CHAPTER IV

THEMATIC MOTIFS IN
THE POETRY OF RICH
AND ATWOOD
THEMATIC MOTIFS IN THE POETRY OF RICH AND ATWOOD

The necessity for a change of language to create a more complete awareness of women's experience is central to Adrienne Rich's poetic and political vision. In order to break the hold of patriarchal restrictions on women's lives, the linguistic universe that supports it must be "decentered". Embedded habits of language need to be displaced, old words must be resounded, new meanings to be discovered and a new order be designed.

In her prose collection *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Rich proclaims:

> When we become acutely, disturbingly, aware of the language we are using and that is using us, we begin to grasp a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess though we were its inventors, and though individual writers like Dickinson, Woolf, Stein, H.D. have approached language as transforming power. (p. 247).

Rich uses language in new ways: as a source of connection and transcendence. It has encouraged Rich to exploit the capacity for truth and tenderness within her voice. It has also given her a concept of womanhood from which to draw great personal strength.
She wants to develop language as a system of connection. She favours a course of conservancy:

. . . . . if I could know
in what language to address
the spirits that claim a place
beneath these low and simple ceilings
tenants that neither speak nor stir
yet dwell in mute insistence
till I can feel utterly ghosted in this house.
(DCL, p. 15).

Rich discovers a difficulty in using the language, ordinarily assigned to her own experiences of sexuality. In "Two Songs" there is a movement between an existing vocabulary which must instruct sensation as much as describe it, and her own unnamed truth of feeling:

I'd call it love if love,
didn't take so many years
but lust too is a jewel,
a sweet flower and what
pure happiness to know
all our high-toned questions
breed in a lively animal. (NL, p. 20).

In "Cartographies of Silence", Rich makes claims for silence—its capacity for interrupting the repetition—compulsion of the activity of naming—the danger of either. The last words of the poem, complete the allusions that equate the act of renaming the world,
of remaking the land, with the power of speech, the capacity for renewal and for rebirth. The woman poet becomes the generative power of life. But this power of silence casts a shadow, for the very act of silence may mean withholding. Rich seeks the resolution in the margins of discourse, which become for her the thoughts that precede or follow conversations, momentary impressions, the internalized voice:

Silence can be a plan
vigorously executed
the blue print to a life
It is a presence
it has a history a form
Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence. (DCL, p. 35).

Though Margaret Atwood feels that language is an inescapable legacy for better or worse, it is wholly inadequate for poetic expression. She told an interviewer Geoff Hancock in 1986: "Not only is language slippery, but it's limited. The vocabulary we have is limited. There are a lot of things we don't have words for"¹ In her Two-Headed Poems she complains:

These words slow us, stumble
in us, numb us who
can say even Open
the door, without these diffident smiles, apologies (SP II, p. 34).
She also says:

Your language hangs around your neck,  
a noose, a heavy necklace;  
each word is empire  
each word is vampire and mother. (SP II, p. 29).

A woman cannot manifest herself in words. She is "a word in a foreign language" (JSM, p. 11). A woman can construct a new word of truth only from within the anonymity of the smiling mask of femininity. In fact, there is an implication in Atwood's poetry that language itself may be male.

According to Frank Davey in his book Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics:

Often in the poems of Margaret Atwood there is the implication that the language itself may be male, may be one of the shovels or guns or circle games by which men attempt to reshape; process and that the speaker must paradoxically enter the spatial world to have any voice at all. The woman must use a man's language of specified location and static condition, because he is uncomprehending of the underground or, liquid. Otherwise she merely enrages the man, becomes one of the 'silent ones'.

In Atwood's poetry there are many references to the limitations of language and poetry. Poetry is merely ineffectual, unequal to the
task of speaking out the horrors of ongoing reality. Words will
not speak in the lying double voice of the oppressed. They will
pour forth from the power of brokenness. The truth of a woman's
life must also be spoken. Speech is to be freed from its helplessness
to name the history of women. Speech must now assert itself in a
new strength.

Almost all of Atwood's works have subtexts either
implied or embedded within it-fairy tales, superhero stories, quest
romances. These subjects, together with recurrent images,
symbols, narrative patterns constitute a "female sub-language"
which rivals and often replaces discursive language. Atwood's
work discounts declared meaning and is an illustration instead of
sub-languages of syntax, vocabulary, literary structure, imagery
and symbol.

The curative effects of Rich's poetry arise from its use
of dialogue as a poetic and hermeneutic model. This use of
dialogue can also be traced in Atwood's poetry. But the treatment
in both the poets is different. The dialogue is a model for the
feminist view of inclusive, constructive power relationships.
Dialogue overcomes exclusion and closure on several levels. It is
also continuously self-revisionary. As one participant responds
to the other, the dialogue redirects and readdresses itself. Dialogue
empowers the self and the people or world around the self without
victimizing either.
Rich's essay, "Women and Honour: Some Notes on Lying" helps explain the drive towards dialogue in her poetry. For Rich, the dialogic situation which is both participatory, and creative is truthful because it affirms the complex interdependence of self and others. From a feminist perspective the dialogue exposes destructive power relations and ideologies. It discloses the multiple possibilities for interpretation and action. From Rich's feminist perspective, dialogue serves a disruptive, liberating political role as well as an affirmative personal one.

According to Joanne Feit Diehl:

Rich must constantly assess the costs of women's historicity and the political effects of the dialogic relation, acknowledging both the potential for women to be healed in and by history and history's power to consume them . . . while at the same time asserting the effects of discontinuity that allow the poet and reader to break with oppressive traditions. 3

Margaret Atwood also uses the dialogic mode but with a subtle irony and humour mixed with puns. She draws ludicrous pictures of the human situation and holds them up for scrutiny so that we can evaluate our situation and our roles as individual historical actors caught up in a cultural tradition from which there is no
escape. She uses images of the labyrinth, the maze, the mirror, the garrison to point to the human predicament. With the use of the gothic, she gives an existential treatment to the horror of reality. The woman persona says to her lover in *Power Politics*:

> I can feel you nailing STOP signs all over my skin on the inside. (PP, p. 55).

Atwood's own use of language attempts to resist the corruption of human speech, this is one of her themes. The diction is modest, the lines are unadorned, stripped of adjectives. Here, the language is reduced to its essence. The power of Margaret Atwood's voice comes from her understatement. Each time there are new ironies in the quiet lines. If at times, Atwood's voice seems cold, it has a passionate purpose - to demystify the romantic.

An equally important aspect of the poetic vision is found in the various ways in which nature is internalized. Nature is a space to return to the preoedipal experience. Rich focuses on the nurturing vision and reverence for life that has sustained women for centuries. According to Rich: "Woman's vital connection with nature gives her an advantage in healing the split between mind / body - a curse of the modern technological age." (FD, p. 264).
In *Atlas of a Difficult World*, Rich turns to nature for redemption. Only natural beauty can rescue the world from total destruction. Rich extols work, beauty, truth, resistance, mercy, love. She expresses concern about the environment which has been desecrated by man; nature which has been violated time and again by man's selfish greed:

Nights like this: On the cold apple bough
a white star, then another
exploding out of the bark:
on the ground, moonlight picking
at small stones

as it soaks through cracks into the trailers
tremulous with sleep as it dwells upon
the
eyelids of the sleepers
as if to make amends. (DFR, p. 8).

In "Transcendental Etude," Rich emphasizes the connections between past, present and future, nature and civilization, self and the other. The poem is a sustained vision of a woman whose energies are balanced between the self and the world around her. Rich honors the fertility of the earth and the complexity of nature. It conveys an appreciation of the plenitude of the landscape before her, through an extended simile. She understands that the countryside before her involves an elaborate balance of relationships.
Transcendence stands for the possibility of living in harmony with nature, a commitment to growth, not destruction, life - not death. This understanding and acceptance of the profound connection between nature and human life, permits a vision that overcomes the habitual separation of mind and body, self and the other.

Atwood equates nature with a woman's bodyscape. Natural experiences of women like menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and nursing establish a close bond between women and nature. The landscape and all living things become for Atwood the social, the political and the personal. She shows an individual in a relationship with a multitude of elements like rocks, mountains, trees, grass, animals, and people all sharing the space of existence.

"Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" is a poem which, on a metaphorical plane suggests a human culture that developed in the wilderness by denying its own existence as part of nature, leaving a legacy of chaos for future generations. Nature provides a corrective to all myths. In the interconnected world of Atwood's metaphors, man's inability to see himself in relation to the earth is merely a symptom of his general inability to sustain relationships with other human beings, with the animals and between their own divided selves. Atwood suggests that the landscape should be accepted on its own terms.
In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Susanna dissolves into tears of empathy and one-ness with Nature. Moodie internalizes the wilderness, which haunts her and which is as much a part of her as the civilization of towns and cities. She wonders when she will be accepted by the landscape and become a part of it:

> When will be that union and each	hing (bits of surface broken by my foot step) will without moving more around me into its place. (JSM, p.21)

There is something archetypally Canadian in Susanna Moodie. Atwood identifies the wilderness with the deepest recesses of the self-a metaphoric transformation of the "wilderness" which permits her to explore Susanna Moodie's sense of her own being, in addition to the changes wrought in the wild Canadian environment itself.

Atwood's "Songs of the Transformed" - show men who have turned into animals and show without inhibition the worst characteristic of the human beast. Though these poems are beast fables, they are about human life, man's follies, sins and stupidity. These poems aim to transform our perception of life by making us
see things from another point of view. If life is a great transformer, mankind's chief sin is his interference in the process - his attempts to freeze life in a series of fixed opposites - man / animal, life / death, myth / reality.

In a final reversal of postures of dominance, gifts that the earth has given are received. The connection between what is given by the earth and what is constituted through human operation is affirmed. This is an image of mutuality that also extends to man and woman. The perceptions, words, gestures that constitute the world, and within it the field of intersubjectivity, becomes the means not only of construction but consecration.

Lift these ashes
into your mouth, your blood,
to know what you devour
is to consecrate it;
almost. All bread must be broken
so it can be shared. Together
we eat this earth. (THP, p. 109).

Rich and Atwood emphasise on human being's ability to see himself/herself as part of the natural world. This would lead to the integration of self, whereas failure to do so would lead to a split a divided self. This is in line with the tenets of Ecofeminism which issues a warning against the industrial and technological desecration of the earth's resources and its life-sustaining power. Joyce Nelson writes in her article "Speaking the Unspeakable":

By making explicit the connections between a misogynist society and a society which has exploited "Mother Earth" to the point of environmental crisis, ecofeminism has helped to highlight the deep splits in the patriarchal paradigms.\(^4\)

As the bond between women and nature constitutes a vital aspect of the feminist aesthetics; the bond between mothers and female ancestors is also quite significant. Rich believes that women need to recognise and act upon the priority of recreating each other and the self. Women need to give up their isolation and assert their connections with one another as mothers, daughters, lovers and friends Rich has borrowed a line from John Donne:

\[
\text{Any woman's death diminishes me.} \\
\text{F.D., p. 121, (2) }
\]

Rich asserts that women have a primary obligation to each other - not to undermine each other's sense of reality for the sake of expediency.

Atwood's "Five Poems for Grandmothers" is a subtle excavation of the past as the grandmothers ensure the country's continuity. A woman discovers herself in the bloodline of women. She is an agent of history, rather than its victim. Female bonding through generations leads to the life-cycle:
the procession
of old leathery mothers
a long thread of red blood, not yet
broken. (THP, p. 103).

There is a deep sense of the underlying and continuing community
of mankind expressed with particular eloquence in the epiphany
of Atwood's poem - "The Bus to Alliston, Ontario" :

the snow
is an unbroken space lit
desert through which we make
our ordinary voyage,
those who hear voices and those
who do not; moving together, warm
and for the moment safe
along the invisible road towards home.

(THP, p. 78).

Rich challenges the traditional, stereotypical sexual practices and
asserts that institutionalized heterosexuality strips women of
their autonomy, dignity and sexual potential. She states that
women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation
toward men are inevitable - even if unsatisfying or oppressive
components of their lives. The love between two women is to be
acknowledged openly, boldly, publicly as Rich claims in her sonnet
sequences in "Twenty One Love Poems".

No one has imagined us, we want to live
like trees,
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air
dappled with scars, still exuberantly
budding
our animal passion rooted in the city. (FD, p. 236)

Without the support of society, which degrades them as women and condemns them as lesbians, the lovers cannot remain united. Rich develops an aesthetic of womanly power and views a woman's body as a metaphor for the life-force itself. Alicia Ostriker says that Rich's presentation is a part of a larger version of female bonding as a source of personal power and political transformation.

Bonnie Zimmerman puts forward a set of assumptions which underlies all lesbian criticism. She states:

that a woman's identity is not defined only by her relation to a male world and male literary tradition, that powerful bonds between women are a crucial factor, in women's lives and that sexual and emotional orientation of a woman profoundly affects her consciousness and thus her creativity.¹

She believes that lesbianism is the fundamental critique of the dominant order and an organizing principle for women. Lesbian poetry, as exemplified by Rich expresses a revolutionary model of sexuality which, in its structure, its content and its practice defies culture. It is Rich's stance, as expressed again and again through her poems that heterosexual norms encourage women to
devalue female bonding and emphasises an ethics of dependence.

Lesbianism invokes separation as a political choice. It wants to produce meanings, transform perspectives and create awareness about other "identities." New meanings are created within lesbian contexts and experiences through choices and a search for values. Rich provokes a rethinking of society's reduction of sexual practice to one coherent identity.

Rich moves a step further and also questions motherhood as an institution, which she argues has ghettoized and degraded female. In her prose book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* Rich writes in the foreword:

A man may beget a child in passion or by rape and then disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again. Under such circumstances the mother faces a range of painful, socially weighted choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, the rearing of a child branded "illegitimate," usually in poverty, always outside the law, whatever her choice her body has undergone irreversible changes her mind will never be the same, her future as a woman has been shaped by the event. (OWB, p. 12).

According to Rich, 'Motherhood' in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child or children is one part of a female process; it is not an identity for all time. To have
borne and reared a child can mean experiencing of one's body and emotions in a powerful way- flooded with feelings of love. As daughters, women need mothers who want freedom. They don't want to be the vessel of another woman's self-denial and frustration. A woman who believes in herself, who is a fighter and who continues to struggle to create livable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist.

Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood have experienced motherhood. Rich herself did her best towards her three sons, inspite of the break-up of her marriage of seventeen years. Rich recalls when her third son was born, her sense of drift, and a female fatigue of suppressed anger and the loss of contact with her own being. Her life, at the time, revolved around small chores, errands; small children's constant needs. At the age of twenty nine, she felt guilt toward the people closest to her and a guilt towards her own being:

You sleeping I bend to cover
Your eyelids work. I see
your dream, cloudy as a negative,
swimming underneath.
You blurt a cry. Your eyes
spring open, still filmed in dream.
Wilder, they fix me -
-death's head, sphinx, medusa?
You scream
Tears lick my cheeks, my knees
droop at your fear.
Mother I no more am
but woman and nightmare (CEP, p. 223).

In "Mother-in-law", Rich traces the relationship between a mother
and daughter, a relationship in which is transmitted the story of
female survival:

I've been trying to tell you, mother-in-law
that I think I'm breaking in two
and half of me doesn't even want to love
I can polish this table to satin because
I don't care
I am trying to tell you I envy
the people in mental hospitals their freedom
and I can't live on placebos
or valium, like you. (WP, p. 31)

Rich's final view is not against mothering. On the contrary, she
concludes:

To destroy the institution of motherhood,
is not to abolish motherhood. It is to
release the creation and sustenance of life
into the same realm of decision, struggle,
surprise, imagination and conscious
intelligence, as any other difficult, but
freely chosen work. (OWB, p. 279).

Atwood seems to transcend the tensions of a life - filled with blood,
pain and conflict in the innocent smile and play of a child. For a
child only the present moment is essential. The mythic and
historical fears of the adults simply disappear when faced with infantile delight. Atwood enters the private childhood world of her daughter in poems like "The Red Shirt" "The Puppet of the Wolf", where miracles can occur. The invisible speaker of "This Is a Photograph of Me" is transformed into a giggling child, whose trusting body is lifted by a pair of peaceful, loving, joined hands. In "You Begin" a mother instructs a child in the ways of the world in a tone of compassion and love. The poems evoke the bittersweet joys of an imperfect existence - which can only be seen and experienced through the innocent vision of a child.

Just as female bonding and the experience of motherhood form the poetic aesthetics of Rich and Atwood, they also experienced the most intimate relationship with their respective fathers, which definitely groomed their poetic sensibilities. Adrienne Rich's close bond with her father is thematically treated over the years in her poems and essays. Her first image of herself as a poet, Rich points out, had been completely determined by her relationship to her father, who encouraged her to read and write. As a result, she says, for about twenty years I wrote for a particular man, who criticized and praised me and made me feel I was indeed "special". Her father's encouragement, his expectations, with their assumptions, initiated a dialogue which Rich would have with him for many years.
the child at the oak desk whose penmanship
hard work, style will win her prizes
becoming the woman with a mission, not to win prizes
but to change the laws of
history. (NL, p.23)

Margaret Atwood's father was an entomologist, and the family
spent more than half of each year in the wilderness of the Northern
Ontario, where her father conducted research. References to the
biological world of her father's research abound in Atwood's
work. She discusses this influence:

My father is an entomologist and he used
to bring home these "things" in one form,
they would go through some mysterious
process and emerge as something else.
So metamorphosis was familiar to me at
an early age. 6

Arnold Rich, an intellectual, considered himself "a scientist, a
deist". Although he offered his daughter Adrienne with the atheism
of Thomas Paine, he offered her none of the terms for considering
Jewish culture, theology or history. Her parents never discussed
with her the Holocaust. Rich observes:

Writing this now, I feel belated. That I
had never been taught about resistance,
only about passing rage.... that I was so
impoverished by the family....that I had
no language for anti-semitism itself.

(BBP, p. 107)
Rich's Jewishness, particularly in the shadow of the Holocaust poses the problem of identity most acutely. What is it for a woman, a radical feminist and a lesbian to be a Jew? In her husband, she found a Jew, of a different kind, but no more a believing and observing Jew than her father. To Rich, both her husband and her father were akin, both deracinated Jews, whose sense of identity as men was defined and compromised by the anti-Semitism of their culture.

From her collection of poems Sources, we see Rich brooding over her Jewishness and the issue pressing in upon her, demanding clarification. Her psychological probing reaches to her sense of self as a Jewish woman. The acknowledgement of suffering and the cause of the suffering attain a clarity in the three prose section of Sources.

Rich's treatment of the Holocaust in Atlas of a Difficult World and Your Native Land, Your Life, is concrete and personal. She identifies with the victims of the Holocaust emotionally. She refers to the slain Jews of modern Europe, as a part of history. In the poem "Innocence 1945" she says:

The beauty of it was the guilt
It entered us, quick schnapps
forked tongue of ice. The guilt
made us feel innocent again
we had done nothing while some
extreme measures were taken. We drifted.

(DFR, p. 28)
There is a renewed commitment in Rich to the difficult process of definition and construction. Rich concentrates on autobiographical facts to the point of revelation and release. Rich's feminism is informed by a Jewish vision.

As Adrienne Rich tries to come to terms with her Jewish identity, Atwood deals with the Canadian crisis of identity. While a student at Radcliffe College, Harvard, Atwood came face-to-face with the Canadian crisis of a violent duality. Atwood and her friends gathered in small groups in an unhappy scramble for their identities. Upon her return to Canada, she felt impelled to chart the geography of the Canadian imagination both for her own and other Canadians' sense of identity.

A British colony of many years - the English Canada and the French colony of Quebec - Canada attained independence yet suffered from a colonial hangover. Prof. A.R.M. Lower has described Canadians as the children of divorced parents. Northrop Frye in Bush Garden writes:

Canada . . . the nation with it's history of being treated as a colony, developed with the bewilderment of a neglected child; pre-occupied with trying to define its own identity.7

Margaret Atwood's Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature, published in 1972 is a nationalist manifesto,
the first attempt of its kind by a Canadian writer to take a historical sociological and cultural overview of Canadian writing. In *Survival*, Atwood writes that Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it . . . . Canada is a state of mind a kind of space in which Canadians feel lost.

The central symbol for Canada, according to Atwood is *Survival*. For French Canada, after the British took over, it became cultural survival, hanging on as a people, retaining a religion and language under an alien government. The main idea is that of staying alive . . . . *Survival*. Behind this, was the basic instinct of the pioneer settlers who first crossed the ocean and landed on Canadian soil. Atwood states that Canada as a whole is a victim or an oppressed minority or an exploited entity.

Atwood identified four basic victim positions for the victimized country, which were also taken up later by feminists to represent women as victimized groups:

Position One: To deny the fact that you are a victim.
Position Two: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of fate, the will of God, the dictates of biology (in case of women), the necessity decreed by economics or history or the unconscious or any other large powerful idea.
Position Three: To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to...
accept the assumption that the role is inevitable.
Position Four: To be a creative non-victim. (Survival, p. 36)

This model is provided by Atwood to make a study of Canadian literature, but the same model can be applied to a class or a country. Due to this motif of survival, Canadian literature is undeniably sombre and negative, which is also a reflection and a chosen definition of the national sensibility.

Atwood became one of the active participants in the cultural nationalism of the 70's. While in the U.S., Atwood was disillusioned with the blight and crime she witnessed there. The American tendency of the watchful Big Brother - the vigilance syndrome - of not only Canada but the whole world, was a frightening prospect. The American myth of the "frontier" though it symbolised renewal and new opportunity, also encouraged exploitation and recklessness. In "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy" Atwood draws attention to the myopic tendency of the Americans to think that only they were right and whatever was not American was suspect.

America is an escape fantasy for Canadians and Atwood strongly feels that they themselves are selling their own country to the U.S.:
Once when there was history
Some obliterating fact occurred
no solution was found
Now this country is underwater
we can love only the drowned. (PU, p. 23).

The danger is that the nation of Canada will lose its unique bicultural heritage and will become Americanized. This will lead the Canadians to see their own identities dissolving into nothingness. Inspite of Atwood's warning, Canadians look to the U.S. as a standard of comparison and excellence. This again will mean a Canadian's failure to achieve self-actualisation:

Is this what we wanted
this politics, our hearts
flattened and strung out
from the back of helicopters? (THP, p. 60).

In Second Words, Atwood clarifies her position that she does not think that Canada is better than any other place, just as she does not think that Canadian literature is better but . . . "they are mine with all the sense of territory that implies." (p. 112).

The mirror and window games in The Circle Game are a national as well as gender ritual. Atwood discusses the Canadian cultural amnesia regarding their Canadian identity. The children's sand-play reenact Canadas historic garrisons. The fort illustrates what happens to the garrison mentality in the 20th C- its imperial earth works crumble; its weapons turn fragile. You Are Happy
also works towards decolonization not only by putting the
colonised character of Circe, at the centre of the story, but also by
undercutting Odysseus, the imperialist down to size:

Don't you get tired of killin . . . .
Don't you get tired of saying Onward? (YAH, p. 51)

In her thesis titled "Canada and the Woman in Margaret Atwood's
Fiction," Charu Maini writes in the Introduction:

Just as Atwood the nationalist addresses
herself to the question of a national
identity the woman in her is also deeply
concerned with the question of the female
in search of an identity in an essentially
patriarchal and male-oriented culture.
Atwood links Canada's search for an
identity from its colonial past, with her
woman protagonist's similar quest for a
distinct female discourse. She works on
the premise that both Canada and women
are victims of forces located either within
or without. 8

Imperialist forces in the form of patriarchy constantly threaten a
woman's identity. Atwood's perpetual concern is for gender roles
and her anxiety over the dominance of colonial forces that
problematize the feminine search for a distinctive voice.

Adrienne Rich is aware of the fact that her country
America had been fast struck for forty years in the deep freeze of
history. In *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, she writes that any citizen of the United States of her time had been saturated by the rhetoric of Cold War, the horrors of Communism, the betrayed socialism, and the warning that any collective restructuring of society spelt the end of personal freedom.

The discourse did not change over the years until words like socialism, communism, democracy were stripped of their historical roots and the many faces of the struggles for social justice and independence reduced to an ambition to dominate the world. Adrienne Rich asks the question - "Is there a connection between this state of mind, the war mentality, the attribution of all our problems to an external enemy - and a form of feminism focussed on male evil and female victimization? (LSS, p. 220).

In 1968, there were many political movements taking place in America - the protest marches against the war in Vietnam, the Civil Rights demonstrations, the left-wing student's agitations and environmental concerns Adrienne Rich was teaching in the SEEK (open admissions) Program of City College, New York and came to be associated closely with many black women writers like Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and June Jordan. This was also the time when the Women's Movement had spread it's message throughout the U.S.
The traumatic events of Rich's own personal life and the political events taking place around her both find a reflection in her poetry. The dichotomy between personal and political is broken. Subjectivity is regarded as a crucial link between private and public experience. With her collection of poems *The Will to Change*, published in 1971, Rich was marked as a political poet, both, in her choice of matter and in her style.

In "Inscriptions", Rich intermixes the personal and the political - even while speaking about her lesbian relationship and taking a historical purview of the events which followed the Second World War - the holocaust of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Utah, Nevada, the socialist Christian teacher who committed suicide, the two Jewish communists married to each other and the violent demonstrations on the streets of New York.

Responding to Diane Middle-brook's observation in *Poets in Person: A Listener's Guide*, that "Many people consider politics to be deadly to poetry", Rich comments:

That's an attitude that I think is prevalent in the United States, but in very few other cultures. It's certainly not prevalent in Latin America, for example, it's certainly not prevalent in Europe. The notion that politics - defined as the struggle to grasp who we are in the world and what our place is in the world, and how we've been empowered or
dismayed - and how we can transform this disempowerment - why should poetry, why should any art be asked to stand outside that great human enterprise.

Rich's poems commemorate people from marginal groups who have been victims of oppression. She presents herself less as a champion or a leader and more as a co-sufferer, pitying herself indirectly in others. She strongly feels that the leadership of women of colour both impels and enables us to enter into alliances with those around the world who refuse to abandon hope and who are trying to become more human.

Another bold step undertaken by Rich, as part of her female aesthetics was to date her poems right from the mid 1950's. This, she understood as both a personal and political act. She did this because Rich did not think that a poem was a single encapsulated event a work of art, complete in itself. She knew that her life was changing, her work was changing. She needed to indicate to her readers her sense of being engaged in a long continuing process. This now seems to her an oblique political statement - a rejection of the dominant critical idea of the time that a poem's text should be read as separate from a poet's everyday life. It is a declaration that places poetry in a historical community, not above or outside history.
Atwood's active participation in Amnesty International helped her transfer her political concerns to an international context. Her visit to Latin America and the stories of torture and horror to which she was exposed, clearly sharpened and focussed her political interests. Right from *Power Politics* where the private war between the lovers become a universal war that is history, Atwood follows the dictum "Personal is Political".

In *True Stories*, the mood of the poems becomes darker, it's violence more intense and literal, the subject matter more overtly political. Atwood's poetry transcends the personal to attain cultural relevance.

. . . . . the knife that cuts lovers
out of your flesh like tumours
leaving you breastless
and without a name,
flattened, bloodless, even your voice
cauterized by too much pain,
a flayed body untangled
string by string and hung
to the wall, an agonized banner
displayed for the same reason
flags are. (TS, p.51).

Her various concerns of humanity expressed through poetry, fiction, prose, paintings and her work as an activist, make Atwood regard herself no longer as a "nationalist", but an "internationalist". She writes in her prose collection *Second Words*:
We are in this together as inhabitants of this quickly shrinking and increasingly threatened earth. There are boundaries and borders, spiritual as well as physical and good fences make good neighbours. But there are values beyond national ones. Nobody owns the air; we all breathe it. (p. 392).

As women poets like Rich and Atwood have followed the principle of the female aesthetic - "The Personal is Political", so they have taken up the most significant task confronting women poets since the 1960's - the validation and integration of self, Rich's and Atwood's poetry is also about self definition and self-acceptance. The creative mind as Rich has discovered needs an assertiveness and a sense of autonomy. Michele Cliff writes in a clear statement which voices the basic principle underlying the feminist poetics:

The refusal to be anonymous, the delusion to separate the self from the expectations and demand of roles is the choice women must make if we are to survive, if a women's culture is to survive. To me that is what it means to be a feminist: not be anonymous, not to deny the self, . . . the first responsibility is to define the self. To stand separate and alone, saying my woman's self my matrix, is the source of my identity.
Atwood shares this interest in female self-definition with many of her contemporaries including Marge Piercy, Alice Munro and Adrienne Rich. They explore not what someone has prescribed a woman should be, but what she really is. Atwood voices, willingness to create women who attempt transformations. By failing to change themselves into what they cannot be these women persona become instead what they truly are.

Rich feels strongly that self-denial and self-sacrifice must give way to a true woman's identification with her own inner strength. Cultural stereotypes which derogate a woman's body and female creativity have to be dismantled. Women's silences are to be broken and their position of marginality and outsiderhood be changed to that of the centre. Women's lives which seem to be drifting unanchored on the winds of myths and masculine biases are to be taken in hand.

"The Frame" is a poem in the form of a narrative which describes a winter night when the central persona leaves the Chemistry lab and is waiting for a bus. Based on a true life incident which occurred in Boston in 1979, the woman is taken to be a thief and is handcuffed by the policeman. She pleads her innocence. The word "silence" which is repeated again and again, stands for her conditioning to be a mute-sufferer in a male dominated society:
In silence that he pushes her into the car
banging her head in silence that she cries out
in silence that she tries to explain she was
only waiting for a bus
in silence that he twists the flesh of her thigh
with his nails in silence that her tears
begin to flow. (WP, p. 47).

"The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen as One" has two persona -
the female speaker "You" and her own silent sister. The two women
differ from each other, one creative, aggressive, energetic, full of
fire and the sister - a picture of traditional femininity, with the
desire to please others. The reflection of the two brings about a
synthesis and calls for a new birth:

.... Your mother dead and you unborn
your two hands grasping your head
drawing it down against the blade of life
your nerves the nerves of a midwife
learning her trade. (DW, p. 15)

To Rich, to move with the sensitivity to the context constitutes a
female mode of perception. The woman has to embark on a quest
for self, to reach self-awareness. Denied anger, hatred and despair
becomes madness, rage or suicidal self-hatred. In many of her
poems Rich bemoans the loss of identity of a woman in marriage
and the drudgery of a housewife's existence, which suffocates and
comes to terms with her own roles as woman and poet - as names for a woman. The drive towards self-knowledge leads to a search of identity. The effort of self-definition yields to an array of images reflecting female marginality. But all these images lead to a whole.

In her feminist manifesto "If You Can't Say Something Nice. Don't Say Anything At All," Margaret Atwood states that women are socialized to please, to assuage pain, to give blood till they drop, to conciliate, to be selfless, to be helpful, to be "Jesus Christ", since men have given up upon that role, to be perfect. Women still carry this burden of expectations on their back. Atwood states that to deny women is to deny them their humanity and to restrict their area of moral choice. Feminism has given women the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the lights.11

Atwood's "This Is A Photograph of Me" is a poem about a woman's quest for identity and the resulting invisibility. The various stereotypes which mark a woman's life and which are associated with femininity are enlisted. Woman is an archaic mystery. As she is in the centre of the picture she is to be identified with the natural landscape, domesticity and water.

Self-division in a woman is culturally prescribed. Wholeness is culturally forbidden to both the woman and the
woman-poet. These schizoid personalities suffer what is called ontological insecurity, a sense of non-existence, invisibility and muteness. Unable to feel their existence confirmed by others, these women cannot affirm it for themselves. Their identity and autonomy are always questioned. Such an individual may create a false image organised to comply with the expectations of others, while the true self remains a detached critical observer. Though this analysis might seem to describe a psychotic personality, it is ironic that it so closely resembles the dilemma of a normal woman. This description fits Atwood's many persona like Susanna Moodie, Circe, the lady who marries the hangman and others.

Fear of the natural, the dream life and the unguarded subconscious requires that a woman transform herself into an artefact. A woman herself takes efforts to efface her own personality to please a man. To be a mirror, a perfect lover the woman must repress her own identity. Atwood questions western culture's very definition of self-hood for a woman. Women respond to the sexual game by acquiescing and accommodating, by allowing themselves to be stimulated by male sexual power. There is a terrible dilemma - women need desperately to like man, who by definition becomes enemy.

In *You Are Happy*, the protagonist moves forward towards new relationships without false hopes promises, defences,
evasions and mythologies. For Atwood the "self" is a place in which things happen. The "self" is here and now. If we can perceive life as the process of "becoming" instead of the state of being, we will be able to embrace the risk of living.

..... you open
yourself to me gently, what
they tried, we
tried but could never do
before ...... without blood, the killed
heart ...... to take
that risk, to offer life and remain
alive, open yourself like this and become whole
(YAH, p. 96)

After the plastic poses are shattered and knowledge of alternate visions are gained, escape from the "Circle Game" finally comes through bearing one's identity in grief. Only in this way can woman become the agent of history rather than its victim.

In the poem "Simmering" in her volume of prose poems Murder in the Dark, Atwood traces the growth of awareness and consciousness raising in women:

They dream that the earth gathers itself
into their hands, swells, changes its form,
too, for them once more. They dream of apples: they dream of the creation of the world; they dream of freedom.
(M.D. p. 33)
One of the thematic motifs of Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood, especially in their earlier poems, is the victim-victimizer relationship that exists between men and women, as well as an awareness of the adverse effects of a sexist culture on the female psyche. Both poets are committed to break down the unequal boundaries of gender and express their anger at the kind of gender arrangement which treats woman as a slave and thwarts her desire for a female space and freedom, to seek a right to exist as an independent human being.

Adrienne Rich writes:

> By patriarchy . . . I mean any kind of group organization in which males hold dominant power and determine what part females shall and shall not play, and in which capabilities assigned to women are relegated generally to the mystical and aesthetic and excluded from the practical and political realms.¹²

In the poem "A Primary Ground", Rich sketches a picture of the family in a domestic scene as the microcosm of the larger political institutions in patriarchy, "Novella" describes a quarrel between a husband and wife in which separation is revealed and enforced by the verse. The internal and external worlds are aligned to comment on the universal condition of separation and
pain which the man and woman embody. "Side by Side" is about
the change which comes in a relationship over the passage of time.
The bonds between the man and woman are becoming as thin as
silk. "Pieces" describes the trauma of discovering the callous and
selfish attitude of man and also his infidelity:

The steps that wouldn't hold us both
splintering in the air
The self withheld in an urn
like ashes
To have loved you better than you loved
yourself
- whoever you were to have loved you -
And still to love but simply
as one of those faces on the street (CEP, p. 381)

"Translations" makes the woman - persona aware of her constricted
existence in domesticity. The female is denied her "selfhood" right
down from history:

Obsessed
with Love, our subject
We've trained it like ivy to our walls
baked it like bread in our ovens
watched it through binoculars as if
it were a helicopter
bringing food to our famine
or the satellite
of a hostile power (DW, p. 40-41)

Rich's poems like "The Stranger" and "Diving Into The Wreck"
focus on the ideal of androgyny. "Waking in the Dark" is also
Rich's call for a better understanding between men and women. Together they can work for peace in the world.

To Atwood the geometry of a woman's world is pulled into conformity with a man's as he dissembles and constructs it. Man is the colonizer and woman the colonized and the central purpose of this colonization is sexual control. The two major themes of her volume of poems *The Circle Game* are - the journey under water away from entrapment and the analyses of a variety of confining circles. She blames the limited human perception as the main culprit in this game between the sexes. If we are too close, all we will see is fragments. What is needed is a perspective on ourselves and on others.

Atwood adopts different techniques to affirm male and female space, like the use of classical mythology and popular mythology. She portrays patriarchal displacement of female deities of an earlier matriarchal age and also the popular male heroes like Superman and female handmaidens like Lois.

In the poem "Camera", the photographer is male and the person photographed is female. Technology remains male by association and time, and the natural processes in the middle of the clouds, the sun, the church, the dissolving force of time - are all female. The camera - man is in search of an organised instant
and wants all reality, including the female voice, to stop, "to hold still":

You make me stop walking
and compose me on the lawn,
you insist
that the clouds stop moving
the wind stop swaying the church
on its boggy foundations
the sun hold still in the sky (CG, p. 45)

The female - persona makes good her escape from this "organised instant", she realises that love is impossible in a static world.

Technology and mythology are two major sources of male power in Atwood's poetry - both because they assert the priority of space over time. In "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer", the landscape is female and occupies a parallel role to that of the woman in Power Politics. The landscape replies to the man's phallic egocentric violence with its own anonymous and organic silence. Atwood feels that both men and women keep the surfaces of life neatly ordered like city planners. But they desperately ignore the chaos beneath the surface. She suggests that descent might bring renewal. Prescribed roles distort life and lead to entrapment. In order to break free of the circles both men and women must take the plunge. A woman's refusal to be separate from a man enacts gender entrapment of a colony within a colony.
The mirror and window games are a national as well as a gender ritual.

The cover design of *Power Politics* shows a knight in armour from whose extended arm and gauntletted hand hangs down, like a game trophy, the body of a woman, torso covered in mummy-like bandages, head down, hair trailing on the ground at the knight's feet. This is an inversion of the traditional posture - an echoing of the Hanged Man of the Tarot pack. In *Power Politics* there is a mechanistic and hedonistic union. The woman feels lacerated and her vision is destroyed by her subjection to a masochistic sexual love. Both man and woman surrender to the projections of images by the other upon self. Man's flesh becomes an obstacle. He is almost a robot mechanism who refuses sensual touch. To be drawn to this monstrous body is fatal:

Your face is silver
and flat, scaled like a fish
The death you bring me
is curved . . . (PP, p. 56).

In a series of gothic images, Atwood brings out the horror of this man-woman relationship. A woman is also responsible for creating roles. Adoring females maintain the illusions of knights in armour and this they call "love".
My love for you is the love
of one statue for another: tensed
and static. (PP, p. 67).

The speaker acknowledges the impasse of mutual victimization and betrayal with sadness. There is no room for real reapproachment and reconciliation. Atwood suggests that subject and object are one; by polarising them there is only power and suffering.

Alicia Ostriker in "What Are Patterns for? Anger and Polarization in Women's Poetry" observes:

Margaret Atwood's Power Politics is conceptually radical and formally experimental, each centering on the motif of a female victimization within patriarchy. Depicting the patriarchal male as lover here, father and God, the poems use a broad array of anger-generated devices to demystify, attack and ridicule him and the cultural scripts he embodies. In this script, male power, intrinsically violent, dominates the concentric worlds of personal life and society.¹³

You Are Happy shows a woman protagonist in grief and regret over the failure of a relationship. In bitterly ironic terms the poet presents withdrawal, fury and pain. The image of separation and
dissociation capture the sense of fragmentation. The people are frozen and immobilized. In this state happiness is a mockery of life. In "Tricks With Mirrors", Atwood's target is male narcissism. Using his own eye as an instrument of capture a man seize a woman's power of reflection and constitutes her mirror in his self construction. Both man and woman suffer because of the gaps of perception and the distortions of vision. Love is not a game, but a journey without predictions. Through the myth of Circe and Odysseus Atwood calls upon women to move towards selfhood and self-actualization.

In Atwood's later poems, we see that the vitriolity of Power Politics is missing. The theme of sexual roles and conflict are issues which have become a kind of political commitment to Atwood. The most significant and constant theme of all her writing remains the battle between the sexes. In her later poems, while writing about the man-woman relationship, her tone becomes mellow. She believes that mutual respect, granting of male and female space and communication can break down the polarization between man and woman.

A part of Rich and Atwood's poetic aesthetics is the use of myths to break the stereotypes that perpetuate distortion, the fears and hatreds of women that disguise and suppress the feminine self. Rich and Atwood question the cultural constructs and use myths also as poetic devices to reach the hidden truths of reality.
Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood aim at dismantling the myths which have been propagated by patriarchy to subjugate and suppress women. Both the poets have used the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice from a feminist perspective which is an attempt to break illusions and traditional beliefs.

In Adrienne Rich's "I Dream I'm The Death of Orpheus," the myth has been inverted and shows a reconstruction of the mind. The heroine has changed roles and is now experiencing the fullness of her powers. The protagonist makes a journey to the unconscious and returns back to consciousness with her resurrected selfhood:

a woman feeling the fullness of her powers
at the precise moment when she must
not use them
a woman sworn to lucidity.
Who sees through the mayhem, the smoky fires
of these underground streets
her dead poet learning to walk backward
against the wind
on the wrong side of the mirror (CEP, p. 36).

In Atwood's three "Orpheus -Eurydice Poems" Eurydice realises that Orpheus is another narcissistic lover who confuses reality with an image. Eurydice has gained her freedom. She realises that in the quest for selfhood, she has to walk independently and not be a shadow of her male counterpart.
In *You Are Happy* Atwood points to the myth-making powers and the stereotyped predictions that create havoc in human life. She strongly feels that we need to recognise the myths by which we live and deconstruct them. In the "Circe/Mud Poems" behind the sorceress and the enchantress is a woman, who is alone and who like any woman pines for true love. In her struggle with herself occasioned by her attempt to change Odysseus from mythic hero to fallible man, she realises her own weaknesses and strengths. Circe becomes a woman who gives and receives. Circe is ready to make her own choices and attains selfhood. For Atwood the world of myth is linked with the world of the unconscious self.

In *Interlunar*, Atwood interlaces fairy tales, biblical stories, folklore and myth. In the Snake Poems she presents - Snake as a part of nature, and snake as a part of myth - Medusa, the snake-goddess Lamia, who represents female wisdom and art endowed with divine power. The snake is an icon of the female demonic. Atwood deconstructs the legend of "The Tree of Knowledge" and "The Forbidden Fruit".

In *Circle Games*, Atwood juxtaposes myth with everyday reality. The mapped impalement here implies a gothic scenario of the helpless maiden readied for rape and torture in the chamber of the ruthless villain. The protagonist searches for a larger self—a truer identity. The restriction of women to traditional
roles creates an anger in Atwood's women protagonists, while the men remain indifferent. Here the women fight hard to retain their selfhood and individuality. The siren in "Siren Song" is part bird, part woman, who is a cursed muse. She asks for freedom from her "birdsuit" and mythical role, but her song is the final deception: Carol Ann Howells writes: "Atwood's feminist challenge is to expose the subversive threat of sexual fantasy to the theories of gender relations." Atwood's themes are gender, language and power, survival and metamorphosis. She develops a contemporary voice as her poetry occupies an important place in the tradition of women's poetry.

Atwood herself has written about Rich in Second Words: "At her best, Rich pulls off what few poets with the courage of their convictions can ever manage: She is eloquent, she convinces and she inspires . . . . Some of her poems are strangely prophetic, anticipating many themes that were later hit on as fresh discoveries by the feminist movement (p. 205).

A writer's or a poet's choice of subject is an aesthetic decision and the conceptual outlook is a determining part of a structural pattern. The message is always inherent in the medium. A study of the aesthetic may make us understand the poetic imagination how it modifies and transforms and enhances life by giving it new meanings and values. This has been the objective of this chapter.
NOTES


11. Margaret Atwood, "If You Can't Say Something Nice, Don't Say Anything At All", in Language in Her Eye: Writing and Gender, Edits, Scheler, Sheard, Wachtel. Coach House Press, Toronto: 1990, pp. 15-25.

