INTRODUCTION

Conceptual Framework

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume XIX, describes a victim as “a person who is put to death or subjected to torture by another; one who suffers severely in body or property through cruel or oppressive treatment”.

It further describes the victim as a person or creature who is “reduced or destined to suffer under some oppressive or destructive agency” (“victim,” def. 2b), victimhood as the “state of being a victim” (“victimhood”) and victimization as “the action of victimizing, or fact of being victimized” (“victimization”).

The Department of Justice, Canada, defines a victim as “...any person who is harmed, killed, or suffering as a result of an accidental or intentional act or situation. The victim may experience suffering and loss, e.g. physical, psychological, emotional, financial, social, medical, and others.” It defines victimization as “the event or incident leading to a victim state” (VCAES).

The *Consolidated Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary* traces the word ‘survive’ to the Latin word *supervivo*. *Super* means over, beyond and *vivo* means “to live”. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume XVII, ‘survival’ means “continuing to live after some event, remaining alive, living on” (“survival”).
The *Cambridge International Dictionary* defines strategy as “a detailed plan for achieving success in situations such as war, politics, business, industry or sport, or the skill of planning for such situations” (“strategy”). Survival strategies, in this context, refer to certain specific responses of individuals to their victimization. The term presupposes survival and hence corresponds with any effort to stay alive.

Psychiatrist and psychotherapist Paul Valent, in his discussion on life-trauma dialectic, defines survival strategies as “specific stress responses which include specific adaptive and maladaptive, biological, psychological and social constituents” (Valent 5). Fight and flight, he says, are two common survival strategies adopted by human as well as non-human victims in their struggle to survive (Valent 4). The survival strategies come handy for victims who seek to emerge out of their victim status and to transform themselves into creative non-victims.

During the times of pagan rituals and nature worship the term victim was applied to animals that were sacrificed to propitiate Gods. In recent times the term has come to be widely applied to human beings who undergo suffering at the hands of the victimizers, those who inflict suffering upon them. The concept of victim has gained wide popularity in recent times as every individual has come to consider himself a victim of one force or the other. The social inequalities resulting from the inequitable distribution of power and wealth have given rise to
an unjust society world over. Zur observes: “Hierarchy, inequality, and violence have always been part of human social structures. There were always rulers and ruled, leaders and followers, the fortunate and the needy, the powerful and the weak” (1). The disparities that prevail in the social organization further the incidence of violence and suffering among members of the society. In the context of the North American society Zur remarks:

We have become a nation of victims, where everyone is leapfrogging over each other, publicly competing for the status of victim, and where everyone is defined as some sort of survivor. (4)

The terms victims and survival have gained wide currency in recent times. These have come to be widely used in psychology and sociology, especially related to the issue of stress management. The discussions on post traumatic stress disorders focus on victims, survivors and survival strategies of the victims. It is essential to distinguish between the terms victim and survivor. If a victim is one who is condemned to suffering the survivor is one who has been able to transcend or at least withstand this experience of suffering. The survivor is the one who has been able to move ahead of the excruciatingly painful and oppressive experiences of life either through one’s own determination and ingenuity or with the help of other social support systems like psychiatrists, counselors, family members and the like.
Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins in her work *Black Feminist Thought* suggests that human beings may “experience and resist oppression on three levels: the level of personal biography; the group or community level of the cultural context created by race, class, and gender; and the systemic level of social institutions” (227). She considers these three levels as sites of domination and possible resistance. The most vulnerable site in her view is the personal level of consciousness. At the personal level of domination and victimization there may exist willing victims, who show the willingness “to collude in her or his own victimization” and resisting victims, who persistently resist victimization “even when chances of victory seem remote” (Collins 227).

The general response to victimization is either to blame the victim or to hold the victimizer solely responsible for the suffering caused to the victim. For instance in the male dominated patriarchal societies the male is often solely responsible for all the sufferings and oppressive experiences of the female. The blame in this regard falls on the victimizer, the dominant male. Another side to this is that from the point of view of the male the blame may entirely be placed on the female who is the weaker sect by gender and physique.

The victim’s response to victimization varies from individual to individual. It is determined mostly by their mental build up. Collins, in this context, sees a “matrix of domination” that prevails between the victim and victimizer as “an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or
simultaneously oppressor and oppressed” (225). Hence she is of the view that there are “few pure victims or oppressors” because each individual “derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives” (Collins 236).

The victims are often characterized by attitude of self-blame. The sense of powerlessness and inability to articulate their oppression render them silent. Hence they often resort to blame themselves for their suffering. This further aggravates the feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and low-self esteem in the victims. When a victim is condemned to suffering and to nurture these negative feelings survival becomes impossible.

However if the victim is able to overcome these feelings and to give up the attitude of self-blame while accepting one’s complicity in the victimization the movement from victim to survivor could be realized. The victims should also be enabled to give up the feelings of moral righteousness.

It is in this context that survival strategies gain importance. If the strategies adopted by the victims are positive they will facilitate the victim to overcome the trauma of oppression and victimization. The victim will naturally look for the real oppressive factors causing victimization and seek to overpower them through the attributes of self confidence and physical as well as moral courage.
However, if the strategies are negative in their outcome the victim will be doomed to exist in self-pity and self-blame. Life for the victim will only be added misery.

Margaret Atwood: An Introduction

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, capital of Canada, on 18 November 1939. She spent her early years in Ottawa and in northern Quebec where her entomologist father pursued his field research. The family moved to Toronto in 1946, but continued its journey to the northern wilderness in the summers. As a result, Atwood did not spend a full year in school till she was 11. She had her schooling at Toronto’s Leaside High School. There, at the age of 16, she realized that writing was to be her vocation. She enrolled for the honors English Language and Literature program at Victoria College, University of Toronto, in 1957.

Among her teachers were the famous literary critic Northrop Frye and the Canadian poet Jay Macpherson. Macpherson turned out to be a good friend and mentor to the young Atwood and it was at her library that Atwood discovered the treasure house of Canadian literature. After her graduation in 1961 she began her master’s program in English Literature at Radcliffe College, Harvard University. Later she returned to Toronto and found employment in a market research agency. After a year she accepted a lectureship at the University of British Columbia. She returned to Harvard in 1965 to continue her Ph.D research.
Her first full-length volume of poetry, *The Circle Game*, published in 1966, won the Governor-General’s Award for poetry. *The Animals in that Country*, another collection, followed a year later. *The Journals of Susanna Hoodie* was the next, in 1970. Atwood’s writing, however, is not confined to poetry. She has several collections of short stories, critical works, novels and short fiction to her credit. *Bluebeard’s Egg*, *Dancing Girls* and *Wilderness Tips* are just a few collections of short stories. Her critical writings and published lectures include *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* and *Negotiating with the Dead*. *Murder in the Dark* and *Penelopiad* are works of short fiction.


Atwood values her role as a writer and considers writing a unique form of self expression because of its apparent democracy. By democracy in this context
she means “its availability to almost everyone as a medium of expression” (NWD 25). Considering the historical references in her works and their historical contexts Atwood says:

All writers must go from now to once upon a time; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. . . The dead may guard the treasure, but it’s useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more - which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change. (NWD 178-179)

Almost all of Atwood’s writings are grounded in her Canadian context and her fascination for Canadian history and landscape is unique. Her writings express her concern with issues of international relevance like human rights and the threats to the environment. In her works Atwood evinces a strong sense of moral responsibility and commitment as a writer and as a woman. Issues concerning and related to women, especially those related to their need for self definition and identity form an integral part of all her works. Her novels explore not only the relations between men and women but in a more unique way the relations between women.
Except for *Oryx and Crake* all of Atwood’s novels are women-centered narratives addressing issues specific to women and their lives. The women are depicted to engage in constant straggle against enforced roles that threaten to rob them of their identity and selfhood. They seem to be engaged in the endless struggle to overpower the various forces that are out to annihilate their individual character as women. The prime concern of these women is to resist the temptations to succumb to the social pressures and personal stress and to adopt strategies that would help to ensure and to uphold their individual liberty and autonomy.

Atwood rejects the ‘feminist’ label for the wider humanist concerns reflected in her novels. But the keen and critical exploration of issues related to women’s lives like gender discrimination, violence and abuse in marital relationships, victimization in their workplace due to gender differences cannot go unnoticed. Through her protagonists Atwood traces the intense suffering and the excruciating pain of separation, alienation, betrayal and domination experienced by women within the ambit of the domestic life in particular and in the society in general.

**Theoretical framework**

Margaret Atwood’s critical treatise *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* undertakes an analysis of the dominant themes and motifs in
Canadian literature. It concludes that there is a “superabundance of victims in Canadian literature” (39) and hence there is a straggle for survival that pervades all literary works regardless of the genre. Atwood arrives at her conclusion considering the unique geographical features of Canada as a nation and the predicament of individuals who find themselves trapped in a hostile landscape. The attitude of hostility also becomes a determinant in individual relationships and hence the geographical struggle for survival penetrates into the individuals’ lives and their survival in society.

In *Survival* she analyses the literary works from 1930s to the end of 1960s. The analysis leads her to the discovery of “a tradition replete with images of victimization: animals, Indians, women, Eskimos, settlers and explorers are all victims of one another or of nature just as nature itself is a victim of human beings” (Rigney 123).

Considering Canada’s status as a colony nation and its struggles to forge an identity for itself, Atwood likens the country to a collective victim that has misplaced or lost its bearing or landmarks. What a lost person needs is a map of the territory with his position marked on it so that he can see where he is in relation to everything else (Survival 18). In this context, she subjects to scrutiny the various methods of survival and decides on the implications of survival in Canadian literature. For her it is survival in the sense of “hanging on, staying alive” (Survival 33) that matters with regard to Canadian literature.
Atwood recognizes survival as “the central symbol for Canada” (Survival 32) and finds the issue pervading every aspect of existence in Canada. According to her, the world in Canadian imagination is a place strewn with traps and snare, where the main thing is to avoid dying. Atwood’s preoccupation with the idea of survival becomes noticeable in her novels, especially with regard to the protagonists who seem to be constantly on the move trying to escape the snares and traps laid out to rob them of their identity and selfhood.

Tracing the evolutionary pattern of the victim figures in Canadian literature, Atwood outlines four possible phases in their lives. These phases are called victim positions and are pointers of the varying responses of individuals to their victimization. The movement from position one to position four explicates the irresistible urge to survive that is inherent in any living being. She finds that they move through various positions of victimhood determined by the oppression they experience in their lives.

The four positions of victimhood as enunciated by Atwood in her book Survival are:

Position one, in which one denies the fact that one is a victim

Position two, in which one acknowledges the fact that one’s victimhood is inevitable
Position three, in which one acknowledges the fact that one is a victim, but refuses to accept it as inevitable.

Position four, in which one evolves as a creative non-victim.

The initial position involves a refusal to recognize the fact that one is a victim. According to Atwood, a victim in this position expends a lot of energy trying to convince herself and others that she is not a victim. This involves suppressing her anger and pretending that certain visible factors causing the victimization do not exist.

In the next position the victim acknowledges the fact that she is a victim and considers the situation inevitable. For this victim, victimhood is attributed to an act of Fate, the Will of God, the dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History or Economics, or the Unconscious or any other large general powerful idea. The fault here rests with some power beyond the control of the victim and therefore victimhood is not her fault. This is a static position, for the victim is caught in victimhood, which is attributed to something “nebulous and unchangeable.” (Survival 37)

The alternative to the position mentioned above is marked by the acknowledgment of the fact that one is a victim accompanied by the refusal to accept the role as inevitable. In this position the victim refuses to see herself as a fated victim. The real cause of victimization is identified for the first time at this
stage. This is a position of rebellion. The victim rebels against the real source of oppression and channels the creative energy into constructive action. This position is more dynamic as the victims who make it to this phase have prospects of action rather than inaction and passivity.

Position four is that of a creative non-victim. Atwood envisions this position as one not for victims but for those who have never been victims at all, or for ex-victims. Ex-victims are those who have been able to move into it from position three because they have done away with the causes of their victimization. Creative activity of all kinds becomes possible in this position. They seem to be more enterprising and determined to shape their lives positively relying on their creative energy.

The relevance of this framework to the study of female protagonists of *Atwood’s* fiction arises out of the likeness between the Canadian victim stance and the feminine one. Atwood has clearly stated this in her response to Gibson’s question on the attempts of the protagonist in *Surfacing* to proclaim her innocence. Atwood says:

But what I am really into in that book is the great Canadian Victim Complex. If you define yourself as innocent, then nothing is ever your fault - it is always somebody else doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true. It will always be
somebody else’s fault, and you will always be the object of that rather than somebody who has any choice or takes responsibility for their life. And that is not only the Canadian stance towards the world, but the usual female one. ‘Look what a mess I am and it’s all their fault.’ And Canadians do that too. (Gibson 22)

Atwood has always been relentless about the need to challenge the victim’s comforting, self-protective but ultimately self-destructive illusion of innocence. The victim in her view may be oppressed but that should not make her unblemished or helpless. Atwood wrote in “The Curse of Eve” (1978), an essay about literary images of women:

... women, both as characters and as people, must be allowed their imperfections. If I create a female character, I would like to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have- hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy- without having her pronounced a monster, a slur or a bad example. I would also like her to be cunning, intelligent and sly, if necessary for the plot, without having her branded as a bitch, goddess or a glaring instance of the deviousness of women. (SW 227)

Second Wave Feminism refers to the increase in feminist activity which occurred in America, Britain and Europe from the late 1960s onwards. It is
marked by its double focus “on women as an oppressed social group and on the female body with its need for sexual autonomy as a primary site of that oppression” (Thornham 31). As a conscious political movement it sought to unite women through a sense of shared oppression manifest at the personal as well as the social levels. It sought to bring about a revolution in the female consciousness through the process of consciousness raising.

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) is considered a precursor of Second Wave Feminism. Beauvoir’s account of the cultural construction of woman as the *Other* laid the foundation for much of the theoretical works of this period. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) are the major works that influenced Second Wave Feminism.

Beginning her writing career in the 1960s Atwood’s formative years coincided with the emergence of the Second Wave Feminism. In fact, Atwood has described her first novel *The Edible Woman* as protofeminist and her later novels provide an analysis and critique of the changing trends within the feminist movement over the years. In her works, she explores the relation between men and women, and between women and women. She explores the power structures that underlie human interactions and its impact on the lives of individuals. Her protagonists are led to the refutation of their innocence and made to recognize
their complicity in the interplay of power and victimization. They are thereby led into an awareness of human dignity and the individual self.

**Methodology**

The study is done in the light of Atwood’s own theory of survival as stated in her critical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. *Second Words*, a later collection of Atwood’s lectures and reviews is also brought in to supplement and illustrate Atwood’s views regarding the victim complex and survival. While analyzing the characters in the light of their victim positions and tracing their struggle for survival, the survival strategies they adopt in various contexts, either to endure their victimization or to overcome it are also studied.

*Second Words*, another critical work by Atwood is a collection of her critical writing in prose. In several articles in this anthology, Atwood again refers to the issues of victimization and survival. Atwood is of the view that the marginalized -Canadians, specifically in the context of *Survival* and women and children - are often cast as victims. This does not imply that men are always favored with non-victim status or are victimizers inflicting suffering on the marginalized. However men do not come under the scope of this study.

**Tools for analysis**

The tools for analysis are deduced from the four basic victim positions Atwood has elucidated in her critical treatise *Survival*. In her study and analysis of
the dominant themes and motifs in Canadian literature, Atwood has found that 
Canadian literature abounds in victims. Hence the study is an investigation into the 
lives of Atwood’s female protagonists keeping in line with their victimization and 
survival. The varying stances adopted by the victims to their victim experience 
form the core of the study. It also brings to light the transition in the victims’ 
responses to their victimization as they advance in age. Their responses also vary 
with their growth. However this is not a strict classification that can be confined to 
particular age groups.

Most of the protagonists studied for instance deny their victimization in 
their childhood. If not an outright denial there is an unawareness that prevails in 
the lives of these young heroines about their victimization. This stance in itself 
makes up the crucial survival strategy of the victims in the early years of their 
lives. Denial constitutes the early response of the victims to their victimization.

The phase of denial has to be followed by acknowledgement of the victim 
experience if the protagonists strive to survive. But the responses to the awareness 
of victimization vary as seen in the study. Once aware of their predicament, the 
victims are likely to respond in two ways. First, they consider their victimizers as 
forces powerful than themselves like the forces of Biology or Fate or History that 
Atwood has enlisted. They acknowledge the power of their oppressors and 
willingly concede to it. This happens mainly because the victims refuse to 
recognize their own power as individuals and as women.
The second alternative is to refuse to consider oneself a victim. If the first response culminates in flight from all oppressive forces as an escapist strategy, the second response, ends up in fight that marks the rebellious stance of the victims. The victims who refuse to consider themselves powerless and fated to be victims, resort to fight and rebellion. These are the victims Atwood has described in position three. This is the most dynamic position as it offers prospects of moving to position four through action. The victim stops considering herself as a “fated victim” for whom victimhood is destiny (Survival 37).

Victims who make it to position three are further confronted by two choices. Either they can give up their fight and relegate to position two or proceed with their fight and move over to the most creative phase of their lives as creative non-victims. Atwood, in her schema prefers every victim to strive to reach this position transcending their victim experiences. This is the most innovative phase in the life of any individual as she is free to rely on her potential and freedom.

This study traces the movement of the female protagonists of Atwood through these four crucial phases, their responses to their victimization and the various survival strategies. It focuses on the transition the protagonists undergo in their way to transformation and transcendence as creative non victims.
Novels selected for the study


*The Edible Woman* is the story of Marian McAlpin a market researcher working for the firm Seymour Surveys. She lives with her friend Ainsley Tewce and is in love with Peter Wollander an affluent lawyer. The novel deals with Marian’s victimization by the private firm she works for. This extends into her relationships with Peter, her apartment mate Ainsley and other friends. As Marian realizes the oppressive nature of her job and her affair with Peter she starts perceiving herself as a victim. This renders her anorexic, affects her social conduct, her performance at the firm and her relationship with Peter. Meanwhile she also gets acquainted with an eccentric university student, Duncan, who ultimately leads her out of the traumatic existence of a victim. Once she stops perceiving herself as a victim she resumes her ability to eat and even bakes a cake and eats part of it.
Surfacing also has a protagonist who is educated and employed like Marian but is unable to get along with her life because of the agonizing experiences of her life. What distinguishes this protagonist of Atwood is her lack of a name that suggests her lack of selfhood. Her life has all through been influenced by men like her father and her lover. Her lover whom she trusted and for whom she deserted her parents has finally betrayed her by forcing her for an abortion. She smarts under the sense of guilt, leaves him and sets out on a journey to the island home of her childhood in northern Quebec. She is accompanied by her friends and hopes to track down her father who has been missing for a few days. Her search for the father obviously is the search for her lost self and she undergoes another phase of harrowing experiences and conflicts during her stay there. The journey opens up to her varying dimensions and responses of women to victimization.

Lady Oracle traces the development of Joan Foster, from an obese and introvert child to a renowned writer of Gothic romances. Joan’s childhood is marked by the tormenting life at home with her mother, the discontented life of her parents and her refuge in eating. As she grows up she is forced to shed her excess weight by the will imposed on her by her aunt. She also takes up writing as her career as she gets involved with several men. The turn in her life happens as she gets married to Arthur and soon realizes that life is not the fictional one as she dreamt. To escape the torments from Arthur as well as her earlier lovers, Joan
flees from Toronto out of helplessness. The sojourn in Terremoto brings her new insights into life and her responsibility as a woman.

Renata Wilford or Rennie, the protagonist of *Bodily Harm* is a freelance journalist who begins her career as a radical writer exposing local political abuses. But her early interest in socially committed articles soon fades and she compromises her commitment to write absurd articles on the most obvious junk like drain chain jewellery. Rennie’s idle life is threatened with the onslaught of breast cancer and the mastectomy that follows. Subsequent to this, her lover lake deserts her and the same day a stranger intrudes into her apartment when she is away. More than his presence the coil of rope he has left on her bed proves to be threatening and Rennie seeks an escape from this potential world of violence. She flies to the Caribbean islands on an assignment she has managed to get from her employer. But in: the island she is caught up in a local rebellion and is put in prison where she and a woman who has become her friend are abandoned, humiliated and tortured. The novel ends with Rennie’s visions of her possible release from prison and her resuming the career afterwards with increased commitment.

Elaine Risley the protagonist of *Cat’s Eye* is a middle-aged painter who returns to Toronto, once her home, for a ‘Retrospective’ show of her paintings. The ‘Retrospective’ serves as the central metaphor of the novel as it leads to a retrospection of Elaine’s life from her childhood. She recollects the traumas experienced as a school girl who shuttled between the settled life of Toronto and
the nomadic life in the forests of Canada with her parents. As an artist, she is blessed with the power to see and to reproduce what she sees in paint. The paintings at the ‘Retrospective’ serve to unravel the tormenting memories and thereby help her to come to terms with her past.

Offred, the protagonist of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the ‘Underground Female road’ to tell her tale of victimization. Offred is one of the handmaids who have been recruited by the Republic for reproductive purposes. The miserable life of the handmaids under constant surveillance is unraveled through Offred’s narrative. It also includes her past life and the general apathy and ignorance exhibited by women and the society towards intermittent incidents of violence in the society prior to Gilead.

*The Robber Bride* is composed of the stories of three central characters who have been acquaintances from their university days. Antonio Fremont called Tony is the central consciousness of the novel who connects her tale with that of her friends and supports them in their individual struggle against Zenia, the antagonist of the novel. Tony is the survivor of a highly oppressive and abusive childhood. Orphaned by her parents in her adolescent years, she educates herself at the university and gets employed as a university professor specialized in military history. She is married to her classmate West and settles for a peaceful family life. However, the intrusion of Zenia, her friend at the University into her life disrupts the harmony of her life. Zenia snatches West away from her twice and Tony is left
desolate and suffering. However with the help of her friends Roz and Charis, Tony manages to stand up to Zenia, reclaim West and protect him from further abduction.

Alias Grace has the central character in Grace Marks who has spent a considerable part of her life in prison. She was imprisoned and sentenced to death for the double murder of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his mistress Nancy Montgomery. Though her accomplice in the crime was executed, her death sentence was commuted to life sentence. Grace’s childhood is marked by parental neglect, poverty and insecurity. As the family migrates from Ireland to Canada she loses her mother and is forced to be mother to her siblings. She takes up work as a domestic servant and is forced out of her home by the greedy as well as brutal father. Grace’s life at various employers’ tells the struggle for survival of an ordinary servant girl. This life ends her up in the prison where she is made a criminal in the eyes of the public through the legal system as well as the media. Her helplessness and desolation adds to her suffering. Finally with the help of a group of spiritualists Grace is granted pardon after twenty eight years in prison.

The Blind Assassin has as its protagonist Iris Chase Griffen an eighty four year old woman telling her tale. The novel holds within it the narrative of Iris’s life, another novel written by her by the same title as well as the story of her affair with a revolutionary leader. Iris’s tale also begins with her oppressive and neglected childhood and traces her growth to the matriarch she is now. It unravels
tie politics of marital relationships and the subtle clashes between couples that finally end up in a stale relationship.

The experience of victimization as regards individuals is not gender specific. In the present day world victimization occurs in every aspect of the lives of human as well as non-human beings and their environment. This study however confines itself to the protagonists of Margaret Atwood’s select novels.

One central issue that connects every living being is the struggle for survival. This struggle gains significance in the light of the constant victimization experienced by them in the course of their survival. By restricting this study to the lives and evolution of a few female protagonists of Atwood’s novels attempt is made to bring out the dominant concerns that guide women in their struggle to survive.

Each protagonist is the narrator of her tale and her narration inevitably is the tale of her victimization, the crucial part of her survival. Every protagonist is a survivor up to the point of her narration. The very fact that they are capable of telling their stories, that they have voices of their own and are capable of articulation are evidence enough to consider them survivors in the light of their agonizing past. What binds these narrators together according to Roberta White is that they “are nearly always isolated figures, distanced from others, disturbingly,
by their most admirable assets: their honesty, desire for autonomy, and need for self-expression” (54).

The similarity in the pattern of the struggles and experiences of these protagonists connects them together. A clear pattern could be traced in their movement out of their victim experiences in their childhood through adolescence into youth and middle age and even into old age as in the case of Iris Griffen. Everyone endures victimization in their childhood, overcomes the life endangering forces of their adolescence, withstands the troubles and betrayals of marital life and fights against the oppressive relationships and other forces that attempt to thwart their development and growth as individuals. The survival strategies adopted by these protagonists become crucial in this respect enabling them to endure, to rebel and to tell their tales.

Chapterisation

Chapterisation is based on the patterns of movement of the protagonists from one phase of victimization to the other. Each chapter comprises a close textual analysis of the novels with regard to the protagonists. This will help to explicate the themes of victimization and survival in the novels selected for the study. The protagonists undergo victimization and respond to it variously. These varying responses of the protagonists form part of the study. Each protagonist is taken up for study in accordance with the chronological sequence of the novels.
The earlier part of each chapter studies the protagonists in relation to their varying phases of victimization. Each chapter concludes with an overview of the survival strategies resorted to by the protagonists either to endure or to confront their victimization.

Chapter two consists of an analysis of the protagonists as victims who are unaware of the fact that they are victimized. They may also be seen as victims who deny their victimization when they become aware of it. This chapter, therefore, studies the early phase of victimization in the lives of the protagonists. This phase coincides with their childhood. The gender discrimination they experience as girls, the abuse and neglect by the parents and bullying by friends are the reasons analyzed here.

The hazards they undergo in their childhood and their responses to these hazards are almost similar in the early phase of their lives. They are unaware of the fact that they are being victimized and even when they are threatened by none other than their parents, these victims place their trust in these parent figures. They cling on to them for their survival. They hope to survive with the help of their parent figures.

Chapter three focuses on the experiences of victimization of the protagonists as they grow up into young women and aim to mould their own lives, away from their parents and home. They attempt to discard the ties of family and
forge new relationships which, however, manifest as new forms of oppression. The passive acceptance and compliance of the victims form part of this chapter as their strategies.

Chapter four explores the predicament of women, who unlike their counterparts in chapter three refuse to content with their fate and repudiate their victim position. It studies the move towards rebellion and attempts at protest that mark the lives of the seemingly passive and powerless women.

Chapter five analyses the extent to which the protagonists progress through the repudiation of the victim role. The study reveals that all the protagonists studied here move closer towards transcending their victimhood and even emerge as creative non-victims.

Chapter six sums up the pattern of development the victims undergo in the course of their lives depicted in the novel. The varying phases and the multitude of experiences that mark their lives direct them positively towards survival. The protagonists studied here emerge as survivors leaving their history of victimization behind. This chapter also looks into the language and narrative techniques employed by Atwood in depicting the life struggles of her protagonists. Also other stylistic devices employed in the novels like symbols, images, metaphors form part of this chapter.