Chapter VII

Conclusion
Feminist perspectives as a women centered theory provide strategies for change. Feminist perspective is to understand women's oppression in terms of race, gender, class and sexual preference and how to change it. As such the feminist principle is an "uncompromising pledge" and an antidote to all types of exploitation and oppression of women. Perspective is a pattern of thought, of emotion, perception, expectation and motivation, in other words, it tells us, "how to think, feel, perceive, expect and act."

Legal, economic and social restrictions on the basic rights of women have existed throughout history and in all civilizations. Though the long line of women writers, who protested against the inequities from Christine de Pisan to Mary Wollstonecraft and through Simone de Beauvoir to present day feminist thinkers, an outlook, a "theory" a feminist thought system evolves. The feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. As a philosophy of life, it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep-seated causes of women's oppression. It is a concept of "raising of the consciousness" of an entire culture. It has assumed different configurations in relation to post-modernist approaches. Seen
only as an agnostic struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression, theoretically it becomes an impossibility. As soon as the oppressional conditions are removed, it ceases to exist. The very concept of equality has undergone tremendous change in the light of new French feminist theories of difference. Through the process of gynesis, a female discourse has been evolved by deliberate valorization of repressed femininity. The French post-modernist theory of Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze has been used in the process of gynesis. Because “post-feminist” has the danger of delimitation and exclusion, materialist feminist theory is offered. Now, all the different strands can be divided into two relational and individualist theories. Currently relational feminism is being widely accepted as it avoids all the negativism associated with extremities of the individualist theories. The present day feminism thought encompasses a moral vision and emerges as a holistic, anti-militaristic and life-affirming philosophy.

Toril Moi has used the term “post-feminism” to cover the different configurations of feminism and post-modernism present today. Present day feminist theorists believe that, strictly speaking, feminism is an impossible position. The agnostic definition of feminism sees it as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression. Such an opposition definition posits feminism as the necessary resistance to patriarchal power.
Logically, then, the aim of feminism as an emancipatory theory becomes to abolish itself along with its opponent.

"In a non-sexist, non-patriarchal society, feminism will no longer exist."1

As such, feminism is an impossible undertaking. Feminism is committed to the struggle for equality for women, an effort to make women become like men. But the struggle for equal rights historically and politically emphasizes the value of women as they are. The very argument rests precisely on the fact that women are already as valuable as men. But in the situation of women's lack of equal rights, this value must be located as difference, not as equality. Women are of equal human value in their own way. When feminism asserts the value of women as women, then it, truly and efficiently, counters the systematic devaluation of women under patriarchy. Equality and difference thus are not antithetical. But a discourse of female difference, articulated in isolation, runs the risk of echoing the very patriarchal prejudices against which the champions of equality are struggling.

The post-modern feminist are wary of labels or definitions of any kind. And, therefore, the word "feminism" particularly troubles Alic Jardine –
Who and what, then do we mean by "feminist"? That word - - - poses some serious problems. Not that we would want to end up by demanding a definition of what feminism is, and therefore, of what one must do, say, and be, if one is to acquire the epithet; dictionary meanings as suffocating, to say the least.²

Toril Moi considers this defeatist position. To her, to name is to exercise power. The notion of conceptually rigorous definitions is merely constraining, is a fashionable dogma of post-structuralism. Jardine herself offers a definition of feminism.

Feminism is generally understood as a movement from the point of view of, by, and for women.³

Present day feminism is a historically specific movement, rooted in French Enlightenment thought (Mary Wollstonecraft) and in British liberalism (John Stuart Mill), and consequently wedded in deeply critical style to notions of truth, justice, freedom, and equality. Toril Moi offers a critique of post-feminism on the ground that it avoids taking sides. Post-feminism represents a particular development of one of the three conflicting discourses of feminism. In its eagerness to please the high priests of poststructuralism and post-modernism, post-feminism takes little account of other forms of feminism, and thus enacts a scenario of exclusion and delimitation? Toril Moi believes that only by
attempting the impossible wager of constructing a materialist feminist theory, that includes the three feminism, that the feminist criticism can be pushed forward past the political impasse of post-feminism.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa on 18th November 1939 and grew up in Suburban Toronto. As a child she spent her summers at her family's cottage in the wilderness of northern Quebec, where her father, a forest entomologist, conducted research. She first began to write while in high school, contributing poetry, short stories, and cartoons to the school newspaper. As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, Atwood was influenced by critic Northrop Frye, who introduced her to the poetry of William Blake. Impressed with Blake's use of mythological imagery, in 1961, Atwood published her first volume of poetry *Double Persephone*. In 1962 Atwood completed the A.M. degree at Radcliffe College of Harvard University. She returned to Toronto in 1963, where she began collaborating with artist Charles Pachter, who designed and illustrated several volumes of her poetry. In 1964, Atwood moved to Vancouver, where she taught English at the University of British Columbia for a year and completed her first novel *The Edible Women* (1969). Atwood received the Governor General's Award for her poetry collection *The Circle Game* (1966) and her novel *The Handmaid's
Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman* is a very highly complex piece of realistic fiction. It seeks to subvert the patriarchal system of marriage. It portrays oppressive modes of marriage which are barriers to women’s individuality and autonomy. In this way, it questions and challenges cultural assumptions about woman’s identity. *The Edible Women* is an assertion of women’s individuality and autonomy in marriage. The other important issues with which the novel is concerned are: The problems confronted by working women; restrictions on marriage, pregnancy and the denial of important positions in offices and other establishment to women. Marian offers Peter the cake as a substitute for herself when he comes to demand an explanation of her disappearance from the cocktail party. She remarks:

You’ve been trying to destroy me — —
You’ve been trying to assimilate me.
But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along.  

The cake which Marian finally baked and ate is a symbolic evidence of her development, and of her ultimate refusal to be a
victim, the packaged product of a male dominated corporate society. Marian poses a challenge that she cannot be manipulated by people like Peter and Duncan. She affirms a sense of pride and proclaims at the end that a cake is edible but a woman is not. As a woman, Marian definitely has changed from the meek, docile traditional woman to the bold, conscious and rebellious feminist. She has become conscious and rebellious feminist. She has become active again, an agent, a subject, a consumer rather than a consumable object of change traded on the marriage market. Marian, the bride to be, is a representative of modern youth rebelling against the system of marriage and its oppression. Marian has resigned her job, challenging the male authority, hierarchy, competition, double standards of morality and discrimination, and the ruling elements which victimized her.

The story of Marian’s self-discovery is the tightenining vision of struggle for sanity. Marian achieves her sanity. But she does not change her society. The proof of her sanity is that Marian has learned to live meaningfully. Atwood has presented everything to our inspection through the discriminating eyes of Marian, the champion of feminism. Victimization of women is a reality in an anti-feminist world. It is a gruesome characteristic of our system.

In Margaret Atwood’s novel, *Surfacing*, the nameless protagonist refuses to return to the city and civilization, she
chooses to stay back on the island of her parents. But, if she does stay back on the island, all by herself, why does she need to destroy her parental home? If one looks at the beginning of the novel one realizes that the protagonist of *Surfacing* is in search of a convincing, credible and predictable life. The beginning of the novel gives us an inkling of the disturbed psyche of the protagonist:

I'm in the back seat with the packsacks; this one, Joe, is sitting beside me chewing gum and holding my hand, they both pass the time.\(^5\)

The protagonist's sensitivity is evident from her equation of chewing gum with holding of hands, she disapproves of being used as a mere object for the thoughtless pleasure of the other. The roots of such a reaction are probably in her elusive past.

The protagonist's search for father is actually a conscious quest for her own true identity which is, in turn, linked with the search for the meaning of life. The modern life, incomprehensible as it is to her, has made her immune to the finer emotions of life-love, affection, compassion. The predominant violence, brutality, and facelessness of modern living agitate her. With this is merged the probing of her own urges and aspirations. What contributes to the loss of identity, the muteness and the uncommunicative, unfeeling life is her involvement with a
middle aged man. Throughout the novel, the flashback of her life with the so-called husband shifts back and forth. It is the break up, the divorce which has changed her vision of her life.

At a crucial stage in the novel, she accepts the reality, until then she had been deceiving herself about her relationship with the man. She had not been married. All along she had pieced together her life into a convenient, acceptable mould. The abortion which was supposed to be necessary for the peaceful future of her so-called husband tears her to pieces. Added to this, the stress and strain of the uncommunicative loveless marriage of Ann and David, the meaningless killing of animals in the forest, contribute to her disturbed mind. It is ultimately the glimpse of her father's dead body surfacing in the lake that triggers off her conscience. The surfacing body reminds her of her dead child. It is this seed of death which had grown into fullfledged frigidity toward life. She needed to throw out this seed, it is only after this realization that her frozen attitude toward life begins to thaw. Her preoccupation with death forces her to think of life, of survival. So long she had lived a meek, vegetable existence, allowing others to take over her life. She now needed to plant the seed of life within her.

The union with Joe gives her a vision of her dead child. She realizes that motherhood would lead her to self-recognition. As
much as her parents' message to her for fulfilling her innermost aspirations. The protagonist of *surfacing* refuses to be bogged down by the meaningless relationships and the modern brutality. She chooses to return and cope with them. She herself will have to be courageous and face the life rather than be timid. This awareness enriches her understanding of her true self vis-à-vis modern living. She decides to go back to the city of face life. She has ultimately found her true identity, her rebel role. It is this clear understanding of the modern situation and her place in it that finally liberates the protagonist from her earlier crazy self. She returns to struggle and survive with dignity.

In Atwood's *Lady Oracle* Joan learns early in life how best to project herself in front of her husband. Probably, it is for this reason that she thinks her marriage happier than that of others. Joan cultivates the knack of changing according to the moods and wishes of Arthur. She presents herself as the docile dimnit because that is how Arthur liked his wife to be. Obviously, what goes wrong with other modern marriages is that the wives, as Joan herself could see, make the basic mistake of expecting their husbands to understand them.

But Joan was wiser, she never wanted Arthur to understand her multiple self. She could successfully hide her various shades of personality to keep Arthur happy. What makes her so secretive
is the basic fear that if Arthur comes to know about her fat past, her fantasies and the innumerable escapist romances, he would be appalled and, perhaps, would not hesitate to give her up. If Joan had taken a lot of care in smudging her life with artificial trimmings to retain Arthur's love for her, and had herself flooded her husband with love for her, why exactly does her marriage go wrong? More importantly, what is Arthur's stand as a 'leftist' husband? Joan marries the activist Arthur on the grounds of her love, whereas Arthur marries her because that would be both convenient and cheap:

He'd been giving it quite a lot of thought he said. Marriage itself would settle us down, and through it, too, we would become better acquainted. If it does not work out, well it would be a learning experience. Most important, we would live much more cheaply together than we could separately.⁶

It is only on experimental basis that Arthur marries her. There is no talk of love here. Joan resents anything from him. She simply reacts to his over-pedagogical ways by immersing herself in her fantasies, in writing romances but is careful in hiding from him, this angle of life. Life for Joan is unquestionably difficult with Arthur and yet she does not remonstrate, mainly in the hope that she would succeed in earning his love some day.
But Arthur's aloofness begins to intrigue and pain her. And it is when Arthur becomes too impersonal; she begins to get too personally involved with Chuck, the Royal Porcupine. Yet when the affair goes a bit too far, and begins to threaten her married life, she calls a halt to it and blames Arthur for driving her into another man's trap. After all, she had not asked much:

"I only wanted to be loved. I only wanted some human consideration, was that so terrible, was that so impossible."  

As a wife, Joan was always expected to do something or the other, not for herself, but for Arthur. She had tried to mould herself into everything. Arthur had wanted her to be she finds it difficult to go on without getting anything from Arthur and more importantly, she wants him to accept her shorn of all her pretentiousness that she had to garb herself in order to be acceptable to Arthur. It is this attitude of Arthur which prompts Joan to escape rather than confront runaway from the overpowering sense of righteousness, from an inflated ego and from arrogance and authority. It is much later that Joan decides to be pragmatic and face Arthur head on rather than be scared of him or this reactions or consequences. As the realistic surface of her autobiographical account dissolves into a richly complex and redundant subjective fantasy, we gain momentary access to
the shape shifting world of the narcissist. Swerving out of our grasp, Joan lures us into a strange world in and beyond the looking glass; the multiple, mirrored, decertainized world of the narcissistic character.

Atwood's *Life Before Man* throws light on the problems of modern marriage such as tawdry affairs and gray emotional struggles, divorce, abandonment, discrimination, frustration and problems of the children, particularly those faced by female characters like Elizabeth in the novel. In other worlds, the novel deals with the collapse of the institution of modern marriage. This novel also discusses women's recognition of power of the mother figure, and the depth of her pain in the institution of marriage. The women in the novel are torn between the past and the future between the mother's frustrations and her extravagant hopes for the daughters. In this way, the novel refers to the uncertainty of women posed between past and future, between mothers and daughters, frustration and hope. This sense of transition is reflected in the marital life of Elizabeth's mother and her own life.

Elizabeth, a special projects administrator at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum, marries Nate, an unemployed law graduate, with the hope of getting safety and shelter for her life. But she soon discovers that it is Nate, who is emotionally weak and dependent, who requires security.
Everything was fine as long as she was willing to pretend she was a Cage, Nate a mouse, her heart pure cheese. He is, she knows, a hopeless sentimentalist. Earthmother, Nate her mole, snouting in darkness while she rocked him. 

Elizabeth and Nate are very mechanical and they do not know what 'love' means between them. They have never lived together as a real wife and husband. Yet two children are born out of their wedlock. Lesje is forced by her witch like grandmothers to seek refuge in the unreal world of fantasies. Lesje's dinosaur fantasies exemplify the monstrous nature of man-woman relationships based on the ethic. As Emma Parker says:

The voracity of the dinosaurs appetite is strikingly similar to the more covert canniballistic tendencies expressed by men and women. Knowledge of the dinosaurs extinction creates a subtle sense of foreboding for the human race when men and women treat each other as meat in a fight for survival.

Lesje has loved William, an environmental engineer. The crux of their marriage is that of the issue of his children. Their love affair ends as William does not want to have a child by her. Therefore, she has 'seedy' or 'even tack' affair with Nate. Elizabeth becomes involved with Chris who works in her office. She finds solace in...
her relationship with Chris. She keeps up her relationship with Chris within its limits, without touching either her house or her children. Chris demands her to give up her job, and leave her home and her two children. In this way, he wants her to cross the limits and live with him. She deplores his solution, she refuses to live on his mercy as a dependent woman.

But Nate's plans to divorce Elizabeth shatter her dreams, and her faith and live in Nate are reduced to a rubble. In fact, she neither loves him nor needs him. What makes Elizabeth sad is Nate's freedom to move in with Lesje and Lesje wanting to have a child by him. Each of the characters finds a release through an unhysteric change in perspective consequence increased self-awareness and self-discovery. In *Life Before Man* Atwood presents the problem in terms of language and gender, and comments critically and ironically on the traditional assumption of the incompatibility between artistic production and maternity.

Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* (1981) is best known post-feminist novel. In the early eighties when the heat of the feminist fervour was subdued with the knowledge what women were no longer inferior or docile, Atwood thought it fit to evaluate the depth of liberation that women are supposed to have attained. The novel shows that the legal, economic, political and social
conditions of women are still bleak and that they are still where they were a century ago. Though women have become conscious of their rights, they are sought to be exploited and oppressed and deprived of their basic human rights like all the weak and powerless in the world. Rennie's travelogue addresses itself to the nature of violence and victimization of women. She writes the travelogue with a sense of commitment to expose the wickedness of men on the one hand and the brutality of the state on the other. Rennie is the child of an irresponsible man who has abandoned his family for a mistress in Toronto. She is brought up in an unhealthy and joyless environment in Griswold by her grandparents.

Rennie begins her adult life in Toronto as a versatile writer. She gets commissioned to write articles for Pandora, a woman oriented magazine and for Visor, male-oriented journal. Rennie comes in contact with Jack who works as a designer of appearances for a packaging company. Rennie seems to be over confident that she can stand upto any crisis situation without any harm either to her body or her psyche. Jack uses all his tricks to use and pack her just as he does things. Later on, she realizes that his interest in her is limited to the gratification of his carnal desires.
A good relationship; that was what she and Jake were supposed to have. People commented on it, at parties, as if they were admiring a newly renovated house.¹⁰

Later on, Rennie gets involved in love with Paul because of his impressive manners and ideals. She feels that Paul is a good substitute to Jack, her first lover, who turns out to be an exploiter and seducer. She is of the view that she might be able to strike a meaningful relationship with him. Unlike Jack, Paul does not hate or abandon Rennie on the grounds of the scar on her body. She thinks that he has some sense of compassion for her damaged body. She is involved in bouts of sex with him for a brief spell. She feels a sense of urgency to run away from all her meaningless and loveless involvement with all men.

Rennie's association with Jocasta, a feminist activist, raises her consciousness of herself and helps her understand better the villainous attitude and victimizing nature of male world toward women. Rennie interviews Frank, an artist, who depicts pornography as an art form. The article on pornography takes Rennie to visit the Toronto policeman's pornography museum along with Jocasta. She is horrified by his sight of nude film clips, of women meant for display and exhibition at the museum, naked forms of women in different postures of brutality are
displayed. The political scene on the island has no room for love, decency and humanity. Women are treated as non-entities. They are tortured and even sliced off into pieces. So Rennie discovers different victims in the Caribbean island. Rennie visits women prisoners in the Caribbean prison along with Dr. Minnow, who is known for his rebellion against the tyranny of the government.

In her travelogue, Rennie includes the tales which Lora narrates in the prison. Lora's tales of woe and brutality completely Shatter Rennie overconfidence in women's liberation. Lora narrates the story of her 'non-violent' rape by her vicious stepfather with whom she used to live in a cellar. Rennie and Lora in their prison cells symbolize how women in all walks of life are victimized and oppressed by male power and authority. Rennie asserts that 'bodily harm' is everywhere both inside and outside of the prison, both in civilized and uncivilized countries, and both in political and personal fields. Thus, there are no fixed hard boundaries to "bodily harm". Freelance journalists like Rennie never leave the prison cells as the rulers will ensure her continued imprisonment. Rennie also looks forward to a day of better and healthy relationship between men and women.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic bleak, totalitarian society where women are denied the basic rights. The novel is a
kind of anti-utopia of the not too distant future as a reflected through the voice of Offred, a Handmaid, one of the victims in the theocracy. Offred, the protagonist in the Handmaid's Tale escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the underground female road to tell her tale of victimization. Freedom of speech is a capital offence in Gilead. She uses 'language' as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings and bitter experiences as well as a "subversive weapon" to tell her tale. Her tale addresses itself to the marginalization to women. She tells her late with a sense of commitment to expose how dignity and autonomy of women are negated by anarchic and repressive societies like the Republic of Gilead. She also suggests the ways and means to surmount the barriers to woman's individuality and autonomy.

The Handmaid is proclaimed an un-woman if she does not succeed by the end of her third two-year posting. The dire alternative for her is the punishment of banishing to the Colonies, where women clean up radioactive waste as slave labourers. Thus, the dictates of state policy in Gilead relegate sex to a saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival. In contrast male sterility in Gilead is unthinkable. As Offred says:

"There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law."11
So, women are judged by double standards of morality in respect of or fertility. In addition to the Handmaids, the Republic of Gilead offers its own state sponsored brand of sex prostitutes called the Jezebels whose sole function is to entertain foreign delegations. The Aunts, the police women of Gilead, who are clad in paramilitary Khaki, train the Handmaids. Thus women are completely controlled by men and are arranged in a hierarchy of value in Gilead. Therefore, Offred's *The Handmaid's Tale* posits a future culture in which such feminist dreams have been replaced by fundamentalist patriarchy that divides women into rigid categories based on function.

The doctor who examines Offred and other Handmaids periodically for sign of pregnancy never even sees their faces. The commanders who attempt to impregnate them once a month, are indifferent to their appearances. As appearance is unimportant for them, the Handmaids are not given face cream. Their bath is regulated by others. Their eating of food is not chosen by them. They are fed only with what the authorities regard as healthy food. For minor offences like reading, their arms and legs which are seen as inessential for reproduction, are ruthless chopped off.

The predicament lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* about man's marginalization of
women. This view corroborates Michel Foucault's observation about the "power sex" correlative. According to this observation, the regime assigns roles to Handmaids, and decrees after social, religious, and cosmic concepts convenient to the interests and desires of the ruling elite. Consequently, Offred, the narrator protagonist becomes the victim of prohibition ordinance of sex in the Republic of Gilead. Offred feels the indignity and terror of living under a futuristic regime controlled by Christian fundamentalists. She is aware of her present reality which is oppressive denying her individuality, nurturance and autonomy. Her life turns into a painfully prolonged prison term.

_The Handmaid’s Tale_ will be taken in some quarters as a feminist parable or rallying cry. What is Offred, after all, if not an embodiment of woman subjugated to the power of men? In truth, Atwood’s vision is considerably more complex than that. For the Republic of Gilead has come about, in part, with the help of women. Offred’s memories of childhood include the time that her mother an ardent feminist, took her to ceremonial burning of pornographic magazines. Offred’s _The Handmaid’s Tale_ is a challenge to traditional values. It is also a recognition to the victimized women that the structures that cause and perpetuate women’s oppression are arbitrary, therefore, any kind of oppression is subject to change. In this way, Offred tells us in her
cautionary tale something to know about human capacity for survival which is a "canonization of feminism."

*Cat's Eye* is Atwood's attempt to expose male prejudices against women's creativity and talent and shows how art can be used as a weapon against tyranny in all its manifestations. Elaine Risley, the protagonist in this masterpiece, is a middle aged painter who returns to Toronto, once her home, for a retrospective show of her paintings. She used "Silver Paper" of cigarette packages to draw figure of women as a childhood hobby. She likes the pictures in *Eaton's Catalogue*; she cuts the small colored figures of women, cookware, furniture out of the book and pastes them in her scrapbook. She plays the scrapbooks game with her brother, Stephen and friends, Grace, Carol and Cordelia. Elaine is raised by parents who are unconventional. She is influenced by her father, who is, first entomologist, and then a university professor of zoology. Occasionally, she has watched his student draw insects. She judges them better or worse depending on the colours. She is fascinated by colours. Elaine also bears the stamp of her brother's artistic talent. Stephen aids Elaine in developing her mental perception and vision of painting by means of his drawing dimensional universes. He says:
"We're limited by our own sensory equipment. How do you think a fly sees the world?"12

Stephen's scientific enthusiasms, in significant ways, shape Elaine's imagination, so that her paintings and his theories come to occupy the same area of speculation on the mysterious laws which govern the universe. Elaine is admitted into the Toronto Night College of Art because of her deep interest in painting. She joins the night course called "Life Drawing". Her teacher, Mr. Josef Harbik, arranges the picture of "live naked woman" for students to draw for fluidity of line. This assignment given to his girl students to draw for fluidity of line. This assignment given to his girl students is intended for sexploitation. Elaine is aware of how art is being used by male painters as "a vehicle for sexual wish fulfilment, a way of making woman an object for man's contemplation and erotic desire."

Elaine realizes the true personality of Mr. Josef Herbik victimization of Susie, her fellow art student, who commits suicide because of her illicit pregnancy. Disappearance of Josef leaves Elaine to begin her romance with Jon, she is trapped into marriage with him by her pregnancy. Thus, they come together by accident. With her marriage and child birth, Elaine's dreams of establishing a balanced and healthy relationship with a fellow painter turns sour. She participates in Women Artists'
conference on "anger" toward men. Elaine feels guilty and awkward as she still lives under the authority of a male painter and tries her best to compromise all the time with him. She does not feel any sense of solidarity with her fellow painters, even though she joins the feminist group. She says:

I have no right to speak. I feel as if I'm standing outside a closed door while decisions are being made, disapproving judgements are being pronounced inside, about me at the same time I want to please.¹³

In *Cat's Eye*, ambivalence lives at the center of the story. Elaine Risley is pulled towards the rich intellectual and scientific interests of her father and particularly of her brilliant brother. At the same time, she worries that she is failing at being one of the boys, and longs for the mysteries of best friends, the unknown world of girls. The vagaries of attitude of her unconventional mother leave her prey to the stupid and cruelly distorting conventions of the middle class mothers and girls of the neighbourhood in Toronto in which her odd family settles down after the Second World War.

Even more surprising than this resistance to classification, however, are the grounds upon which that resistance is based; the sense that this is more than a feminist tract, more than a post-modern exploration of literary self-reflection, precisely, because
it speaks from and about autobiographical form. Atwood is forcing us to rethink our position again. Just as we had become comfortable with the idea that a biographical reading is a reductive one, Atwood shows us that it is quite the opposite. It is precisely the autobiographical aspect in and of *Cat's Eye* that makes us resist our temptation to master the text. We want to say that *Cat's Eye* is all of fiction and autobiography, feminist tract and personal meditation, contemporary metafiction and classical narrative, precisely because it is more than these. But to say that would be to admit that Atwood has restored our faith in the story and in the magic of literary illusion; and we are surely much too experienced as readers to say that. Accordingly, the emphasis of my discussion of the autobiographical elements in *Cat's Eye* lies more on Atwood's artistry than on the links between Atwood's life and her art.

Margaret Atwood, in her novel, *The Robber Bride* shows how one sex dominates and attempts to possess the other by control through social authority and economic force. Through the portrayal of Zenia in *The Robber Bride*, Atwood reveals how women seek a revolution in their circumstances by training themselves as a fighting force. Zenia is the spokesperson of sexual revolution aimed at the ending of sexual repression. But women's sexual freedom, Atwood feels, carries with it a great potential for their exploitation and thus it can be converted into
an exploitative license for patriarchy. *The Robber Bride,* thus, is a feminist thought provoking novel. It is the most intricate and subversive of all Atwood's novels. The novel tells us how female sexuality is as transgressive as the male sexuality in transforming the existing gender relations. In other words, it questions and challenges radical feminist thinking about gender relations in the 20th century that is the contemporary society. What Atwood envisages here is that both patriarchy and matriarchy are two extreme standpoints. Hence, the novel derives home the message that heterosexual relations ought to be voluntary, egalitarian or oppressive.

While *The Robber Bride* does not follow any single fabular pattern, there are three avatars for Zenia, the demonic woman of the novel. Incidentally, each of the different avatars is identified in the different life stories told by the three friends, Tony, Roz and Charis. Just as Tony very much admires the reckless courage of Dame Giraude fighting for a lost cause, so she has a sneaking admiration for Zenia as guerrilla fighter, despite her own humiliations at her hands.

Zenia is dead, and although she was many other things, she was also courageous. What side she was on doesn’t matter, not to Tony, not any more. There may not even have been a side. She may have been alone.14
This is, perhaps, putting it rather melodramatically, but what Zenia represents always exceeds the bounds of decorum. Her power is the power of female sexuality, and the figure of Zenia relates directly to contemporary social myths about femininity; it also relates to male fantasies about the feminine; and in addition it challenges the viewpoints of feminism. Indeed, Zenia tells three different versions of her life story to parallel those Roz, Tony and Charis. She is what they all most desire and dread to be. No wonder that by the end Tony reaches this conclusion:

As with any magician, you saw what she wanted you to see; or else you saw what you yourself wanted to see. She did it with mirrors. The mirror was whoever was watching, but there was nothing behind the two-dimensional image but a thin layer of mercury.¹⁵

Why cannot the three friends let Zenia go, when they think she is dead and when they have all been to her memorial service five years earlier? Having been robbed by Zenia of men, money and self-confidence, they keep on meeting once a month for lunch because of her. The positive outcome is that they become fast friends and it is worth noting that this is the first time such a group of loyally supportive woman friends has appeared in Atwood's fiction. But the fact remains that they meet in stories about Zenia, and arguably it is their collective need of her which brings her back from the dead.
All three of them have a seam, a split, and Zenia operates on this edge of desire and lack which is the borderline territory of the marauding Gothic other. Zenia is a threat because of her flatting sexuality, her deceptions and betrayals, her ruthless contempt for others, and her destructiveness. *The Robber Bride* shows that the other woman is always against, 'us', precisely because she represents that otherness which cannot be accommodated or acknowledged but which is also necessary for self-definition. Zenia represents what is unspeakable because it has been buried alive as she transgresses the boundaries between realism and fantasy, between what is acceptable and what is forbidden. Atwood as fiction maker tricks her readers into confronting this challenge, for like Zenia, she too is a magician who uses the same illusionist techniques. "She does it with mirrors."

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* is a historical novel set in 1840s, which invokes past. The protagonist Grace Marks is a notorious female criminal who is also the narrator of the story. Atwood's fiction often presents a distressing conundrum of how one can live without either being consumed or becoming a predator. Certainly there are numerous examples in *Alias Grace* of cannibalistic images that draw attention to gendered power relations. Remarks such as the farm implement dealer's that
women are 'better for a touch of salt' figure women as tasty morsels, conflating anthropophagic desire and sexual innuendo. And it is not only the novel's overtly brutish characters that indulge in the transformation of women into gastronomic delights, dealer and the prison guards are good examples of sexual desire as cannibalistic. But anthropophagic desire in *Alias Grace*, particularly Simon's desire, also produces a haunting nightmare of sameness that threatens identity. The illicit affair between Simon and Mrs. Humphrey culminates in an unbidden fantasy of cannibalism that conflates devouring and being devoured.

During the day, Rachel is a burden, an encumbrance, and he wishes to be rid of her; but at night she's an altogether different person, and so is he. He too says no when he means yes. He means more, he means more, he means further, he means deeper. He would like to make an incision in her – just a small one – so he can taste her blood, which in the shadowy darkness of the bedroom seems to him like a normal wish to have. He's driven by what feels like uncontrollable desire.16

In *Alias Grace*, the return of repressed corporeality in its most base animality always comes with a price. In fact, Simon, the
novel's carniflier extraordinaire, is ultimately erased. His desperate flight from Kingston appears as the direct consequence of his exploration of repressed physicality, his narrative absence the result of his hasty escape from dangerous liaison with Mrs. Humphrey. After this point Simon ceases to focalize the narrative, save a brief letter to his friend, Edward Murchie, which eschews the intimate details provided in the previous third person narration.

Like Mary Whitney, Simon's indulgence of corporeal leads to his narrative exile. He is allowed to return only indirectly, through, the mediation of a single letter to Murchie and more often through his mother's correspondence. Like Mary, Simon becomes spectral. Denied bodily presence and voice, the two characters evince the danger of succumbing to dedise. However, the different circumstances of their disappearances are striking; while Simon escapes responsibility and the repercussions of his carnal desires, Mary is killed for indulging these desires. Obviously, the outcomes of corporal indulgence are highly gendered. As noted, Mary's awareness of the bodily functions of the upper classes and her own sexual transgression lead to her transformation into a bloody corpse and return as a spectral presence. Although he does not die physically, Simon Jordan's flirtation with cannibalistic desire relegates him to a textual limbo.
Ironically, while Mary and Simon have been silenced in the narrative, Grace marks, the convicted 'murderess' who has been directly implicated in the slaughter of Mr. Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, is the text's sole surviving body and voice. Throughout the novel Grace refuses to acknowledge her own transgression, to recall the experience of murder, or the sight of the corpse, confrontations with the repressed object that Simon desperately seek his exploration of her psyche and in his own dreams of frustrated dissection discussed above. Grace escapes the dissolution suffered by Mary and Simon; her narrative presence at the novel's conclusion offers evidence of the resilience that results from a denial of the object. Despite Simon's efforts, Grace refuses to allow the uncanny return of the repressed. Unlike Mary Whitney and Dr. Simon Jorden, who confront and explore the grotesque body with its ensuing destabilization of subjectivity, Grace disavows her own encounter with the carnified body, effectively preserving herself, and by extension the very possibility of individual, human 'selves'.

In Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, the reader is aware of the frame story, but the reader is misled as to the relationship between the frame story and the inner story; the reader is told at the start that the inner story is written by Laura. But in the final chapters of *The Blind Assassin* we learn that this
book within a book, also called "The Blind Assassin" is supposed to have been written instead by Laura's sister and the frame story protagonist Iris. Iris writes:

> We grew up inside her house; is to say, inside her conception of herself. And inside her conception of who we ought to be, but weren't. 17

Whereas Atwood once again explores her favourite theme of the female as both victim and victimizer, she does so in a relatively new narrative form. In her novels, she has increasingly experimented with the blending of genres, yet for the first time; she uses the genre of the memoir whereby an aged female narrator is shown in the process of writing down and trying to cope with the painful, unassimilated experiences of her past. The memoir, which relies on the conventions of classic realism, offers a version of history which is juxtaposed with other subjective views of the same historical subject-matter. In line with many of her previous novels, the theme of self victimization is explored by creating a dramatic tension between the protagonist and another character who functions as a Doppelganger figure. In *The Blind Assassin*, two main characters perform this function with a view to underscoring the multiplicity of the self.

Atwood's novels have consistently undercut the illusion of retrieving the truth about reality or about the self. The
experimental formal feature with which the author undercuts this illusion in *The Blind Assassin* is the intertwining in a specular narrative of historical and literary intertexts, whereby various forms of employment belonging to classic realism but also to ancient history, ancient myth, legend, popular romance, science fiction and journalism, are imposed on Iris Chase's experience as a means of interpreting the past. Atwood's technique of *mise en abyme*, or the embedding of stories within stories, each belonging to a different genre, with events, images and characters' behaviour being constantly mirrored, serves as a tool to question the relationship between historical fact and fiction and to call into doubt our ability to ever know reality and represent it truthfully.

As Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* begins, we are introduced to a character called Snowman, clearly a survivor of some kind. He is alone in what has come to seem like the post apocalyptic primal scene, a parched and depleted seaside landscape.

Snowman wakes before dawn. He lies unmoving, listening to the tide coming in, wave after wave sloshing over the various barricades, wish-wash, wish-wash, the rhythm of heartbeat. He would so like to believe he is still asleep.
Atwood now begins her flashbacks, pacing them to alternate with the slow progress of the present day narrative. From the first of these we learn that Snowman's real name is Jimmy. Jimmy grew up in an early 21st century world in which gated city states run by corporate biotech companies from an elite enclave for the smart, affluent and disease free, while the Pleeblands hold the rough urban centers where crime, drugs, and terrorism abound. Jimmy's parents are scientists, but his mother abandons her calling early, concerned over the ethics and morality of high tech bio-engineering, finally fleeing the community she views as a prison rather than a safety zone.

Just before his mother's escape into the world of guerrilla environmentalism, adolescent Jimmy meets Crake, an emotionally distant genius who becomes his best friend. The two spend hours playing computer games; Extinctathon, Kwiktime Osama and Blood and Roses or searching for porn sites, like HottTotts kiddie porn, where they first see Oryx, a young southeast Asian girl sold into sex slavery by her parents. She becomes Crake's assistant and Jimmy's much loved paramour. The dynamic among the three combines with Crake's soulless brilliance. He has designed a new race of human beings, the Crakers, passive, pretty and vapid, for a biotech corporation, and Oryx, survivor of the aspects of human existence, programs them to cope with the world while Jimmy designs other aspects of their lives.
The novel *Oryx and Crake* is not science fiction; Atwood uses science, politics, and economic disparities already in play, gene-splicing, hybridization, cloning, bio-terrorism, global warming, over urbanization, extinction, and poses that scary "what if". Life Orwell and Huxley before her, Atwood takes the world as we know it and suggests scenarios both frightening and all too probable. Atwood has long since established herself as one of the best writers in English today, but *Oryx and Crake* might be her best work yet.

In Atwood's *The Penelopiad* the story is narrated by Penelope herself. "Now I'm dead. I know everything". These are the opening words spoken by a Penelope strolling in an amused and detached way through the Meadows of Asphodel. However, hers is not the only story we hear. There are also the twelve maids, the ones whose terrible deaths cannot fail to shock every first time reader of *The Odyssey*. With the rope still dangling from their necks, they are ready and eager to have their version of the story heard too. The two competing, and needless to say, contradictory accounts of the events having taken place in Ithaca in the absence of Odysseus.

The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of *The Odyssey*:
what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?\textsuperscript{19} However, although she quotes the Greek drama as her inspiration, what Atwood has actually produced here is a perfect example of another ancient literacy genre, the Menippean satire. The mixture of prose and poetry, the reworking of a venerable classic in a tone of playful irony, the constant hinting at the seedy and the lascivious that might be lurking behind the facade of decency and propriety, all belong to the genre that we know from the extant works of Seneca. It just may be the case that this form is a natural fit for all kinds of literary spoofs, across the cultures and centuries.

Penelope’s narrative, done entirely in prose, falls into two parts; the first, shorter, dealing with her childhood in sparta and the marriage to Odysseus, and the second based more closely on the events form \textit{The Odyssey}. The ancient source for the early life of Penelope being few and now very informative, Atwood relies mostly on her own imagination here, a dangerous proposition even for a most talented and conscientious poet.

After some initial floundering, however, once she reaches the familiar ground of the Homeric material, Penelope gets back on track and relaxes into some really fine story telling. The growing tension between her calm and self-assured tone and
the raucous comments and revelations by the Chorus leads to a mystery-like ending, where no questions have been clearly answered, but one fact emerges beyond any doubt, the maids have been terribly wronged, and there is nothing in this world that can make that wrong right. Therefore, one gives Atwood full credit for her mischievous but thoughtful reading of *The Odyssey*, and one is convinced that *The Penelopiad* will be much enjoyed by every classicist as well as by any true lover of Homer's epic.

***
References

1 Toril Moi, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Style: Recent Feminist Criticism in the United States", Cultural Critique, 9 (Spring 1988), p.3.


3 Ibid., p.15.


5 Margaret Atwood, Surfacing, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1972, p.8.

6 Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1976, p.220.

7 Ibid., p.303.

8 Margaret Atwood, Life Before Man, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1979, p.145.


10 Margaret Atwood, Bodily Harm, Toronto McClelland and Stewart, 1981, p.102.


13 Ibid., p.361.


15 Ibid., p.461.


***