INNOCENT VICTIMS

Victims in this phase expend a lot of their energy in suppressing their anger and pretending that victimization do not exist. They often consider themselves privileged unlike other victims who find life miserable. Even if the victims are sensible enough to comprehend that they are being victimized by larger powers, they refuse to accept the fact. The victims in position one refuse to accept their victimization for fear of losing the privileges they enjoy. They opt to survive in their status as long as it appeases them with certain privileges that seem to be gratifying as individuals and as women. By denying their victim experience these victims double up as perpetrators of their victimization. They may in turn double up as victimizers to other individuals whom they come across in their day-to-day interactions.

Denial in this context implies an awareness of the victim status. The victim is mature enough to realize that she is being made a victim and is oppressed, but denies the fact. She does not want to lose the privileges meted out to her by the powerful victimizers. The victims in this study do not exactly deny their experience because they lack in knowledge about their victimization. These victims are mostly children; rather the childhood phase of the protagonists is studied here. Their experience of victimization and their responses to it are worth
studying because in the course of the novels they come to an awareness of their victimization.

Early in their childhood they are too young to know that the world is cruel and there are forces that are powerful enough to ruin their lives. They fail to comprehend that even parents who are to nurture them can turn out to be their oppressors. Their victimization is marked by the sufferings and the traumatic experiences they undergo mostly within the families and from their friends. In the words of Goldblatt “They are yet to realize that trust can be perverted, that they can be reeled in, taken advantage of, constantly abused, if they are not careful of lurking predators in their landscapes” including their immediate relatives (277).

Since this chapter focuses on the childhood phase of the protagonists, analysis of the traits of childhood and the various forms of victimization becomes essential.

**Childhood**

Childhood is a crucial phase for the protagonists as it marks the foundation of the personalities and shapes their future. A secure and memorable childhood is ensured to each child in any society through the proper functioning of the social institution of family. However in most of Atwood’s novels the families and the relational operations within it often prove hazardous to the development of children.
While the elder members like the parents manage to survive the conflicting relationships children find themselves trapped within the network of familial relationships. The demeanor of the parents often remains beyond their limited level of comprehension. They find themselves lost between the conflicting parental figures. Hence the childhood phase for most of the protagonists inevitably turns out to be a period of victimization. They however remain unaware of the fact that they are the victims; it is too young an age when they are in their pre-adolescent years. Hence they fail to problematize the relationships.

In the traditional family structure that forms the backdrop of all novels of Atwood, the mothers often find ways to move out of their oppressive lives in the family. They are mostly victims of unhappy marriages and disastrous relationships. The children however are the more oppressed finding less ways to express themselves and lesser venues to communicate their miseries. None of the novels taken up for the study has a child who is happy and fulfilled in her family and is fortunate enough to have a normal upbringing by the parents. The sense of isolation and despair they are forced to endure makes them view life from a cynical perspective.

In the power conflicts among elder members of a family it is the children who suffer most. They are trapped in the power struggle of the elders and end up victims of the dominating power figures. They become unfortunate victims of the elders’ struggle to survive. Deprived of parental love and care the patriarchal
family structure that dominates the society often fails to facilitate their survival. Women who often regret being trapped in unsatisfactory marriages definitely make life difficult for their offspring. This is true in the case of the mothers of Joan Foster, Tony and Grace. Likewise the men are forced to leave for the battlefield to participate in the wars that are being fought between the nations and they often return after a gap of years. By the time their daughters are grown up and they happen to view the fathers as strangers. Joan, Tony and Iris are never able to connect effectively with the father figures who remain silent in their homes. The rift between the fathers and daughters only widens with time and hence fathers can in no way assist the children in their growth and development. A study of the victimization of the children throws light into the parent-child relationships in the novels of Atwood. As the children considered in this chapter are doubtless the protagonists of the respective novels, it is evident that they move out of victim position one and emerge as survivors of this phase of victimization.

The paradox regarding the survival pattern of the protagonists studied here is that when the mothers become aware of their victimization in marriage and family, the oppression and subjugation they undergo in the familial relationships, they seek ways out from their victimhood. While they seek to liberate themselves from the oppression in marriage and family they in turn act as perpetrators of victimization making life troublesome for the children.
However as they grow up and happen to undertake an analysis of their characters as grown up individuals, an evaluation of the past becomes necessary. The protagonists often end up evaluating their childhood and examining their relationships with their parents and friends. This process of self-analysis becomes crucial in the course of the characters growth out of their victimhood. In fact its roots lie in their childhood and therefore this process becomes essential as they have to do away with the victim roles in which they have been trapped all through their lives.

Innocence and powerlessness are the remarkable features of any child. Their innocence often fails to be appreciated by the parental figures. The parents in their guilt-ridden world even see their children as burdens thrust upon them and seek ways to get rid of them. Children, though they could sense the antagonism and the hostility of the parents fail to sense the real motives behind it and therefore fail to respond to it adequately. They are left mere spectators and remain in the sidelines of the family structure.

The remarkable achievement of Atwood is that she has gifted these marginalized children with sharp sensitivity and the emotional power to grasp the happenings around them and to register them in their memory. In one way this makes life difficult for them while on the other they are able to make an effective stocktaking as they grow up. They gain the power of articulation as they grow up in their lives. Their woes that have gone unrecognized and unrelieved in childhood
are subject to re-evaluation. This helps them in emerging out of the traumatic memories that have been oppressing them all through their life. This paves the way for their release from their victim position.

**Child Abuse**

Child abuse can be defined as causing or permitting any harmful or offensive contact on a child's body; and any communication or transaction of any kind which humiliates, shames, or frightens the child.

Parents might ill-treat children because of several reasons: they might take out their own despair and frustration on the children or may consider them burdens that bind them to unhappy marriages. The major types of child abuse are: physical, emotional, and sexual. The emotional abuse can be further classified as verbal and psychological. It includes acts or the failure to act by parents or caretakers that have caused or could cause serious, behavioral, cognitive, emotional or mental disorders. Neglect is the failure to provide for the child’s basic needs. Sexual abuse is inappropriate sexual behavior with the child when committed by a person responsible for the care of the child. When committed by strangers it becomes sexual assault. Commercial or other forms of exploitation occur when the child is forced to work or perform activities for the benefit of others. It includes child labour and prostitution. These activities harm the child's physical or mental health, education and all round development.
Whatever the form of abuse, the ultimate impact of it is that the child happens to fear the near ones who are the victimizers. Naturally, it alienates the child from her surroundings and makes her a recluse. The child is denied a balanced personality; self-esteem goes for a toss and the ability to behave normally in society is severely dented. The protagonists of *Surfacing, Lady Oracle, Bodily Harm, Cat's Eye, Robber Bride, Alias Grace* and *Blind Assassin*—all share a troubled childhood.

As regards the protagonists in this study, their parents are responsible for the neglect and abuse they undergo in childhood. The fundamental responsibility of the parents towards their children is the obligation "to provide the kind of supportive environment those children need to develop into normal adults, where normal adults are supposed to have the biological and psychological structures in place to enable them to perform the functions we assume that normal, standard adults can perform." (Matthews). Neglect by the parents is also detrimental to the development of the children. When parents leave the children uncared and unattended, mostly in their homes and desert them seeking better lives for themselves the children are unable to cope with their lives and the resulting loneliness. This becomes perilous when the girl children are left to the care of their fathers. Their physical survival itself is at risk when the fathers take to drinking and attempt to abuse the daughters physically.
The parents’ inability to cope with their stressful lives, especially as single parents, the torments of their frustrated lives and the victim experience they undergo all through their lives are all factors that lead to the abuse and neglect of their children. In the case of these protagonists child abuse takes the form of physical and emotional abuse, parental neglect and even sexual abuse. Neglecting the basic needs of the children and the failure to provide their basic needs, including their physical safety, failure to provide them emotional support and love are all forms of abuse. When the parents leave the children in their homes unattended or force them to silence even in their presence they neglect their duty of nurturing the children.

As caretakers of the children, it is the duty of the parents to protect the children and to provide them opportunities to realize their full potential as individuals. The UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child has underlined the basic human rights children everywhere should have. This includes “the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life”. The four core principles of the convention were: non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child (UNICEF). The convention spelled out every right of the child considering them vital to the human dignity and harmonious development of every child.
The impact of these various forms of abuse manifests differently in the children. The response of the children to various forms of abuse will always be similar. They end up fearing and hating the victimizing parental figures, and develop habits of withdrawal. They become introverts lacking communicative and other social skills that are to help them build up lasting relationships in their later lives. As a result the children become emotional recluses and alienate themselves from the rest of the family as well as the society. In most children this considerably reduces their self-esteem and obstructs their emotional development as normal children even outside their home.

The children in the novels taken for the study find themselves trapped helplessly in their families, between conflicting parents. The parents, especially mothers, along with the grandparents in some novels victimize the children. Among the three generations that are portrayed in most of Atwood’s novels the parents, caught in the middle generation between the grandparents and children, often try or at least crave for escape. In Survival she says:

They move from a farm to a town, from a town to a big city. But they have internalized the guilt foisted on them by the Grandparent, and they do not often make a great success of their lives. They lack the will, the attachment to the land and the metallic strength of their parents, but they have been unable to replace it with anything more positive and attractive. They are somehow crippled; or they are vague, lacking in definition; or they are just
as work-driven as the grandparent but without the compensation of being able to believe that they are fulfilling the will of God. (135-136)

This vagueness that pervades their lives and the absence of self-awareness mostly renders the mothers frustrated and emotionally crippled. Their rage is directed towards the children and their partners, and the children are rendered helpless victims unaware of their victim status. Goldblatt’s observation that “Mothers, rather than alleviating their girls’ distress, increase their children’s alienation” is apt in this regard (279).

**Bullying**

Bullying is another form of abuse that children often have to undergo in their young years. Bullying is defined as “behaviour which consistently undermines another’s confidence, reducing feelings of self-worth and self-esteem” (Field 51).

A bully is a person who is habitually cruel or overbearing, especially to smaller or weaker people. To treat a person in an overbearing or intimidating manner is called bullying. The phrase peer abuse is also used to implicate bullying. It can be detrimental to the victim’s well-being and development. It is usually done to coerce others by fear or threat.

Bullying takes expression in different ways like verbal harassment, physical assault or other subtle ways of coercion. Making fun of others, their dress and
manners and other subversive acts like undermining their friendships are also forms in which bullying is likely to manifest. It can occur in any site of human interaction like schools, workplace, political activities or even international relations. The fact is that the bullies themselves may be victim of bullying in some other contexts. The bullies initially pick on their victims by taunting or teasing them and gradually it develops into physical harassment.

As regards this study the term bullying is restricted to the harassment that takes place among school going children. The protagonists selected for the study are victims of bullying during their school years. The impact of this experience is so heavy that the children who are victims find it very difficult to cope with their situation. The immediate effect of it is that they grow up with a low self-esteem and will be of indrawn character. Loneliness and anxiety are also factors that affect the development of the victims. The company of other children often fills them with fear. They will also be afraid to share their experience with others, even their parents.

Attempts are often made to justify bullying at least to some extent saying that it helps to develop the survival skills of the rather introvert and dependent children. It is also said to help them develop their social skills and to build up lasting relationships and so on. But the fact remains that bullying weakens, disempowers and destroys the victims. As Field puts it,
It does not aid survival, instead threatens our existence . . . only those who have suffered it fully appreciate the sheer awfulness of daily unremitting abuse that has no answer, no reason, no value and no end (1)

*Surfacing*

The nameless protagonist of *Surfacing* is a victim of bullying during the years at school. Also the neglect by the parents contributes to making her an emotional recluse and an introvert woman. Her namelessness in the novels also can be seen resulting from her sense of alienation that results from the habit of a recluse.

She is forced into a secluded life by her father. The father, an entomologist, opts for a settled life after years of nomadic life. The spot he chooses for it is an island cabin in the remote forests of Northern Quebec. Father’s withdrawal is due to his contempt for human beings. “He didn’t dislike people, he merely found them irrational; animals he said were more consistent, their behavior at least predictable” (*Surfacing* 64). He also prefers the island to the village as he sees it as “a place where he could recreate not the settled farm life of his own father but that of the earliest ones who arrived when there was nothing but forest and no ideologies but the ones they brought with them” (*Surfacing* 64-65).

Father’s withdrawal into the island affects the upbringing of the children, especially the narrator. The children in their childhood are denied the normal
upbringing like other children of their age. Also the narrator as a young girl finds it difficult to comprehend the rationale behind the father’s choice. Later as she grows up and experiences the life in the city she is able to justify father’s decision. Also her schooling is frequently interrupted because of the wandering life of the parents.

She is put in a different school every year during the winter. School is a cause of disappointment for her as she always felt to be an outsider. With her “hermit-crab habits” and the ignorance of the local customs her friends treat her as “a person from another culture” (Surfacing 80). It is difficult for her to form lasting relationships with girls of her age and therefore is often left alone without friends. This also renders her a victim of the bullying tricks of the students of the local school.

Being put in a different school each year she “was the one who didn’t know the local customs, like a person from another culture: on me they could try out the tricks and minor tortures they’d already used up on each other” (Surfacing 80). When the boys chased and captured the girls and tied them up with skipping ropes, after school, they often forgot to untie her. She was the one who was really victimized by her peers. She had to spend “many afternoons looped to fences and gates and convenient trees, waiting for a benevolent adult to pass and free me;” (Surfacing 81).
Unaware of the craftiness of children and their habit of forming communities among themselves she remains a loner. She relies on her own craftiness to answer their queries. The protagonist finds it essential to make herself acceptable in the community so as to survive. She fears being a castaway because “Being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded; it arouses in others disgust and pity and the desire to torment and reform” (Surfacing 81). Though she is not yet aware of what it is to be a victim, she undergoes the victim experience at the hands of her friends. She proves to be the most vulnerable of the group as she is ignorant of their tricks and nuances of their games.

When the elders around her are unable to redeem her of her miseries she seeks solace in God. Her notion of God is what she has had from Sunday schools, of the god who would answer our prayers. Hence she prays to God “not like the Lord’s Prayer or the fish prayer but for something real. I prayed to be made invisible, and when in the morning when everyone could still see me I knew they had the wrong God” (Surfacing 81). This experience only adds to her disillusionment.

Disappointed by both man and God she ultimately withdraws into herself and grows up as a recluse. The parents remain aloof from her emotional world. They fail to recognize the trauma experienced by the daughter in coping with the frequently changing ambience and thereby makes life difficult for her. The
insensitivity of the parents to the emotional needs of the daughter thus furthers her victimization.

*Lady Oracle*

Joan Foster is a victim of both child abuse and bullying. As with the protagonist of *Surfacing*, Joan is also forced to change schools frequently at the whim of her mother. This often leaves Joan without friends at home and at school. The disturbed relationship between the mother and daughter also adds to Joan’s trauma. Both the mother and the bullying friends contribute to Joan’s victimization in her childhood. The absence of the father in her childhood also makes life difficult for Joan.

Joan’s mother’s discontentment in her married life is aggravated as Joan fails to conduct herself according to her mother’s wishes. Though mother named Joan early on after Joan Crawford the actress who was “beautiful, ambitious, ruthless, destructive to men” (LO 42), Joan does not show the promises of being any of these. This is just one reason for mother’s disappointment with her. She remembers a remark of her mother when she was eight or nine: “To think that I named you after Joan Crawford” at which Joan’s response is “my stomach would contract and plummet and I would be overcome with shame; I knew I was being reproached, but I’m still not sure what for” (LO 43). Unaware of the reasons for
reproach loan is left to endure the shame that results from the mother’s remark and also a sense of failure at not being able to be what mother wished.

Mother is never able to forgive Joan for being fat. Though her obesity was earlier a result of her anatomy, mother considers it as Joan’s fault. Up to the age of six her photos show Joan as a normal child and then as the pictures stopped abruptly Joan concludes it was “perhaps she no longer wanted my growth recorded” (LO 43). At the age of seven Joan is made to perform at the dance recital of a local dancing school.

Though she was trained to dance as a butterfly, at the last moment she had to transform herself into a mothball, regardless of her protest. Joan says “I was wounded, desolated in fact, when it turned out that Miss Flegg wanted me to remove my cloudy skirt and spangles. . . ” (LO 49). The worst thing in Joan’s own words is “I still didn’t understand quite why this was being done to me, this humiliation disguised as privilege” (LO 51). Joan is never able to overcome the humiliation and disillusionment caused by this incident. Nor is she able to forgive her mother and the dance teacher for shattering her dreams.

The recklessness of the mother also leads Joan to the hands of the bullies. Instead of enrolling her in the brownies in the neighborhood, mother puts her in one
farther away, in a better neighborhood, attended by children from different schools entirely. ...It didn’t help to acquaint me with the girls in my own school, the reverse in fact as I had to leave school early on Brownie Tuesdays in order to get there in time; and at the Brownies itself I was an alien from beyond the borders. (LO 54)

This alienation only aggravates Joan’s suffering as a victim. The Brownie girls with whom she had to go to the meetings impose endless torture on Joan, both physical as well as mental. While returning from the Brownies by nightfall the other girls would run off leaving fat Joan alone. They would have their own reasons that make Joan deserving of this punishment,

for something I had done or hadn’t done that day: I had skipped too heavily in the fairy ring, I hadn’t stood straight enough, my tie was rumpled, I had dirty fingernails, I was fat. Sometimes they would say they wouldn’t run off, or would swear to come back and get me, if I would only perform certain acts: . .. Once they told me to stick my tongue onto an iron fence on the way down to the ravine, but it wasn’t cold enough and my tongue didn’t freeze to the fence as they’d hoped. (LO 61)

It is merely one such incident that they tie her up blindfolded to the bridge over the ravine and leave her into night to be rescued by a stranger. When her mother knows about this incident she uses it as an example of Joan’s “fecklessness
and general lack of wisdom” (LO 66). She accuses Joan: “You were stupid to let the other girls fool you like that” (LO 66). Thus instead of providing relief to the daughter mother accuses her of being thoughtless and sides with the bullies adding to the torment.

Joan’s miseries only increase as the bullies discover that she can be easily reduced to tears. Tears were considered a mark of defeat in the games of the girls in school. Violent fights were not the game of girls, but their games were with words that were whispered in their conspiracies. “Words were not a prelude to war but the war itself, a devious, subterranean war that was unending because there were no decisive acts, no knockdown blows that could be delivered, no point at which you could say I give in. She who cried first was lost” (LO 59). Her vulnerability to tears makes Joan an easy victim of the bullies.

The relationship between Joan and her mother reveals the rift that existed between them quite early in her life. Though mother had her plans for Joan and expected Joan to perform accordingly all plans collapse because either mother is not clear about them or because of Joan’s clumsiness. Joan addresses her ‘mother’,

... never one of those childish diminutives; I must have, but she must have discouraged it. Our relationship was professionalized early. She was to be the manager, the creator, the agent; I was to be the product. I suppose one
of the most important things she wanted from me was gratitude. She wanted me to do well, but she wanted to be responsible for it. (LO 70)

This remark throws light into the relationship between the mother and daughter. There is not much love and affection that binds them in this professionalized relationship. Joan as a child is unaware of mother’s expectations and is drowned by the sense of failure as she fails to fulfill them.

For mother Joan is a burden tied on to her neck. She had to bring up the daughter alone during the years when her husband was away at war. Moreover the marriage itself was a trap in which she has been caught and left to fight for her survival. This justifies her frustration and vehemence for Joan. Joan happens to overhear the conversation between the parents. Mother tells her father “It’s not as though I wanted to have her. It’s not as though I wanted to marry you. I had to make the best of a bad job if you ask me” (LO 82). So bringing up the daughter is a bad job, unrewarding for the mother and her attempts to do it well end up in frustration and suffering for both mother and daughter.

Mother finds herself victim of an unhappy marriage, but is unaware of it. She drifts through her life shifting her victim experience to her daughter. Thereby mother is not only a victim herself but a perpetrator of victimization. The whole of her life is spent in despair and regret. As for Joan the situation changes as she
grows up and is able identify the causes for her victimization. The victim experience of her childhood is only a passing phase unlike that of her mother.

_Bodily Harm_

Rennie’s childhood is spent at her maternal home in Griswold, supervised by the domineering grandmother and a decidedly passive mother. As Atwood remarks in _Survival_ about the grandparent figures, Rennie’s grandmother is a woman of “unbending will[s] and sets of “principles” . . . grimly religious, and more than willing to police and censor the morals of others. They rule, or attempt to rule, their children with a rod of iron” (BH 134). As a child the grandmother’s iron will is beyond Rennie’s comprehension.

Rennie’s attitude to life is shaped by her proximity to her grandmother. One of the earlier images she has of the matriarch is her “prying my hands away finger by finger” (BH 53) as punishment for some transgression. Another form of punishment imposed by the grandmother is to lock her up in the cellar. According to the grandmother’s sense of justice, even crying or losing one’s temper are punishable offences. Rennie, aware of the consequences of doing otherwise, has to control her tears even in her grief so as to escape the darkness and cold of the cellar. She says:

When I was shut in the cellar I always sat on the top stair. Sometimes there were things down there, I could hear them moving around, small things that
might get on you and run up your legs. I’m crying because I’m afraid, I can’t stop, and even if I hadn’t done anything wrong I’d still be put down there, for making a noise, for crying. (BH 53)

The house is dominated by silence and Rennie the child is forbidden to ask questions. In the oppressive atmosphere of the house Rennie also learns to be silent.

Being passive and inactive was the norm of decency according to the standards of the grim world of Griswold. The folks of Griswold would do nothing to disgrace themselves. And the best way to do that is “to do nothing unusual” (BH 55). Rennie realizes this as a threatening situation early in her childhood. Also she has the model of her mother, who has sacrificed her life for the grandparent generation. Rennie, in the course of her growth in Griswold becomes aware of her victimization, and longs to escape from being trapped in Griswold. These years and the experiences there are crucial in shaping Rennie’s attitude towards life, which is marked by a “cultivated detachment” and “calculated non-participation in life” (Lucking 6) and thereby the victimization she undergoes in her later life.

Rennie views Griswold as “a subground, something that can’t be seen but is nevertheless there, full of gritty old rocks and buried stumps, worms and bones; nothing you would want to go into” (BH 18). The social norms of Griswold
demanded decency from girls rather than beauty. Grandmother was keen on practicing and inculcating the oppressive norms of being decent in her household. It was preferable for the people of Griswold to remain respectable rather than disgracing themselves. The best way to keep from disgracing was “to do nothing unusual” (BH 55). Growing up in the claustrophobic environment of Griswold naturally gives the feeling of being trapped. All that Rennie could think of in her adolescent years was how to get away from Griswold. She has the precedent of her mother before her, who willingly gets trapped in Griswold, sacrificing herself for her parents and siblings. Rennie becomes aware of her victimization through the living image of the mother.

Although I admired her - everyone was always telling me how admirable she was, she was practically a saint - I didn’t want to be like her in any way. I didn’t want to have a family or be anyone’s mother, ever. I had none of those ambitions. (BH 58)

Added to this are the three things that Rennie learnt during the Griswold years. They were: “how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them” (BH 54).

Even as Rennie grows up and leaves Griswold her attitude to life remains the same. The lessons from Griswold remain ingrained in her mind. As a journalist and as a woman she encounters and endures victimization of grave dimensions,
but attempts surviving them by constant denial. As a freelance journalist Rennie has the freedom to choose her stories and to explore them, but she merely sticks on to mundane items like fashion and lifestyle stories. She soon establishes herself as a quick expert on surfaces early in her career. In fact the choice of her career itself determines her preference for not committing herself to her profession. In the early days of her work she concentrates more on trends that didn’t really exist. She writes pieces on them “to see if she could make them exist by writing about them” and most often it would turn out to be success because “people would do anything not to be thought outmoded” (BH 25).

Cat’s Eye

Elaine Risley undergoes endless miseries and suffering at the hands of her friends turned bullies. Elaine’s shift from her nomadic life with her parents to a settled life at Toronto and her lack of familiarity with the habits and manners of girls her age are the factors that contribute to her victimization. As she starts attending a regular school at the age of eight Elaine longs for the life and friends she has got acquainted through storybooks. But the fact she stumbles upon about the friendship of girls is beyond her comprehension. She finds it difficult to accept that girls among themselves can be treacherous and oppressive to each other. This inability to accept the truth lets her be a victim unaware of her victimization. Her longing for companionship and her naivete lets her continue as a victim.
Elaine’s experiences of bullying continue steadily over a period of time. Having spent her childhood in the forests of Quebec, Elaine is unaware of the crude culture of the city. As she is acquainted with the girls Cordelia, Carol and Grace, Elaine looks forward to a whole new world awaiting her. As she visits their houses and engages in games cutting out figures from Ladies’ Home Journal and Eaton’s Catalogues and pasting them in her scrapbook, a strange world of feminine sensibility unfolds before her. As they engage in these idle games Elaine realizes that

Something is unfolding, being revealed to me. I see that there’s a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to me, and that I can be part of it without making any effort at all. . . I don’t have to think about whether I’ve done these things well, as well as a boy . . . Partly this is a relief. (CE 57)

This initial impression of Elaine proves entirely wrong in the course of time. She later realizes that it is easier to make herself acceptable among the opposite sex than with girls. Also the effort she desperately puts in to get accepted proves futile as it adds to her misery.

Her idyllic innocence renders her a victim to the ploys of the bully friends. Elaine’s first betrayal occurs when Cordelia digs a hole in the backyard of her house and lowers her into it. When she goes down into it Elaine considers it a
game, but as time passes she becomes aware that her friends have deserted her. She becomes aware of the gravity of the situation. As the realization dawns upon her Elaine feels “sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror” (CE 112). The incident serves as “a marker, a time marker that separates the time before it from the time after” (CE 112). It marks the end of Elaine’s unawareness of her victimization.

The phase of denying her victimization occurs when Elaine goes in for compromises so as to belong to the group. Elaine willingly relinquishes all major roles in the games to other girls and lets them have their say. More than the roles she values their company. But her sacrifice only brings in more insult from the girls. Elaine however does not respond to this, rather disregards them so as to stay with them. Thus she repeatedly denies her victimization in her attempt to stay with the group. Even when their taunts become unbearable, Elaine refuses to raise any objection.

The intense mental torture she undergoes drives her to the realization that “Little girls are cute and small only to adults. To one another they are not cute. They are life-sized” (CE 125).

As in the case of Joan, Elaine is also under surveillance by the friends. Elaine is aware of her plight as she says:
Once I’m outside the house there is no getting away from them. They are on the school bus, where Cordelia stands close beside me and whispers into my ear; “Stand up straight! People are looking!” ... They’re there at recess and in the cellar at lunchtime. They comment on the kind of lunch I have, how I hold my sandwich, how I chew. On the way home from school I have to walk in front of them, or behind. In front is worse because they talk about how I’m walking, how I look from behind. (CE 127)

Elaine perpetrates her victimization by maintaining silence about her ill treatment by the bullies. Even though the bullies are careful to pacify her so that she would not complain to the elders, Elaine never contemplates revealing it for fear of losing their company. Elaine reveals the strategy of the bullies:

They don’t say any of the things they say to me in front of others, even other children: whatever is going on is going on in secret, among the four of us only. Secrecy is important, I know that: to violate it would be the greatest, the irreparable sin. If I tell I will be cast out forever. (CE 127)

Secrecy is essential for bullies, they do it secretly, and Elaine facilitates them by maintaining secrecy.

Elaine is never able to consider her bullies enemies or to hate them. “With enemies you can feel hatred, and anger. But Cordelia is my friend . . . . They are my friends, my girl friends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I’m
terrified of losing them. I want to please” (CE 127). Her eagerness to please only helps to bring in more suffering and oppression on Elaine. As long as she is guided with this motive Elaine has no way to get out of this victim role. By remaining submissive and by refraining from complaining or seeking help from elders Elaine becomes “a willing accomplice in her own victimization” (Barat 176). Her willing participation in the power games of her childhood invariably renders her a victim. She repeatedly denies her victimization for fear of being an outsider. She believes that acquiescence is necessary to belong to the group and therefore essential to survive.

Elaine’s mother also proves her helplessness when she comes to know about it. Only when she could stand up to herself and make up her mind not to have such girls as her friends, can Elaine emerge a survivor. Even though she survives the earlier phase of extreme bullying she endures it for the sake of friendship. The endurance is through denying her victimization as she does not want to betray the friends. Through the treatment of the cruelty of children Atwood, “instead of presenting it simply as an ugly fact of life . . . shows Elaine slowly and painfully coming to an understanding of its sources and causes” (Jump 118).
Tony, the protagonist of *The Robber Bride*, is another victim of an embittered childhood. She undergoes physical as well as mental abuse from her parents especially her mother. In fact Tony’s predicament at the hands of her discontented mother is very much similar to that of Joan Foster.

Tony is the silent - and smallest- victim of the war that rages between the parents. Anthea, her mother, is frustrated in her marriage that was necessitated by her pregnancy. She considers herself a hostage in Canada. Hailing from England, she longs for everything that is English and has contempt for everything Canadian inclusive of her husband. Naturally, Tony’s Canadian accent also arouses her anger. From the furious verbal exchanges between her parents little Tony gathers that mother was forced into the marriage and was carried off by her father “that crude thieving lout,. . . to this too cramped, two-storey, fake Tudor, half timbered, half baked house, . . . in this narrow-minded provincial city, in this too-large, too-small, too-cold, too-hot country that she hates with a strange, entrapped, and baffled fury” (RB 145). Mother’s discontentment and despair are let out on Tony. She hisses at Tony for her flat Canadian accent inherited from her father, unlike the real English one of the mother.

Tony grows up with the feeling that she “is a foreigner, to her own mother; and to her father also, because, although she talks the same way he does, she is -
and he has made this clear - not a boy. Like a foreigner, she listens carefully, interpreting. Like a foreigner she keeps an eye out for sudden hostile gesture. Like a foreigner she makes mistakes” (RB 145). Caught up between their barbarous exchange of words Tony perceives herself

as an alien having the wrong accent for her mother, the wrong gender for her father, . . . The lack of recognition from her mother in childhood, a failure in the domain of intersubjective relatedness leaves Tony as an adult unable to form close relationships or to believe that she can share her inner world with another. (Perrakis 211-212)

Tony always calls Anthea mother “as if Mother is someone else” (RB 140). Though she tries desperately to please her mother she is uncertain how to conduct herself.

The hostility of the parents together with the lack of affection intensifies Tony’s sense of alienation. The unpredictability of her mother’s mood makes things worse for Tony. She is at times effusively affectionate; indifferent and neglectful at other. Tony always fails in predicting and reacting in accordance with these mood shifts. These failures get imprinted into her consciousness and haunt her always. However, Tony gathers strength from her other, bolder, daring self, the left-hand one she has named as Tnomerf Ynot. This other is an embodiment of all that is lacking in Tony. At least in her private moments Tony is
free with this self. When she grows up and is aware of what is being done to her she strives to shape herself in the form of this imaginary other.

The aloofness of the father and the oppressive influence of the mother literally stunt her growth. Tony is of a diminutive stature and does not spare much of her time or money in dressing up or making herself look attractive, even when she is grown up. When she was a child her mother used to say that “she could dress Tony in a potato sack and Tony wouldn’t notice” (RB 139). What Tony did notice was that it wouldn’t make any difference for Anthea whether she wore a potato sack or not. She cultivates a disregard for her looks, especially her dresses, which are of the size of schoolchildren due to her physical stature. This may perhaps be an outcome of the one dress bought for her by mother just before her elopement and was too large in size.

Tony inherits her mother’s victim mentality and imbibes it into herself. When she is left alone with father she fears that he will finally blame her for the whole chaos of his married life, that because of her they had to marry. As mother comes to think of herself as a war bride, so Tony starts considering herself a calamity of the war, “a war baby” (RB 158). Though as a child she lacks the right family atmosphere of nurturance and self-development Tony survives the traumatic phase of abuse and parental conflict. Her refuge is the other, the reversed self of Tnomerf Ynot.
*Alias Grace*

Grace Marks is a victim of parental neglect and abuse by her father. Her own parents are the cause of her sufferings in childhood. The parents out of sheer neglect do not care for the physical or emotional well being of their children including Grace.

Poverty and social backwardness are the two factors that add to her victimization throughout her life. Her father is a stone mason and is an irresponsible man who spends most of his wages in the tavern. Though her mother was the daughter of a clergyman, she was caught in the marriage with the mason as she was already pregnant with her first child. Like the mothers of Joan Foster and Tony, Grace’s mother is also trapped into the marriage. The mother is always physically weak or pregnant and therefore has no way to care for her children. By the time Grace is eight she has five siblings younger to her. Since mother’s health is weak Grace has to do all the washing and cooking and other domestic chores. Father spends all his earnings on drinks and abuses his wife and children. As a child Grace could only think that she was born into the wrong family for the wrong parents. Her troubles begin at birth and regarding her birth she has to accept that it was nothing of her choice.

Grace is an outsider in her family. She is the one who has to grow up much ahead of her age and play the role of both the parents for the younger children.
Recalling her childhood she says, “When I was younger I used to think that if I could hug myself tight enough I could make myself smaller, because there was never enough room for me, at home or anywhere, but if I was smaller then I would fit in” (AG 33). This longing to fit in is inherent in her as a child and persists even as a grown up. All through her life Grace is forced to perceive herself as a misfit. Her father is furious when he sees mother’s delicate condition and curses her for bringing all the children into the world. He spends most of his time and wages in the tavern and misses work. When he is at home he curses the children and laments why god has saddled him with such a litter, and frightens them saying they “should all have been drowned like kittens in a sack”(AG 108).

Grace’s mother unlike Tony’s was a “timid creature, hesitating and weak and delicate” (AG 105). Grace, though a child, was angry at this and wished her “to be stronger, so I would not have to be strong myself” (AG 105). But her mother is worn down and ill and succumbs to death during the family’s voyage to Toronto. The death of the mother is a calamity for Grace. The loss of the mother during their voyage to the promised land of Canada fills her mind with apprehensions. Left with six siblings and the melancholic father Grace is struck with fear and doubts about their future. When she hears her father sniveling to the lady who offered them shelter in Toronto Grace is overcome with remorse and disgust. She says:
I’d found it hard enough when our mother died, but attempted to keep myself together through it all, and to put my shoulder to the wheel; and to hear my father sniveling away in that fashion was enough to turn the stomach. I believe it was only then that I truly began to hate him, especially considering how he had treated our mother in life, no better than if she had been a rag for cleaning his boots. (AG 126)

The emigration of the family instead of improving their lot only worsens it. The relationship between the father and the daughter worsens with this incident.

Grace is subjected to worse forms of victimization as father resumes his drinking. His rages return stronger than when her mother was alive. He abuses her verbally and even physically. Grace loses all her faith in him as a parent. She realizes that he was “drinking up the bread out of his own children’s mouths, and soon he would force us to begging or thieving, or worse” (AG 129). He assaults her physically as he used to do with his wife in the past. Grace’s arms turn black and blue. One night he threw her against the wall shouting that she was a slut and a whore and she fainted. Grace is haunted by the fear that he would one day break her spine and cripple her.

Grace is finally thrown out of her house by her father who expects her to earn for the family. Grace takes up a job as a servant maid at the house of Alderman Parkinson. Her experiences there reveal new forms of victimization of
women, especially of the backward classes. The first phase of Grace’s victimization is complete as she is forced out of the house by her father and seeks job as a domestic servant. Her new position opens up new experiences and she comes in contact with new forms and sources of power. Though no more under the threat of abuse and assault from the father, Grace realizes that she is victimized by new forces.

*The Blind Assassin*

Ms’s childhood is marked by the lack of parental affection and care. Her mother who is a woman of renown often engages herself in philanthropic activities. The daughters, Iris and Laura, are left alone in the palatial house in the care of the housekeeper Reenie. In fact the housekeeper is the only comforting presence throughout Iris’s life. The sisters often find solace in the company of each other. Whenever they look for their mother she is absent and they conclude “Mother might be resting, or doing good deeds elsewhere, but Reenie was always there” (BA 2).

When her father is away at the war Iris’s mother is busy in Toronto. Mother serves plain meals at home as models during the war time. She also engages in public service during the war, organizes comfort circles and knitting. As a philanthropist she spends her time caring for the maimed soldiers of the world war
and supplies provisions for them. Thus she rains her health going beyond her strength.

When father returns from the war maimed, an atheist and a hard drinker, mother withdraws into her cocoon. The relationship between the parents is heavily disrupted and “It was as if they had drunk some fatal potion that would keep them forever apart even though they lived in the same house, ate at the same table, slept in the same bed” (BA 78). Though it concerns only the parents the children are the ones who have to ultimately pay for the conflict between the parents.

With the mother’s death both daughters are left entirely to the care of the housekeeper and are almost abandoned. Mother, at the time of her death had requested Iris to be a good sister to Laura. Iris, regardless of her own childhood has to sacrifice her joys and pleasures for the sake of Laura. Mother’s request for the first time reminds her that she is a victim as she says, “I felt I was the victim of an injustice: why was it always me who was supposed to be a good sister to Laura, instead of the other way round? (BA 93)” But there is nothing she could do. Left alone with her sister Iris could sense the desolation that was engulfing them. They are like two island-dwellers:“. . . there were only the two of us. The two of us on our thorn-encircled island, waiting for rescue; and, on the mainland, everyone else” (BA 43).
Iris also has to confront father’s desperation that he does not have a son. She is also a victim of gender discrimination. Being the eldest progeny of the Chase family the right to Inherit the family business should go to Iris. But her father does not consider her worthy of it because she is a girl. When father plans to have her as his descendant Iris’s anxiety is about fitting herself into the shoes of the Chase sons. The letter head of Chase Industries had it in print: Chase and Sons. So the task left for Iris is to transform herself into a son so as to be the right heir and to prove her capability. This is more than what she could bear considering her upbringing. As for the father, “The values he required were those of the army: neatness, obedience, silence, and no evident sexuality. ... He had let me run wild for too long. It was time for me to be taken in hand” (BA 158-159).

In order to solve this crisis father works out a solution by marrying her off to Richard Griffen another prominent industrialist of Toronto. As soon as the firm is in his hands Richard merges it with his own firm, the Royal Classic Knitwear. Thus the marriage that was one of convenience only adds to Iris’s victimization.

As the daughters are left to be brought up by the father and the caretaker, their upbringing is neglected. They are denied all the joys and refinement suited to girls of a noble family like the Chase. He wanted to bring them up like boys and therefore they were denied any accomplishments of girls their age. Hence Iris is noticed as lacking in charm in the scrutinizing eyes of Winifred, her sister-in-law. She admits, “I expect father could see a point to charm in some quarters, but he
hadn’t instilled any of it in us. He’d wanted us to be more like boys, and now we were. You don’t teach boys to be charming. It makes people think they are devious” (BA 233). In fact Iris is left wondering why father treats her like an “inmate of some curious reform school” (BA 159).

Iris is the silent witness to a series of disintegrating institutions during her lifetime, especially her early childhood. Her family as a whole collapses, with the death of her parents, then the business empire of Chase family disintegrates, followed by the disintegration of the ancestral household, Avilion. Though Iris is the heir of Avilion she is left to watch the successive disintegrations passively due to her helpless state.

Iris is also a victim because she is denied proper education and social relationships. She does not have any friends and has no contact with people outside Avilion. Her victimization becomes complete as she is left alone desolate and suffering, uncertain of the impact of the events happening in her life. As typical of a child, Iris out of her innocence hopes that everything will turn out to be good and her story will have a happy ending. She says:

Children believe that everything bad that happens is somehow their fault and in this I was no exception; but they also believe in happy endings, despite all evidence to the contrary, and I was no exception in that either. I
only wished the happy ending would hurry up, because ... I felt so desolate. (BA 138)

Typically, right from her childhood, Iris spends her time in self-accusation and suffering, in spite of her childish innocence.

The innocence of the child is exploited by everyone including the parents. Mother entrusts Laura to her care, regardless of her age. Father, who had complete disregard for his daughters during his lifetime, reminds Iris that she has to take care of Laura. He also forces her into the marriage with Richard Griffen a prominent industrialist of Toronto. More than the concern for the well being of his daughters he is driven by the desire to perpetuate the business empire of the Chase family. Hence Iris is trapped in an unhappy marriage for the rest of her life.

The tutorials held at home at the insistence of the father add up another dimension to Iris’s victim experience. Not only that the father denies them proper schooling in the name of their lineage but also imposes the tutorials on the girls as a corrective measure. The subjects of study were decided mostly by the father and the teachers. In this curriculum intended to cure the girls of their daydreaming and sloppy sentimentality there was no thought on what they liked or why they liked it. The ultimate aim of this education was to turn them “into the semblances of boys, one way or another” (BA 161). The girls have to put up with various forms of abuse at the hands of the tutors including manhandling.
The victimization Iris undergoes during the early years of her life makes her a position one victim. She denies her victimization at the hands of the parents. First of all being parents they are considered with due respect and fondness. But only in her recollections in old age does Iris realize the magnitude of the sufferings she underwent in her childhood. The loneliness of her old age is juxtaposed with that of her childhood and she is brought to the awareness of victimization she underwent in its manifold dimensions from various sources. Also the innocence of her childhood prevented her from considering her parents as victimizers. The responsibilities they entrusted on her on various occasions were at the time viewed as a mark of parental affection and concern. But through her introspection Iris realizes the power and authority imposed on her by the parents. She also realizes that parents were driven more by their selfish motives than by any concern for their children.

**Survival strategies**

The victims in this position resort to survival strategies in their irresistible urge to survive. Repeated denial of their victim experience and compliance to their victimizers are the two key strategies adopted by most victims in the first position. Their will to endure their sufferings and at the same time professing and pretending that they are not subject to victimization apparently seems to be an absurd strategy. But a close look at the denial of the victims makes clear their desperate attempt to make some good out of desperately bad situations.
The victims are often alone in their sufferings. This is one strategy resorted to by the victimizers. Because suppressing one group or even more than one individual involves the probability of a rebellion. If the victim is isolated from the rest of the group, is made to feel different and privileged they will consider themselves better off than the others and therefore will not attempt to side with them. Rather they would prefer the presence of the oppressive structures without their knowledge. Later when they gradually become aware of the oppression they have to confront, it will be impossible to risk their survival at the cost of the privileges offered to them.

Victims in this position are not left with any choice. In their situation of extreme powerlessness and innocence their genuine response is to comply with their victimizers. These children naturally conform to the oppressive and highly abusive acts of the parents who double up as victimizers. The response of the children is the natural response of any living organism in nature. The survival strategies that they opt for are expressions of their ingenuity.

The victims of bullying by friends are reluctant to betray their friends. Also they do not want to cause more misery to themselves by betraying the bullies. Lack of friendship and social interacting skills lead most of these children into the hands of their victimizing peers. As seen from the children studied here they lack the right family atmosphere of nurturing in their childhood. They have little exposure to the social life and all share an equally unhappy family background.
Victims often withdraw into themselves and parents fail to notice the agony undergone by their children. The protagonist of *Surfacing* is victimized because of her strangeness from other students. She perceives herself as an alien in the margins of the student community and is unaware of their games and tricks. As an alien in the group she realizes it is like being a socially retarded person. “Being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded, it arouses in others disgust and pity and the desire to torment and reform” (*Surfacing* 81).

The narrator however survives on her own. She conforms to the torture from the bullies, but gradually turns them to her own advantage. Thus from being an outsider she finds a way into the centre of the group so that others compete to join her. The miseries are turned to her advantage as she admits: “I spent many afternoons looped to fences and gates and convenient trees, waiting for a benevolent adult to pass and free me; later I became an escape artist of sorts, expert at undoing knots. On better days they would gather around, competing for me” (*Surfacing* 81). She relies on her ingenuity to survive her bullies.

Joan’s miseries take the form of overeating defying her mother’s warnings. Though the mother and daughter are aware of obesity and its impact on her as a girl, Joan pays little attention to it. She eats defiantly. Her urge is to attempt at resistance towards the neglect from the mother. The only matter mother pays some attention to Joan is about her eating. Hence Joan derives a morose pleasure from
devouring whatever she could lay her hands on and blotting up, Joan admits “I ate to defy her, but I also ate from panic” (LO 82).

Though she is victimized by the bullies she does not complain to mother. Joan is forced to silence knowing that mother will not trust her words and will only blame her. Joan is unable to escape her bullies because they have been forced upon her by her mother. Hence mother indirectly aggravates Joan’s suffering and Joan is reduced to suffer in silence as a child. When Joan is late for home, held up by the bullies on the way back from school mother does not seek the reason for being late, but only blames Joan for being “selfish and inconsiderate” (LO 62). When Joan is left tied to the bridge at nightfall mother blames her for having caused it saying “You were stupid to let the other girls fool you like that” (LO 66).

Witnessing the deterioration of her iron-willed grandmother’s health and the predicament of her mother, Rennie as a high school student, determines to get out of Griswold. When the elders discuss grandmother’s health Rennie’s thoughts are as follows:

All I could think of at that time was how to get away from Griswold. I didn’t want to be trapped, like my mother. Although I admired her - everyone was always telling me how admirable she was, she was practically a saint - I didn’t want to be like her in any way. I didn’t want to have a family or be like anyone’s mother, ever; I had none of those
ambitions, I didn’t want to own any objects or inherit any. I didn’t want to cope. I didn’t want to deteriorate. I used to pray that I wouldn’t live long enough to get like my grandmother, and how I guess I won’t. (BH 58)

Though her life in Griswold was synonymous with oppression Rennie shapes her survival strategies from her experiences there. The policy of detachment, of not involving herself is what she practices throughout her life, and more so when she is a victim in the first position. She takes this lesson from the grandmother and builds up a detachment with both mother and grandmother, thereby fleeing Griswold later so as to join the university.

In order not to disgrace herself and her maternal family Rennie does not resort to rebellious acts as long as she is in Griswold. She possesses a keen observation and takes her lessons from the life of her mother. She realizes how her mother has been made a victim of the grim norms of Griswold and has been denied a happy life. Mother in fact has been reduced to silence and passivity by the kind of detached life she leads withdrawn from the society. Mother only cares for her ageing parents and is separated from her husband. Rennie keeps the news of her mastectomy from her mother. “As a child, she learned to conceal cuts and scrapes, since her mother seemed to regard such things not as accidents but as acts Rennie committed on purpose to complicate her mother’s life” (BH 82).
Rennie’s loathing for Griswold and the thoughts of having to go back to the place are nightmares that haunt her throughout her youth. Rennie’s survival in this phase is surviving Griswold and the memories associated with it.

As a child Rennie has to put up with the torments from the grandmother. She has to take to heart the various lessons and maxims of life as taught by Griswold. But beyond all this there is the longing in her to get out of Griswold. Therefore her strategy of denying her victimization is only a passing phase intended to help her get out of Griswold.

One of Rennie’s less pleasant fantasies about the future, on nights when she can’t sleep, is that her mother will get some lingering disease and she’ll have to go back to Griswold to take care of her, for years and years and years, for the rest of her life. She’ll plead illness, they’ll have a competition, the sickest one will win. (BH 81)

Griswold is the trap that entraps its women and reduces them to helpless victims. Rennie however makes her way out it, emerges a survivor. She survives the Griswold years obviously denying the fact that she is victimized.

Elaine’s longing for girl friends ends her up in the hands of her bullies. Her innocence is not merely childish but also a product of her long years of nomadic life. The lack of proper acquaintance with social life and customs justifies the
childish innocence she possesses even at the age of eight. When girls her age are capable of cruelty towards Elaine her naivete renders her a victim at their hands.

Her victimization takes graver dimensions with the arrival of Cordelia into the group of Carol and Grace. Elaine’s immediate sense of betrayal by her friends when she is forced into the hole they had dug up for her does not last long. In order to continue with her friends Elaine is forced to deny the agonizing experience caused by them.

Elaine also acts as a perpetrator of her victimization. Rather than blaming her victimizers Elaine blames her lack of experience with the world of girls. Maintaining secrecy about her bullying experience is another way in which she helps her bullies. This secrecy gives Cordelia her power and Elaine does not expect to shed this mask of secrecy. Cordelia’s ploys are covered up by secrecy and Elaine thereby complies with her own victimization by maintaining secrecy.

Added to this is the lack of ill will in Elaine. She refuses to consider them as her enemies. “With enemies you can feel hatred, and anger. But Cordelia is my friend. She likes me, she wants to help me, they all do. They are my friends, my girl friends, my best friends. I have never had any before and I’m terrified of losing them. I want to please” (CE 127). Elaine willingly undergoes “the constant struggle to meet Cordelia’s ever shifting demands and so remain acceptable to “the group” (Whitlock 46).
To survive in the community of school children and in the society it is imperative for Elaine to have friends. Elaine is able to sustain her relationship with her friends by denying her victimization and by complying with their demands. However, Elaine leads a miserable life suffering silently. Her miseries are reflected in peeling the skin off the feet, chewing the ends of hair and gnawing the cuticles off from fingernails. As Elaine remembers it:

In the endless time when Cordelia had such power over me, I peeled the skin off my feet. I did it at night, when I was supposed to be sleeping. . . I would begin with the big toes. I would bend my foot up and bite a small opening in the thickest part of the skin, on the bottom, along the outside edge. Then, with my finger nails, which I never bit because why bite something that didn’t hurt, I would pull the skin off in narrow strips. . . The pain gave me something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold on to. (CE 120)

Elaine awaits each day anticipating the torments in store for her. And at the end of the day she is left worrying about all her actions and the differences she is said to have from other girls of the group. The excessive fear she evinces following the meeting with the girls is evidence enough for her victim role. She says:

I worry about what I’ve said today, the expression on my face, how I walk, what I wear, because all of these things need improvement. I am not
normal, I am not like other girls. Cordelia tells me so, but she will help me.

Grace and Carol will help me too. It will take hard work and a long time.

(CE 125)

In order to evade the torments from the girls Elaine tries to keep herself from going out with them. She idles away her time in the kitchen pretending to help mother. Mother fails to sympathize with the miseries of the child and when the time comes Elaine is forced to go out into the hands of the tormentors waiting outside. Her body responds to this repeated victimization in the form of illness. This begins the morning she throws up the alphabet soup she had for breakfast. The girls are repulsed and send her back home. Then she begins to get sick often but there is relief as she says, “On these days I feel relief, as if I’ve been running for a long time and have reached a place where I can rest, not forever but for a little while. Having a fever is pleasant, vacant. I enjoy the coolness of things, the flat ginger ale I’m given to drink, the delicacy of taste, afterward”(CE 148-49).

The intermittent journeys of the family to the wilderness of the North are relief for Elaine. More than the gladness of the journey the relief matters for her as she says:

My throat is no longer tight, I’ve stopped clenching my teeth, the skin on my feet has begun to grow back, my fingers have healed partially. I can walk without seeking how I look from the back, talk without hearing the
way I sound. I go for long periods without saying anything at all. I can be free of words now, I can lapse back into wordlessness, I can sink back into the rhythms of transience as if into bed. (CE 153)

However since these journeys do not last long the relief is also short. As they get back Elaine’s victimization resumes.

Elaine’s final redemption comes with the incident at the ravine and the illness that followed. It shows the extend to which children can be ruthless to each other and how much suffering a victim can be put to. Elaine manages to survive the freezing cold of the ravine and believes she was rescued by the Blessed Virgin Mary and later her mother who came looking for her. Once she is back to school after a period of illness the bullies again attempt to get back at her with vengeance. But Elaine has been hardened up by the incident that had taken her to the verge of death. Elaine realizes there is nothing more for her to fear, having gone through the period of blankness. She shows the audacity to stand up to Cordelia and to walk away from the group as they are about to torment her. Within her she is aware:

I am still a coward, still fearful; none of that has changed. But I turn and walk away from her. It’s like stepping off a cliff, believing the air will hold you up. And it does. I see that I don’t have to do what she says, and worse and better, I’ve never had to do what she says. I can do what I like . . .
There was never anything about me that needed to be improved. It was always a game, and I have been fooled. I have been stupid. My anger is as much at myself as at them. (CE 207)

Tony attributes her survival to having hardened up early as told by her mother. Born as a premature baby she had to spend the early days of her birth in the incubator, motherless. This experience which she was informed by her mother helps her survive the absence of mother in later life. “Hardened off” is a term Tony has “lifted from Charis, who has explained that it’s what you do to seedlings to toughen them up and make them frost resistant and help them to transplant better. You don’t water them very much, and you leave them outside in the cold. This is what happened to Tony” (RB 135).

Like the other victims in this position, Tony’s anguish is also caused mostly by her mother’s neglect. As a hardened up child Tony manages to cope with the neglect through her ingenuity. Even before mother’s elopement Tony is a lonely child lacking parental care. Tony recognizes the presence of her parents through the vehement exchange of words that take place between them mostly at dinner table. Caught up between the parents Tony withdraws into silence and grows up as an introvert child.

To escape further abuse from her mother and to defend herself Tony starts living two lives, the right-handed public one and the left-handed secret one. She is
more at ease with her left hand self while she feels awkward and clumsy with her right hand.

Tony is rendered silent and powerless by the parents’ misuse of words. If parents resort to words to abuse each other, Tony seeks refuge in words, to get away from their hatred and abuse. Tony uses words for her own subversive purposes. She is fascinated by the palindromes and also takes an interest in reversing even the common words. “If you said a word backwards, the meaning emptied out and then the word was vacant. Ready for a new meaning to flow in. Anthea. Aehtna. Like dead, it was almost the same thing, backwards or forwards” (RB 154).

The absence of the mother that follows her elopement is the most oppressive incident of Tony’s life. The emptiness she experiences is beyond words. Tony however survives this painfully oppressive experience of “Acres of vacancy” by filling it up “with whatever she could, with knowledge, with dates and facts, more and more of them, pouring them into her head to silence the echoes. Because whatever had been lacking when Anthea was there, it was much worse now that she wasn’t” (RB 154). Jean Wyatt’s observation about the child victims of parental abuse that “Lacking the minimal conditions for identifying with and integrating nurturing parental figures, children make up supplements on the side of the endangered self to fill in the identificatory gaps in self-development” is justified in the case of Tony (Wyatt 45). Tony constructs
“doubles for herself, supplements of being to shore up her sense of insufficient existence: her imaginary twin, Ynot, for instance, was “the incarnation of her sense that part of her was missing” (Wyatt 44). Ynot is the embodiment of all the power that Tony lacks including her inability to control either her own as well as her parents’ lives. Hence it becomes a crucial determinant in her survival as a child.

Grace is a victim of parental neglect and exploitation. Her victimization is the result of her social backwardness and the poverty that accompanies it. Grace survives through her unawareness of victimization. She spends her time caring for her siblings when father spends his earnings from daily labor drinking and mother struggles with her delicate health. Grace takes up the responsibility of feeding the younger children and manages to keep them safe in spite of the abuses of the father. As a child Grace feels herself a misfit in the family and willingly sacrifices herself for the benefit of others around her inclusive of the parents and siblings. Innocence is the hallmark of Grace as a child and she does not consider about her own well-being.

Immigration is looked upon as a harbinger of hope for the family including Grace. But the family survives the ordeal of immigration only because of Grace. The wisdom she has acquired from observing life around her helps her in withstanding the ordeals. When she loses her mother she steps into her shoes and performs the responsibilities vigilantly though it goes unacknowledged by the
father. As a child Grace is driven by the desire to please the morose looking father unaware of his dislike for his children including her. When she takes the children to the dock she contemplates

.. .pushing one or two of them over, and then there would not be so many to feed, nor so many clothes to wash. . . . But it was only a thought, put into my head by the Devil, no doubt. Or more likely by my father, for at that age I was still trying to please him. (AG 108)

Grace undergoes the worst suffering when she is thrown out of the house by her father who expects her to take the role of a breadwinner. Grace’s acquaintance comes to her help and though she is a novice in household chores she manages to win the approval of the lady at the Parkinson household.

Though the sisters grow up together, Iris is the victim for obvious reasons. Like the other children who are rendered victims by their parents Iris also perceives herself as “the victim of an injustice: why was it always me who was supposed to be a good sister to Laura, instead of the other way around?” (BA 92). Iris struggles to fulfill the last request of her mother, by being kind and protective of her sister Laura. This early perception of being a victim does not shift her to other positions. In fact this is the first instance where Iris senses an injustice being done to her, and feels that she is being subject to discrimination in spite of being a child.
Burdened with the responsibility of being good and responsible Iris survives by surrendering her will to the greater will of the family. She erases her self and tries to rescue the family. She sacrifices herself for the sake of the family business, her father and her sister.

Iris is a sacrificial victim whose life is sacrificed to salvage the outcomes of the follies of the elders. Though a child longing for parental care, Iris is forced to care for her sister Laura. After the death of her mother, the daughters are left to survive on their own, except for the food and shelter provided. Later her father also entrusts Laura to her care in case something happened to him. While Iris performs her duties as a caring sister the loneliness and desolation she experiences as a child go unnoticed.

Iris overcomes her desolation engaging in fantasies of a better future for both of them wishing for a benevolent fate in future. True to victims Iris resorts to the strategy of self-blame during this phase as she thinks “Children believe that everything bad that happens is somehow their fault” (BA 138).

Iris also has to bear the burden of mother’s assurance regarding father’s love for her. Prior to her death mother tells her “Underneath it all, your father loves you” (BA 102). This specific mention of father’s love and the assurance makes Iris wonder about the real love of the father and it appears more complicated for her as a child. She thinks:
It may have been a warning. It may also have been a burden. Even if love was *underneath it all*, there was a great deal piled on top, and what would you find when you dug down? Not a simple gift, pure gold and shining; instead, something ancient and possibly baneful, like an iron charm rusting among old bones. A talisman of sorts, this love, but a heavy one; a heavy thing for me to carry around with me, slung on its iron chain around my neck. (BA 102)

Iris emerges a survivor of this phase of victimization. She is a victim of the undue expectations of the parents, who are negligent of their roles. Iris survives through her ingenuity and by finding solace in the company of Laura.

From the predicament of the protagonists it is obvious that childhood is not as cherubic and idyllic a phase as it is believed to be, at least for these protagonists. Their struggle for survival begins right from childhood. It becomes even more problematic because they are unaware of the fact that they are victimized and hence deny their victimization. However the one consoling factor is that they gradually come to an awareness of it as they grow up and acquire knowledge about their society and relational patterns within it.