CHAPTER – V

CRAVING FOR LIFE VALUES AND DEATH

I had had a romantic, adolescent notion of death earlier, but I hadn’t really felt that solid moment when you realize your life is not going to go on forever, that people you know aren’t going to be here forever, that we’re going to die. What was it the Greeks used to say? “Call no man happy until he is dead”

– Atwood. (Ingersoll 126)

Creating an anti-hierarchical system in the sense of superior and inferior creatures is the urgent need of the postmodern world, for it maintains hierarchy in all fields where power dominates and power is imposed on the weaker sections. It is definite that an anti-hierarchical setup will evolve only from the fusion of man of his environment. Writers all over the world deal with the issues, which affect the human race through their works. In order to inspire hope in man they concentrate on the conflict between good and evil. This conflict is one of the major preoccupations of the writers from the origin of literature and it is analyzed by writers at the spiritual, moral and psychological level.
From the world of Greek myths to the postmodern world, literature concentrates on vices and virtues and stresses the need for the latter, which will create a moral world. Further the writers all over the world also stress on a viable world which can be attained only if the social evils like inequality, untouchability, terrorism, etc, are abolished.

Unlike the religious texts the literature of the present world presents how scientific and technological growth affect life values and life support systems and reduces man to the level of machines. This reduction causes a sense of rootlessness in the modern mind and hence the postmodern world craves for life values, which are absent. Writers like Milton, Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Eliot, Toru Dutt, Nizem Ezekiel, Kamala Das, etc, were concerned with the problems of the postmodern world and focussed attention on the need for an meaningful life.

Atwood's creative world presents her as a writer of rare vision and a clear mission through her creative writings. She highlights not only the conflict between the material and the natural world but also between life and death. She is primarily concerned with the tension created during the conflict. A serious reader can easily identify her way of describing the conflict through her female heroes. For instance it would be wise to refer to
her novel *Lady Oracle* where she presents this conflict very clearly. In this novel the protagonist says,

I planned my death carefully unlike my life which meandered along from one thing to another (...). I wanted my death by contrast to be neat and simple understand (7)

In her poems also Atwood's female heroes often negotiate with the dead. This metaphorically represents an encounter with the past. Her personae understand the values of life through this negotiation, and this negotiation with the dead helps one understand the past thereby indirectly helping her lead a happy life. Coral Ann Howells in her article rightly reiterates this idea which finds a place in Atwood's fiction.

Not ignoring the dead while writing about the living – indeed looking into the past in order to understand the present – has been one of the most significant characteristics of Atwood's novel writing career. (10)

This is also true in the case of her poems for she deals with death through certain key images like darkness, drowning etc. Death also means ignorance as against wisdom. In order to understand life values, sometimes, death serves as a key. In order to highlight life values Atwood traces the
various factors which affect human beings like power, inequality etc., She concentrates mainly on power and its operations, for power affects life values, and dominates the powerless. In a system of power politics human values have no role to play and on the other hand cruelty gains momentum. Atwood also presents the unequal world where suppression and violation of human values play a crucial role. It is worthy to note that Atwood was one of the members of Amnesty International and her concern towards human rights and values occupy a major place in her creative works like ‘True Stories’ and Bodily Harm. In these two books she deals with the cruelty and the violence against women. Being a staunch feminist Atwood is against the degradation of women and being an accepted postmodernist, she is against the operations of power, which violate, corrupt, exploit and pollute. She explores the possibilities of existence in a world of cruelty where survival itself is a great problem. George Woodcock rightly identifies that “tenacious survival and constant metamorphosis” are Margaret Atwood dominant themes. In order to live a healthy life one has to become a creative non-victim, for a creative non-victim will accept life as a process and will definitely concentrate on creation rather than destruction. It is also remarkable that a creative non-victim is neither a killer nor a victim but an ex-victim.
Atwood portrays her female personae as victims in her poems and she visualizes the world in which they struggle to live a harmonious life, where inequality prevails, where her own race is tortured, exploited, consumed and pushed to the margins. The first poem taken for analysis is “Torture” included in her poetry collection True Stories, which is the outcome of Atwood’s involvement in Amnesty International. This particular poem highlights the violations against the female persona, where the female body is violated and hence human values are violated. In situations like this the victim is in an inescapable position in the male dominated circle where power operates on the victim mercilessly. Treating females as slaves reminds the reader of the present setup in which living itself has become a great problem.

In this poem the poet discusses with “free will and politics and the need for passion”. As a detached observer the poet portrays the ‘torturer’ and the ‘tortured’. Usually in Atwood’s system the male is a killer or an agent of torture and the female is the tortured. The same idea is repeated here also.

I think of the woman
they did not kill. (Atwood, True Stories 50)
It is only befitting to add here that Atwood's experience as a visual artist has helped her in describing the 'tortured' body. Here she presents how the female body is exploited or tortured and while dealing with the cruel actions of the males, she says,

(...) they sewed her face
shut, closed her mouth
to a hole the size of a straw,
and put her back on the streets,
a mute symbol. (Atwood, True Stories 50)

This picture of the woman only shows how the males torture woman and reduce her to the level of a mute symbol. As a visual artist of significance and a designer of her own books she has the talent for presenting a sharp and highly pointed picture of the subjects that she deals with in her poems. This description disturbs the reader's psyche and here the female body is reduced to a "mute symbol", for, it implies that she is violated, exploited, tortured. She is reduced and is pushed to the periphery and is made to even deny the fact that she is a human being, or even a living creature.
The poet vociferously declares that there is no point in identifying the ways by which she was tortured but it is important that the reasons for the torture should be identified in order to stop violations and hence the poet stresses that human values should be respected. In order to respect human values one should identify why power is operated and on whom and how it is operated. The poet also acknowledges the fact that the power operated here is "not abstract" and is "not concerned with politics and free will" but is beyond this, for the person who tortures her goes beyond human limits and so, it is his audacious power that lies "beyond slogans" and the tortured remains unidentifiable and the injustice done to the tortured remains an absurdity. To George Woodcock this is,

"a condition of unreasoning barbarity, where cruelty and death are no longer tragic but merely gratuitous, absurd in their horror".(Grace Atwood Language 140)

Atwood argues that cruelties and torture continue in every walk of life in the modern mind and in this poem torture reaches its climax in the following lines scaling the heights of horror and nightmare.

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. (Atwood, True Stories 51)

Being a visual artist Atwood enumerates the tortures by painting the situation in words. As she herself says,

sometimes I paint things before I write about them; the thing appears as a visual image. On the other hand, sometimes I don't. Poets and artists ... (shouldn't) think too much about processes-it interrupts work. The visual art and the rest of it are of course connected at some level. I don't really have any way of verbalising it. (audiotape) (qtd. in Wilson 130)

Atwood describes,

a flayed body untangled

string by string and hung

to the wall, an agonized banner

displayed for the same reason

flags are. (Atwood, True Stories 51)
The Atwoodian attitude towards death is clearly evident in this poem where death is treated as a process of life rather than an end in itself. Linda Hutcheon rightly argues in her book *The Canadian Postmodern*, that

The acceptance of death as part of the process of nature and life (‘planted’) however much the culture resists this acceptance (‘like a flag’) helps Moodie face the paradox of having two unreconciled and irreconcilable voices; her English illusions and her Canadian experience, what she ought to have felt and what she did in fact feel. (143)

While dealing with the present, Atwood deals with the past (the dead or the roots) This is very clearly described in the next poem taken for study i.e. “A night in the Royal Ontario Museum” included in her well known collection *The Animals in that Country*. As the title of the poem suggests Atwood deals with a night in that museum through her persona. She often explores the unexplored and she is more concerned with the seen earthly world than the unseen other world. The persona is pushed into tight corners surrounded by dead bodies and skeletons. Atwood’s idea about the museum is clearly expressed through the persona’s words like ‘crazed-man-made store brains’
where the weathered
totem pole jabs a blunt
finger at the byzantine
mosaic dome. (Atwood, Animals 20)

All the dead things are displayed in the museum and the persona says that all the things displayed are looking for an "EXIT" sign, according to the poet- as they have been artificially brought together and forcibly arranged.

The museum consists not only of dead bodies, but also diagrams and skeletons. The persona in this poem is entrapped in a labyrinth as a museum piece. She thinks about the past, for all things displayed inside are related to the past. Her mind is pre-occupied with the dead bodies, which metaphorically represent the past. Frank Davey in his book Margaret Atwood rightly points out, "The museum is the ultimate rationalizer of natural force cataloging and categorizing the wonders of the past and demystifying the present." (91)

The museum to her remains a symbol of the past. The past is related to history as the present is related to daily life and hence the conflict
between the past and present is evident. The persona is dissatisfied with the present situation of entrapment and hence she wants to get out. She says

I say I am far

enough, stops here please

no more. (Atwood, Animals 21)

The persona’s contradictory feelings that she is a museum piece held in bondage and the frustration that she has come very far and cannot go on is chilling in its effect. For museum “repeats its memories” and she is “dragged to the mind’s deadend” and she feels that she has given off herself “among the mastodons and beyond” (Atwood, Animals 21)

Natural things like rocks, minerals and “wastes of geology” are displayed and from this it is evident that the persona is caught up in a man-centered space which is artificial and in which dead things are arranged in an artificial order as against natural order.

Beyond the artificial world the museum has a very few samples of life giving things too. Through the persona Atwood deals with the deathscape which is full of man-made structures, which represents the cruelties involved in these structures, for it is against natural or creative order which can be brought by the women folk in the near future. For
throughout the ages in the patriarchal structures 'women' are the sufferers or victims. This poem involves death, the museum as the house of death, frustrating prison made by man etc.

The next poem entitled "Death of a Young Son by Drowning" is another poem in this group, which deals with death as an ordinary happening in life and not as a bare concept. This poem deals with death by drowning as the title itself suggests, and it is based on the incident that occurred in Susanna Moodie's life i.e. her son drowned in Moria River. This incident is clearly described by Moodie in her book *Life in the Clearings*. Atwood picks up this situation and converts it into a poem.

Atwood clearly narrates the incident beginning from the boy's birth i.e. the "navigation with success / the dangerous river of his own birth' and on the contrary 'on a voyage of discovery / into the land' where he drowned unexpectedly. Atwood describes in detail the drowning of the boy in very picturesque words:

> His feet slid on the bank,
> the currents took him;
> he swirled with ice and trees in the swollen water (Atwood, *Journals* 30)
These lines also hold up like a mirror the image of the Canadian
dangerous river and when he drowns he is hung on the river like a heart.

She says,

There was an accident; the air locked,

he was hung in the river like a heart.

They retrieved the swamped body, (Atwood, *Journals* 31)

The whole body is symbolized as a ‘heart’ in the body which
consists of water. The body along with “future charts” and “plans” were
retrieved. The season was spring, Moodie feels disturbed and tired because
of the long trip full of obstacles and expectations. She says

My foot hit rock. The dreamed sails
collapsed, ragged. (Atwood, *Journals* 31)

‘My foot hit rock’ implies the reality as against the ‘dreamed sails’
that is about the Victorian past. It is remarkable that the past has become a
part of her life after this incident, for ‘the dreamed sails collapsed,
dragged.’ She says

I planted him in this country

like a flag. (Atwood, *Journals* 31)
After his death she comes back to reality, and she longs to plant him like a flag establishing her discovery of a new land. It is death that makes her think about the past, for understanding the past will lead to the present and hence will automatically lead to the future.

Atwood clearly presents the interconnectedness between the past, present and future, through death in this poem, for death makes Moodie realize the reality and compels her to live in the present. It is worthy to note that the Atwoodian philosophy of life, is that learning lessons from the past will lead one to live a happy present and hence will automatically lead to a harmonious future. Living in the Canadian environment is a difficult task as is revealed in Atwood ‘s poem “The Deaths of the Other Children”. This poem also deals with life values and death but the perception is different from the former poem, which is also included in the same collection of poems. Here in this poem the twin major aspects ‘life’ and ‘death’ are highlighted; the former one is described through natural vegetation and the latter is presented through a dead body. Jerome Rosenberg says,

[...] Moodie acknowledges the relationship between decaying flesh and flourishing vegetation, between her own body and the bodies of her children as they contribute to the detritus that constitute the land: (46)
The poem starts with the death of the body and its union with the soil. These lines reveal that

The body dies

little by little

the body buries itself

joins itself

to the loosened mind, to the blackberries and thistles, (Atwood, Journals 41)

The fact of the body dying slowly and burying itself in the soil, joining or uniting not only with the soil, the earth, but also with the mind. Then the black berries and then the thistles reminding the reader of the ultimate union of the human in the earth.

In fact Moodie is frightened of the death of her children. She loved them very much and hence she feels so dull and disappointed. She asks,

Did I spend all those years

building up this edifice

my composite

self, this crumbling hovel? (Atwood, Journals 41)
These lines emphasize the idea that her mind is crumbling with the sense of loss. She experiences the process of transformation, the change of the surrounding. She says in a foreboding manner:

Everywhere I walk, along
the overgrowing paths, my skirt
tugged at by the spreading briers
they catch at my heels with their fingers. (Atwood, *Journals* 41)

"They" here represents the "briers" as well as the children who are buried, i.e. who have become one with the land. The line "they catch at my heels with their fingers" gives a human connotation to them. (briers). There is a seeming paradox evident in this image. The brier is a thorny plant and so may imply negative ideas. But spreading briers can also mean the ordinary thorny plants that tug at your clothes when walking in forests. After the sadness and the heaviness in her heart she tries to reconcile with the situation and she reflects on the human merging with the earth and also ponders over how the ecology, like the human keeps pulling at one's person while trampling or treading through natural territories.
This poem further elaborates the conflict between hope and despair. Atwood's concern for nature makes the readers aware of an eco-centered life which is the urgent need of the day for man-made structures will pollute the environment. The "briers" in this poem may also suggest the life Moodie has to lead in the near future. Death stresses the life that has to be lived. But death is not an obstacle in the way of life. In fact death reminds the readers of the past and helps them to understand the meaningful life which is before them. Atwood's world gives room for life after death and this clearly finds a place in the next poem "The Resurrection". In this poem the persona i.e. Atwood acknowledges earthly elements like "the rustle of the snow" and the supernatural elements like "the angels" and in fact she is waiting to reach "the final city". In this poem the poet tries to mingle both the natural and the supernatural. Those who are already dead become one with the land i.e. they have become "the stone voices of the land". She says,

god is not

the voice in the whirlwind

god is the whirlwind (Atwood, Journals 59)

The relationship that Atwood had established so far in her poems i.e. the relationship between nature and the human now takes on a new
dimension. It becomes a relationship between nature and the divine. In fact, it is very interesting to study how Atwood makes God, human. In fact she humanizes God. Her idea is that god is not supernatural and the line ‘god is the whirlwind’ treats God as an earthly force. God is nature. God is terrible. God is mighty. God is powerful and destructive also. As R.P.Bilan writes:

She rejects the notion of god as the Logos, or Word existing outside of apart from nature; moreover, what she accepts is not what we ordinarily think of as pantheism: to say “god is the whirlwind” implies an acceptance of all the chaotic energy of nature. (11-12)

Atwood's description of God as the whirlwind leads to so many suggestions. She may be implying that God the creative force can also be a destructive force, for God is everything. He is the maker of life and he is the taker of life. While dealing with the “last judgment” she says,

at the last

judgment we will all be trees.(Atwood, Journals 59)

Here also the reader is non plussed at the idea that Atwood says that at doomsday 'we will all be trees'. It is really surprising to see that even on
doomsday the human merges with nature. These lines represent the relationship between nature, ecology and women. It is significant to note that unlike the Christian ideology here the idea of resurrection and the last judgment are made earthly or natural.

Unlike the occidental philosophy the oriental philosophy believes in rebirth rather than resurrection. Sri Aurobindo in his book *Letters on Yoga* says,

There is after death a period in which one passes through the vital world and lives there for a time. It is only the first part of this transit that can be dangerous or painful; in the rest one works out, under certain surroundings the remnant of the vital desires and instincts which one had in the body. As soon as one is tired of these and able to go beyond, the vital sheath is dropped and the soul after a time needed to get rid of some mental survivals passes into a state of rest in the physic world and remains there till the next life on earth. (436)

It is remarkable that both believe in life after death and consider that death is not the end. Atwood humanizes the concept of resurrection and it is worthy to note that supernatural elements are humanized in her works.
Atwood recreates the idea of death and life after death and in this poem where death becomes a pathway to the spiritual world Atwood envisions a world of happiness which is eco-centered and is full of creation rather than destruction where life values have a definite role to play as in the poem “Mushrooms” where the poet concentrates on creation and creativity.

Atwood, as a poet with a keen sense of perception deals with the ecological description of the growth of the mushroom in the 'moist season', as if she is present while it grows from the ground. She says,

they ooze up through the earth

during the night,

like bubbles, like tiny

bright red balloons

filling with water;

a sound below sound, the thumbs of rubber
gloves turned softly inside out. (Atwood, True Stories 90)

Again the visual artist and poet in Atwood make her paint the growth of the mushroom in words. It is remarkable that though the description is picturesque it is not an imaginary one and at the same time is scientific in nature. She gives details about their shape. She observes,
In the mornings, there is the leafmould
starred with nipples,
with cool white fishgills,
leathery purple brains,
fist sized suns dulled to the colour of embers,
poisonous moons, pale yellow. (Atwood, *True Stories* 90)

These lines further show the accuracy of the description with scientific information about mushrooms. For instance “gill” is the key word used by scientists to describe the radiating plates under the surface of the mushroom and the colour “purple” finds a place in science too. Scientists, say “when young they (mushroom) are pink in colour, but in age they change to a dark purple brown or nearly black in colour (…)”(2). In the above lines Atwood gives details about edible mushrooms as well as poisonous mushrooms. The former ones are associated with the ‘sun’ having “the colours of embers” and contrary to it the latter is compared to “poisonous moons” and are “pale yellow” in colour. This selection of colour and the description reminds the reader of Atwood’s talent in exploring areas of interest between her visual and literary art.

In the second part of the poem Atwood analyses how the ground is helpful for the growth of the mushroom. Atwood is of the view that there
are parallel "thunderstorms" which move on the surface of the earth and
under the earth simultaneously and strike as "lightning when they meet".
The formation of the mushroom from its origin is clearly portrayed by
Atwood in the following lines.

Underfoot there's a cloud of rootlets

shed hairs or a bundle of loose threads

blown slowly through the midsoil.(Atwood, True Stories 91)

One wonders at the pithy detail that a literary artist evinces of a
technical scientific phenomenon (growth of the mushroom).

According to science the beginning stage of the mushroom is called
as the "fruiting stage" George Francis Atkinson says,

When the fruiting stage, or the mushroom, begins there
appear small knobs or enlargements on these strands, and
these are the beginnings of the button stage [...] (6)

The words "bundle of loose threads" resemble the "threads of
mycelium" in the formation of the mushroom. Further, the poet, while
describing the formation of the mushroom, makes it human as well. This is
a wonderful example of how Atwood equates nature with the human.
These are their flowers, these fingers
reaching through darkness to the sky,
these eyeblinks
that burst and powder the air with spores. (Atwood, *True Stories* 91)

It is interesting to note that Atwood’s perception of the mushroom is different, for here, the mushroom is humanized. The word ‘eyeblink’ is a beautiful word coined by Atwood and the image is so pictorial bursting and powdering ‘the air with spores’, as though the eye opens and in a blink the spores are cast out into the air. These words and images remind one of the words and images used and coined by Hopkins in his poetry.

The third part details facts on how they feed and also about the taste of mushrooms. Atwood clearly says that “they feed in shade” and grow on dead wood and contrary to it, taste of “clove” or “new snow”. The former tastes can be associated with poisonous mushrooms and the latter can be associated with edible mushrooms. In the fourth part i.e the final part of the poem the reader can easily identify the poet’s purpose of hunting the mushrooms.
It isn't only

for food I hunt them

but for the hunt and because

they smell of death and the waxy

skins of the newborn

flesh into earth into flesh. (Atwood, *True Stories* 93)

She is hunting not only for the sake of hunting but also for food. The smell of the mushroom announces “death” and also “birth”. The reader can easily understand from the final part that she is addressing this to the second person “you” who is present as a detached observer. The words ‘decay’, ‘hope’, ‘dirt’, and ‘poetry’ deal with life and death. All these reveal life and death metaphorically. In fact the mushroom acts as a metaphor through out the poem, as a metaphor of creation. It is the writing of poetry that is presented by the poet. Poems come from with in i.e. “underfoot there is a cloud of rootlets”. Atwood’s poems reveal not only the optimistic side of life but the negative too: she differentiates both through the “edible mushroom” and the poisonous ones and also through “decay” and ‘hope’, ‘dirt’, and ‘poetry’.
Atwood’s approach to life is a creative one rather than a destructive one where barriers are overcome through understanding the difficulties involved in facing the frightening and harsh reality.

Atwood's creative world stresses the need for a socio-ecological world where each individual has something to contribute and the contribution is duly respected. The present world is the product of technology and civilization where nature and women are neglected and is full of entrapments where the opposites are entrapped.

Her female personae try to come out from the man-made artificial structures which impose violence on them and exploit them to serve their needs. It is evident that while facing the reality before them, Atwood’s female heroes, in her fictional world and her personae in her poems experience pain because of the death of their associates and friends for example the death of the Moodie’s young son by drowning and the death of her other children too. In her novel Surfacing too the death of the unnamed protagonist’s, brother is a deep wound in the mind of the narrator.

Death is a metaphor which explores the possibilities of understanding the past and this is clearly worked out in her poems “Death of the Young Son” by Drowning, “The Deaths of the Other Children”, and
"A night in the Royal Ontario Museum". In these poems death is treated not as the end but as a part of life. To Roland Barthes

Death and birth are facts of nature- But if one removes history from them there is nothing more to be said about them; any comment about them becomes purely tautological.

(Badminton 12)

In the Atwoodian system, life and death are treated not as separate entities but are interrelated to each other. Hence she directs the reader to understand life values from death (metaphorically from the past) and after death. She leads her readers along with her personae to the spiritual world as in "Resurrection" where everything is converted into an earthy affair. Death metaphorically paves the way for a better understanding of the present and will help envision, the unknown future as in the poem "Mushrooms" where the Mushrooms grow on dead wood and growth of them is equated with the process of writing poetry. It is worthy to note that writing poetry, is not imagining something beyond reality but is a process in which scientific approach to analyze the various aspects of life is involved. Hence the Atwoodian Poetic world is kinetic in nature including different facts of life where Atwood gives pictorial descriptions to death with favourable aspects of life. In fact her poems help the readers to
analyze the present setup with the help of the past and indirectly directs them to create a healthy atmosphere in the future.