Adle Wiseman, Aritha Van Herk, Jeannette Armstrong and Rudy Wiebe. The women’s movement provided many of these novelists with the courage and motivation to break out of traditional patriarchal forms to depict how women have been abused, exploited and oppressed.

Margaret Laurence is one of the most impressive and outstanding figures during the sixties and seventies. Her writings are characterised by a breath of vision, “a historical sense in the Eliotean sense and a largeness of texture that are unique and distinct in Canadian fiction”.

Alice Munro’s writings are concerned with the adolescence and growing up of complex, young girls. Her stories deal in some detail with ruinous marriages and question the very rightness of marriage itself. Collectively, they offer exhaustive and intense explorations of the progress of women towards selfhood. The emphasis on women which we find in Munro’s novels appears to be symptomatic of an urge to describe the female side of the human condition, a synthesis of women’s insights gained from their own femininity. She believes as she puts it that “there’s a change coming in the lives of girls and women”.
Today, Canada’s writers are significant actors on the international stage: Mordecai Richler, Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munroe, Timothy Findley, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji are also world-renowned. Many of the South Asian immigrant writers have greatly contributed to the growth of the Canadian literature, without the burden of either assimilating or opposing the Canadian mainstream culture. For instance, Rohinton Mistry does not talk about his Canadian experience at all in his Such a Long Journey, and still he has established himself as a Canadian writer. Set against the background of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, the novel examines the existential predicament of the central character Gustad Noble, a tragic hero who is pitted against heavy odds. Slowly, the story of Gustad Noble develops into a tale of a minority community and its sense of powerlessness.

M.G. Vassanji too explores the social, cultural, racial and political issues that the white experienced when they ruled India, though Vassanji’s main concern is not political, but racial and cultural. In Findley’s The Wars (1977) – a First World War story of a young man’s travails - readers witness the ways in which family pride, social status, sexual assault, moral passivity and political inertia, all destroy him. “What is it”, Findley asks, “that separates people from each other – separates them from nature – induces them to violence?"36 This question which haunts his earlier fiction, centrally occupies his next three novels – Famous Last Words (1981) which tells of
the rise of fascism, The Telling of Lies (1986) which probes the meaning of ‘complicity’ and Not Wanted on the Voyage (1984) which elaborates the narrative of the Flood.

Ondaatje focuses his own attention on historical figures, or on the act of recording history itself, in an attempt to question the very feasibility of historical verisimilitude. He strongly rejects the mechanistic, materialistic existence, literal mindedness and brash optimism of the Americans. Thus there are two sides to his writing—one gathers information (dates, times, places etc); the other gathers the secrets of the human heart.

Margaret Atwood’s stories deal with the women’s encounter with the world. They are concerned with the woman’s struggle to discover her self and find self-fulfillment. Atwood has played a key role in setting in motion, many radical ideas in terms of women’s individuality and autonomy, power and politics “through their own strategies of rebellion through tropes of madness, silence, illness and guile”. The aim of her fiction is to make women “critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structures”.

Significance of the study:

The major theme of her novels is the relationship between man and woman, and the distinctive relationship between man and nature. In both the cases, one tries to dominate the other, may be because of the fact that she writes from a woman’s point of view. She identifies women with nature and
men with the technical assault on nature. Nature is very often the victim. Man is pictured as the manipulating oppressor. She presents a number of types to illustrate this hunter-hunted image in her works. The hunted animal is often a symbol of the unconscious in Atwood’s works. At crucial moments, there is a tendency to conquer the unconscious and the hunter is identified with the hunted.

Almost all the stories of Margaret Atwood are about the lives of girls and women between the 1950s and the 1980s. They are concerned with exploration and survival, crossing boundaries, challenging cultural and psychological limits and glimpsing new prospects. One may say that Margaret Atwood has aimed at restructuring social and economic relations in the light of gender equality in Canadian society.

According to Atwood, society limits the choices of women, and she prefers to portray women who make clear-cut dramatic choices. They are in this sense constantly engaged in the politics 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. Rather, ‘survival’ is a challenge to better their own personal existence.

Thus, the theme of survival is central to the works of Margaret Atwood. She repudiates the fragmentation and alienation afflicting her society and feels that the quest for spiritual survival is a necessary antidote to it. The characters in her novels struggle to overcome alienation and
achieve personal and social integration “which is imagined as a freedom to
love, to share, to meet, to touch”.\textsuperscript{39}

Since feminist challenges have been written into women’s texts in her
novels, Atwood’s writing is characterized by the urge to “throw the story
line (of traditional power structures) open to question and to implement
disarrangements which demand new judgements and solutions”.\textsuperscript{40}

In the Canadian context, one comes across mainstream Canadian
writers challenging the dominant British American tradition, thus paving a
way for establishing their true Canadian literary ethos. In the same way
women writers too have challenged the male power or patriarchal control in
their effort to achieve a woman centered writing.

Atwood has been urging women writers to discard the language that
perpetuates male superiority and to forge for them a transparent one which
would represent and transpose a pre-existing reality. She ridicules Quiller-
Couch’s distinction between what he terms ‘Masculine’ and ‘Feminine’
prose styles and has been successful in her attempt at commanding a
‘nonsexist’ language.

Is survival a theme resplendent in Canadian Literature alone? No.
The theme of survival is not restricted to one nation. It is a universal
theme. Nor is it confined to literature written only in the twentieth century.
In the twentieth century however, we encounter diverse experiences of
alienation and survival, as the central characters are drawn not only from the
ruling or upper classes but also from various classes, occupations and races. According to Coomi S. Vevaina, in some literary works, “the characters seem resigned to the fact of being inexorably trapped and overpowered by the world, while in others, they rebel against it and seek ways of transcending their alienation”. The mental anguish of man as depicted in modern literary works, mirrors reality.

In *Dairy Down Under* (1978), Atwood records her impressions of Australia as a country that seems to her to be even more oppressed than Canada. In *Second Words*, Atwood speaks very pointedly of her role as a Canadian, as a woman, and, most importantly, as a critic and a writer of Canadian Literature, and then she moves forward into expanding this theme to the suppressed all over the world. She says:

> I have always seen Canadian nationalism and the concern for women’s rights as part of a larger, non-exclusive picture. Looking back over this period, I see that I was writing and talking a little less about the Canadian scene and a little more about the global one."42

Thus, it is clear that she herself acknowledges the universality of her theme ‘survival’.

**Review of Related Works:**

The same theme has been dealt with by the Indian writer, Anita Desai in her novels. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1982), after living for
twenty years with her husband, it becomes clear to Sita that she cannot take life as it was:

She could not inwardly accept that this was all there was to life, that life would continue thus inside this small, enclosed area, with these few characters churning around and then part her, leaving her always in this grey, dull-lit empty shell.43

Anita Desai’s protagonists might very often fail, but the failure is more a social failure than an individual failure. She values the contemplative, critical and questioning aspect of her protagonists. Her characters – whether it is Bimala of Voices in the City, or Sita of Where shall We Go this Summer? - are not content to take their lot as ‘karma’ and do not believe in shedding a few, self-pitying tears in a dark corner. They are consistently, persistently struggling with their situations for survival.

Toni Morrison, a black-American woman writer, displays a great concern for survival in her novels. In an interview with Chloe, Morrison said: “But the risk of being your own person or trying to have something to do with your destiny, is one of the major battles in life”.44 Morrison is alive to the twin edged sword of racism and sexism, but she has learned to battle the cruelties of both with her wit. A writer with a mission, she has brought several African-American voices into the mainstream of American literature, and her works define the search for identity and the need to preserve cultural roots to avoid a perversion of the human spirit.
The conflict between the past and the future, between ethnicity and progress, is one of Morrison’s obsessive concerns. Son, the hero of Tar Baby (1981), cannot break free from his cultural roots, and has adopted an uncompromising stand, refusing to be cowed down by the dictates to which other African-American men had long since surrendered. He chooses loneliness and defeat rather than spiritual and psychic death. His regressive philosophy of life comes into conflict with that of the aggressive survivalist, Jadine Childs. “One had a past, the other a future and both bore the culture to save the race in his hands”. In her probing analysis of who survives and why, the Morrisonian message is clear: through the power of the human spirit one can wean the best out of bleakness, doubt, horror, poverty, and violence and emerge newer and more whole.

The Australian born Patrick White’s novel The Tree of Man is a tribute to the ability of ordinary men and women to survive against the elemental and inhuman forces of nature in Australia. The action takes place on the outskirts of Sydney. Another of White’s novel, Voss, is a novel about a German explorer in New South Wales, Queensland, and the Northern Territory. In this novel, the author takes an extraordinary hero into an extraordinary country, with the aborigines leading Voss on to further mysteries of magic and death. But the explorer’s real journey is towards the purification of his soul through torments of both agony and joy.

Margaret Atwood once observed:
Canada shares with all of the New World ex-colonies and with others such as Australia and New Zealand, the historically recent experience of a collision between landscape and a language and social history not first indigenous to it, with each side alluring the other.46

Thematically, early Canadian Literature deals with the struggle of the settlers with a harsh environment. In contrast, Atwood gives a nightmarish picture of contemporary life around her, presenting the dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities of late twentieth century urban living. Her vision of life is cast in various forms.

Margaret Atwood shares with her teacher, Northrop Frye, the view that criticism does not reveal the meaning of texts, but the conditions of meaning which are provided by universal myths, modes, genres and images. During her college life, Northrop Frye introduced Margaret Atwood to William Blake. It was the influence of Blake's works that made Atwood see the roots of literature not only in myth but also in nature.

Even more important to Atwood's development, perhaps, was her friendship with teacher and poet Jay Macphersen, whose irony and fine sense of form suggest a literary kinship between the two women. Other female writers too, Atwood claims, have influenced her poetic development over the years: Anne Hebert, P.K. Page, and her contemporaries, Phyllis
Webb and Gwendolyn MacEwen. The writers that Atwood most admires are Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Kafka and Ionesco.

Just as Atwood was influenced by other writers, her works have also had a great bearing on other writers, especially Canadian women writers. Certainly *Survival* appeared to stimulate the writing of other thematic surveys—Elizabeth Waterston’s *Survey* (1973), Laurence Ricou’s *Vertical Man, Horizontal World* (1973), John Moss’s *Patterns of Isolation* (1974) and *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* (1978).

It is only recently that critics and scholars have succeeded in establishing the distinctiveness of Canadian literature. While critics like Northrop Frye and George Woodcock promoted an awareness of the existence of a distinct literature called Canadian literature, it was Atwood’s well-known book *Survival* which shocked the people into a realization of the existence of Canadian literature as a distinct entity. According to Atwood, the central image of Canadian culture is that of “a collective victim struggling for survival.” She also asserts that Canadians have a will to lose, merely because one chooses to be a victim to avoid the responsibility of self-definition.

In her *Survival*, Atwood defines the four basic victim positions. They are as follows:

to deny the fact that you are a victim; to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of fate, the
dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the unconscious, or any other large general power or idea; To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable; to be a creative non-victim.48

Out of the four victim positions, Position Four is not a position for victims in Atwood’s writing. According to her, 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 victimisation and become a non-victim. Sustaining this position is difficult for an individual, but this position holds out the hope and possibility of liberating oneself from the gender power-struggle through creative activity.

Consequently, ‘Victimisation’ and ‘Survival’ are twin themes explored by Atwood in her criticism, fiction and poetry. As a Canadian woman writer, she deals with issues of victimisation and survival as conditions of both the Canadian experience and female experience. At the thematic level, her novels examine themes related to the politics of gender, such as the enforced alienation of women under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of women as functional beings, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women, the gradual carving out of female space by women through various strategies and woman’s quest for identity, self-definition and autonomy.
Therefore, Atwood calls for self-awareness, self-determination and self-affirmation in women rather than letting themselves to live in an unknown territory, as exiles in their own country. Atwood thus advocates patriotism and diagnosis as the first step towards change. This individual and collective awareness of patriotism and diagnosis of society’s need for change, could bring about a national unity among women and foster the realization of a national dream of equality of the sexes. Hence, the portrayal of women in search of an identity for their own selves as well as of their country’s cultural identity is an important phenomenon in Atwood’s recent fiction.

The women portrayed by Atwood suffer from personal victimization which has its roots in the colonial pattern of domination and destruction. The women feel inferior to men and suffer psychological tension, which supports the view that “women’s lives constitute an experience of colonialism”. This is evident in Atwood’s novels, which depict individual women’s place in a male-dominated society. Remaining in this colonised state, they feel oppressed and find it difficult to communicate with others and see others as strangers. Atwood’s portrayal of women’s place in society, their search for identity and their struggle to come to terms with existence, the self and the land, gives a new dimension to the Canadian landscape and portrays the changing character of Canada.
Hypothesis:

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, psychoanalysis, feminist poetics, and sexual politics, the much talked about survival theme in Margaret Atwood’s novels has not been traced and examined. Consequently, this study critically examines the politics adopted by the women protagonists of her novels to survive.

Aims and Method:

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

Chapter Two entitled "Surviving Consumerism" analyses the politics of female survival in The Edible Woman. The novel is an indictment of the “male consumption” of women in a patriarchal, capitalistic, 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 to please others. The novel calls women to be pragmatic and face life head on. To survive a modern society, you need to contribute to your life in your own way, not in the way someone else decides. For women to survive, their codependent behaviour should be weakened, and their own inner directives should be strengthened. Lady Oracle exhorts women to no longer barter reality for a pseudo-security promised by the male. It encourages them to exercise their autonomy and to be free to pursue interesting and challenging careers.

Chapter Four, 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 of women into realities.
Chapter Five, headed "Surviving Theocracy" is devoted to the 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 we need to know about the human capacity for survival which serves 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 unable 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 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 for each and everyone of them to become human. Atwood's female protagonists in all these five novels are identical in refusing to be victims and surviving their predicaments. Survival for them means that there is no dominance or
submission, that all individuals are free to determine their own lives as equals. While the protagonist of the first novel survives the constraints of marriage, the protagonist of the second novel survives a duplicitous appearance that she has to put up in order to face the world. Atwood broadens the scope of survival to a political atmosphere in her third novel and the next novel actualizes it. The last novel portrays a successful woman. So, a progressive pattern is seen in all these five novels.