Oates’s primary artistic goal is to confine her fiction to thoroughgoing social and psychological realism. Her novels accurately mirror the psychological and social convulsions of modern times.

In her earlier novels, written in the sixties, Oates attempts to portray convincingly the social turmoil of American life as faced by young men and women. In these, her women forcefully endeavour to attain freedom from social and economic oppression, and cultural patriarchal dominance. As an evolutionary advance, in her novels of the seventies Oates creates bolder women. In *Do with Me What You Will*, Oates creates a young woman named Elena Howe to emphasize and establish her vision of women’s liberation and in *Unholy Loves*, she presents Brigit Stott’s attainment of self-identity and empowerment.

This chapter traces Oates’s endeavour to make her female protagonists question tradition and take a new direction. This uncommon “questioning of tradition, often followed by tentative steps in new directions” is the second step in the process of the evolution of feminist consciousness (Lerner xxiii). Bartky calls this step woman’s “project of negation and transformation” (25-26). Oates’s novels *Do with Me What You Will* and *Unholy Loves* represent the working out of this feminist postulate.
Oates’s “greatest concern is with the conscious and unconscious reactions of her characters to the pain of their stunted lives” (Giles 216). In *Do with Me What You Will* and *Unholy Loves*, Oates explores the psychological problems of her female protagonists. One among such problems is the repression of women. The female protagonists, Elena of *Do with Me What You Will* and Brigit of *Unholy Loves*, initially succumb to repression, but later achieve redemption from repression. Their social and economic condition is better than that of Clara, Loretta, and Maureen. Yet their life is plagued by repression.

3.1 Repression

Repression is a violent act of volition that suppresses womenfolk. In his discussion of the term *repression*, Jacques Lacan explicates that the repressed is “an individual who is the total psychic slave of an Other’s Desire and thus incapable of his own Desire” (Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* 116). It means that one is forced to perform others’ desires. In another context, Lacan states that repression cannot be made “synonymous with immaturity, neurosis, or infantalization” (Ragland-Sullivan 116). On the basis of this definition of repression, Oates’s two novels, namely, *Do with Me What You Will* and *Unholy Loves*, are analysed hereunder. The female protagonists Elena and Brigit are repressed by various factors contrived by patriarchy.

“Oates’s approach to fiction is more like Dreiser’s than that of any one else I can think of She is as absorbed in the interaction between
individual Americans and the society they live in as he was [. . .]”

(Elizabeth Janeway, “Clara the Climber” 5). Oates’s method in her novel

*Do with Me What You Will* is precisely this explosion of realism into

surrealism that convinces by appalling. Its object is one of the more

traditional stereotypes of femininity, namely, passivity. It is the cumulative

result of the acts of repression of men. Elena experiences such passivity.

Brigit is also threatened by repression.

Both these women are caught in the throes of society's whirlpool and

individual psychological stasis. In contrast to the women of Oates’s earlier

fiction, these two women achieve their goal and assert their self-identity.

Initially, their psychic energy and female potential are repressed by

patriarchal authority. However, after a period of repression, they struggle to

redeem themselves from such repression, and finally attain autonomy and

transcendence. As Kay Mussell explains, “Women are cast as victims in a

man’s world, [. . .] but through the demonstration of feminine virtues, the

victim proves herself worthy of salvation through the love of the hero, who

becomes her deliverer from the terrors that beset her” (qtd. in Ruthven 1 IS).

Elena and Brigit are the victims of physical repression, sexual

repression, psychological repression, emotional repression, and intellectual

repression. Though they are tormented by these various forms of repression,

they perk themselves up to prove their potential for transcendence: “we

understand what we are and where we are in the light of what we are not
yet” (Bartky 26). They perceive the possibility of transcending their repression.

3.2 Physical Repression

The act of forcing someone to respond to another’s desire or to obey another’s authority is regarded as physical repression. The repressed person is quite incapable of restraining such authority or force. This adverse characteristic of patriarchy and other social forces is presented in Do with Me What You Will.

Oates traces Elena’s passive state of mind and the psychological problems created by the repression of her father. Elena endures fear and a sense of formlessness in her youth. She is just seven years old, studying in Emmet Stone Elementary School, Pittsburgh. Her estranged father, Leo Ross, is a Ford dealer in Detroit, and her mother, Ardis Carter, is a model for advertisements. Their marital life is wrecked and they are divorced. Ardis celebrates the force of law: she leads an independent life, rearing her girl Elena. But Leo curses the law for its devilish role in their marriage and takes revenge on his divorced wife by kidnapping his daughter from the school. Leo, standing near the fence, calls his daughter over; she hesitates; but, he persists, “Obey me, Elena. Obey me. Yes, like that, yes, don’t be afraid—crawl under—crawl under—(Oates, Do with Me What You Will 10). The child crawls under the fence. He takes her away in his car. The metaphor of fence symbolizes the superstructure of patriarchy that exacts allegiance, obedience, and servility from the female. She has to obey what
she is bidden to do without demur. Elena’s passive acquiescence to her father’s wish proves her timid insecure predicament. Leo degrades his daughter into a degenerate human being by his patriarchal authority and the girl is “his own Elena again, his own doll” (Oates, Do with Me What You Will 17).

In a patriarchal culture, a female is taught to imitate and identify herself with the stereotype of traditional female virtues: gentleness, passivity, frailty, and delicacy (Showalter, A Literature of Their Own 12-13). Elena has inherited such female virtues and so she comes out through the fence and rides with her father. He takes her to various places and finally confines her to a locked room in San Francisco, California. She panics and, suffering claustrophobia, becomes sick. After writing confessional letters to his wife and the police, Leo leaves his sick daughter there and escapes. Elena is rescued by the police and kept at a Children’s Shelter for treatment. Her mother Ardis comes to the hospital and feels happy to be reunited with her daughter.

At a very young age, Elena is taught to submit to her father’s authority, because she knows that “to be loved is to be obedient, to comply with the wishes of the parent or authority figure, and to be obedient is to be good. So to be loved is to be good, thus protected” (Philomene C. Ducas, Determinism in Joyce Carol Oates's Novels 1964-1975 382). Leo’s kidnapping of Elena is a social crime and so he secretly shuts her up in a dark room, without giving her proper food. The young girl suffers
claustrophobia, nausea, and dehydration, and she is left there in a half-dead condition. Her father is not consciously wicked, but psychologically maimed, as a result of his forced separation from Ardis, which incites his desperate, revenge-motivated abduction of Elena.

Another kind of physical repression which Elena suffers comes from her mother Ardis, who is very selfish, possessive, and aggressive. She is much concerned about her plan of making Elena a model and so she is much interested in taking care of her beauty. Ardis’s profession as a model does not bring her sufficient money. She has to bear the expenses of her daughter's education and health. As she suffers from heavy debts, she intends to induct Elena as a model.

When Elena is nine years old, she works with her mother for long hours under very bright lights as part of a mother-and-daughter modelling team. She is posed in stationary attitudes and ordered not to move and not to blink, that is, never to respond in a natural manner. She is rewarded for her compliance: she is complimented for being a docile girl. Nevertheless, on one occasion, when a new admirer takes Ardis and Elena to a dimly-lit restaurant after a modelling session, she commits what seems to her mother a dangerous blunder. She stumbles against something in the semi-darkness, and her eyes begin to water, prompting the following conversation:

“Why are you blinking like that?” Ardis asked.

“Her eyes must be sore,” said the man.
Elena did not answer. She waited. In a few minutes her mother would forget, would turn away; she could rely on that. But for some reason Ardis slid her arm around Elena’s shoulders, gently, and examined her eyes. It was very embarrassing because the man, a stranger, was watching. “‘Now’, tell the truth, honey. Can you see allright?’” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 54-55)

This is a double-bind situation of threat and punishment. Ardis’s selfish and aggressive tendency befogs Elena’s psychic energy and self-awareness. As Ardis exploits her dependence, Elena sustains her passivity and earns the name “good girl.” Ardis tells Elena, “The most important thing in life is sleep [. . .]. Absolute unconsciousness’” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 50). She is forced to be obedient and passive.

Elena is beautiful. Ardis advises her to maintain her beauty. Ardis says to her, “‘You have a closed-up little face sometimes, like one of those little flowers, a narcissus, a very selfish flower’ [. . .]” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 52). Ardis prepares her to be a model like her. Her obsession furthers Elena’s passive, timid, and degenerate condition, as her mother’s commands keep ringing in her ears: “*Sit still. Like that. Don’t move. Don’t blink. Be good. Be a good girl. Yes. Perfect*’” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 53). Meanwhile, insensitive to Elena’s psychological stress,
Ardis bragged to the photographers and their assistants and the other models that Elena had been born with a natural gift, that she could sit under those hot lights for half an hour, not seeing anything, not moving her face, not even sniffing, hardly breathing; she was a little doll.

“You really are a little doll,” people agreed. (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 53)

Since ah early age, Elena has been coerced to be a passive degenerate thing by her father’s patriarchal authority and her mother’s dominance. These two forces mould her into a nonhuman creature without any psychic energy and female potential. To reiterate Elena’s passivity, Oates employs strong images such as “narcissus flower,” “little doll,” and “sleep” in this passage.

Ardis is in debt. To get over her poor financial condition and to achieve social security, she intends to marry Kami an. So, she develops her contact with him. His frequent visits encourage her to marry him. She tells him, “‘I want Elena and myself to have your name, yes. And then, someday I want to be your wife; I want to belong to you’” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 62,). She wants to have a real permanent home with Karman. She needs stability and protection. Agreeing to marry Ardis, Karman asks them to go to Chicago where he will meet them.

Ardis and Elena prepare to leave for Chicago. All of a sudden, Ardis diverts her trip to New York in the hope of getting more professional
opportunities there. But their stay in New York for four years does not improve their lot. Meanwhile, Ardis encounters Sadoff, who owns a night club in Detroit. She develops her contact with him and gets a new job as a waitress in his club in Detroit. Sadoff asks her to move to Detroit and admit Elena to a school there. They move to Detroit and both become dependent on Sadoff. Elena does not like to go to Detroit and she does not like Sadoff's association. But she is compelled by her mother to settle down in Detroit. As Janis P. Stout observes,

Elena is so blighted by her extraordinary beauty and by her own interiorizing of others' demands of passive accommodation that she becomes, at times, a virtual nullity. She almost ceases to exist as a separate person, moving, instead, in a fog of dullness and unassertiveness [...]. She merely accepts the imprints of others and echoes their wishes. At times of stress she reaches the perfection of this accommodating passivity by lapsing into catatonia, a state of suspended animation in which, like a very good little girl, she ceases to assert [...] her own being. (“Catatonia and Femininity in Oates’s Do with Me What You Will” 208).

When Elena is rescued from her father, her aggressive mother Ardis reinforces the message of docility, praising her for being “very good” since she “never resisted” the doctors and the nurses in the hospital. Like her father, her mother forces her into expressions of love, which she obediently
mouths. She is taught to associate love with fear, and to use expressions of love as a means of escaping disapproval, saying what she senses others expect. Her mother and her father have both taught her that lesson, but the readiness with which she accedes to their pressure indicates an inherent proclivity to submissiveness. Her experience with her father is traumatic, generating anxieties from which she never fully recovers. Later, her life with her mother is quite disturbing. In both childhood and adolescence, she suffers physical repression imposed by her parents. As Stout says, “Oates shows clearly that the structure of traditional expectations in which 20th century women find themselves is a smothering constriction denying them the possibility of a self-fulfilling life [...]” (214). In order to reach selfhood, Elena must break out of the constraints of this traditional structure, namely, physical repression.

*Unholy Loves* bears evidence of the practice of physical repression exercised on the female protagonist. In Friedman’s opinion, “*Unholy Loves* (1979) follows a number of academicians through a series of emotional traumas that finally purge them of their individual delusions. Although not all the characters survive the loss of their delusions, those who do, confront life with renewed vigor and maturity” (“Joyce Carol Oates” 283). The central character, Brigit, is made to suffer emotional trauma inflicted by patriarchal authority through the exercise of physical repression.

In this novel, Oates traces the marginalization of women in a male-dominated society. As the whole novel explores the female experience of
Brigit, Brenda Daly calls it “a portrait of the artist as a maturing women (“Marriage as Emancipatory Metaphor: A Woman Wedded to Teaching and Writing in Oates’s Unholy Loves ” 270). Like Oates herself, Brigit is a university teacher and a novelist and is almost 39, close to Oates’s age at the time she wrote this academic novel.

Brigit has had a long span of marriage with Stanley Fifield—r early sixteen years. Their well-begun mam age disintegrates. Refusing to live with her selfish, violent husband, Brigit walks out on him and works at Woodslee University. During her marital life with Stanley, Brigit has received many scars of physical repression. When Stanley finds that Brigit is incapable of fulfilling his desires, he becomes cruel, but is “bewildered at his own cruelty, unable to comprehend his sudden outbursts of rage, derision, mockery, despair” (Oates, Unholy Loves 130). He always forces Brigit to be obedient and submissive to his command. His patriarchal authority is very reluctant to recognize her desires and emotions. Though he seems to be good and docile in others’ eyes, he is arrogant to Brigit.

Stanley is very possessive, brutal, and selfish. He has repressed Brigit in her act of accomplishing her wishes. lie fails to foster intimacy with his wife. “Though she lived with Stanley Fifield for more than a decade she isn’t altogether certain of what he looks like, and she suspects that she, to him, is a ghostly, maddening presence [. . .]” (Oates, Unholy Loves 171). Brigit seems to be a sexual commodity to him. He wishes to hold her under sexual bondage. He has no interest in understanding her
feelings. “Throughout the marriage she was cursed by a sense of his not
knowing her and not wishing to know her; not her [. . .]” (Oates, *Unholy
Loves* 172). His mind is pervaded by the necessity of his sexual
gratification. He is unwilling to understand that there are more things in
marriage than sexual accomplishment. His main expectation is that 3rigit
must always be ready to yield to his sexual desires.

Stanley expects that Brig it should sustain her youth and love for him.
“He fell in love with and married a certain young woman, an image in his
imagination, and he did not want this image violated. He fought for it
passionately and viciously [. . .]” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 111). His main
concern is accomplishment of sexual pleasure. She is “only a physical
stimulus for him—a means of stirring his manly desire, his ‘love’—which
thrust itself desperately and wildly and ecstatically into a ghostly image of
Brigit Stott, a vapor that had no relationship to the living woman at all
[. . .]” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 172).

What Brigit knows about him is only his outward physical
appearance and gestures. She is not given any opportunity to study his inner
mind. A woman who knows herself to be a subject finds herself “living in a
world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other”
(deBeauvoir, qtd. in Donovan 122-23). In a male-dominated society,
women like Brigit are repressed. Her memory of her fractured marriage
often haunts her and she is ashamed.
Brigit has an aspiration to be a successful and famous rovelist. She is gifted with a talent for creative writing. She is interested in demoting her time to writing novels. Her act of writing is discouraged and ridiculed by her husband. To Stanley, love is only a means of sexual gratification. To Brigit, love is a means of spiritual endeavour. So, she cultivates her love of art and writing novels. His insistence on her obedience to his orders hinders her emotional stability. She discovers two different dimensions of his personality: “The public self, the private self, the husband and the lover and the man and the human being with his own raw, indescribable need were all different, always at war. She had been a minor casualty of that war” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 173).

Stanley’s obsession with Brigit’s weakness is a major cause for the crack in their relationship. His perseverance in what he expects from her ignores her merits and resources. His patriarchal dominance overrules her expectations from her husband. However, as an intellectual modern American woman, she boldly resents and resists his authority. Between them there has been “Marriage. The deterioration of love. Separation. Reunion. Separation. Divorce [...]” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 23-24). The main reason for the breakdown of their marriage is his repression of her desires and aspirations. Whenever she recalls her married life, she re-experiences the sad plight of her relationship with him.

After the separation from her husband, Brigit happens to meet Lewis Seidel in New York City at about the time her second novel comes out and
her marriage has begun to deteriorate. Lewis is responsible for her placement in the university. Since then they have been friends.

At Woodslee Brigit is troubled and repressed by another man. He is Alexis Kessler, a music teacher in the university. Alexis is an “aging Wunderkind of the music department” and a bisexual. Lie is so handsome, a young man, and yet so unmanly. Once, when Alexis and Brigit are together in her residence, she attends a telephone call from her friend and talks animatedly within his earshot. During her talk, she mentions Stanley’s name. When the talk is over, Alexis snatches the receiver from her and puts it down roughly. She is amazed at his behaviour and becomes angry. lie too becomes angry, furious, and then hysterical. They start screaming at each other. The reason for his anger is that he does not want her to talk to others, particularly to Stanley, when he is with her. He does not want her to care enough about her husband to even inquire about him. He wants to exercise absolute control over her. Lie curtails her freedom and individual right.

During her married life with Stanley, Brigit is enforced to obey his patriarchal authority. In her love affair with Alexis, she is again expected to be submissive and obedient to him. Her experience of physical repression amounts to a stunted life and restricts her development as a writer. The sexist ideology (the male-female sexual contradiction) is in full force in practice in American society.
3.3 Sexual Repression

Sex plays a vital role in marital life. The misuse of sex or abuse of sex in marital life is treated as a moral offence as well as a legal offence. Many marriages are fractured because of sexual problems. The fulfilment of sexual desires in marital life is a spiritual endeavour. Oates portrays sex as an important category in her fiction. In *Do with Me What You Will*, Oates shows how Elena is denied sexual satisfaction by her husband Marvin Howe. Denial of sexual satisfaction is termed sexual repression.

Marvin exercises sexual repression upon his young and beautiful wife Elena. As the professional relationship between Ardis and Sadoff grows, she sets up a plan to many Elena to him. Meanwhile, Ardis is introduced to Marvin by Sadoff in the club in Detroit. Elena is also present there along with her mother. Elena is fascinated by the charm of Marvin, who is attracted to her beauty. Ardis’s plan for Elena’s marriage is now aborted and, in obedience to Ardis, Elena gets married to Marvin, who is a rich and famous criminal lawyer in Detroit. His past life and his first marriage were sordid and sad. He married a girl and had three children by her. Later, the marriage disintegrated and he rejected his wife and children.

Taking Elena into his baronial house, Marvin shows her his valuable possessions and tells her, “These things were waiting for you for decades [. . (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 112). What motivates Marvin to make Elena his wife is her youth and beauty. Her duty as his wife is just to be one of his valuable collections. There is no real love and real life in their
marital relationship. She remains a princess to him. He has already assured Ardis that he will not have any children by Elena. A marriage without love and feelings is nothing but a sort of commercial interaction. This marriage becomes another of the external pressures on Elena, this time explicitly externalised, in a bond, a contract, “not [...] between two people, but between two people and the law [. . .]” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 108).

As Marvin is faithful to his word to Ardis, he dooms Elena’s anticipation of sexual bliss in marital life. She is repressed by both the excessive influence of her selfish mother and the patriarchal authority of Marvin. Ardis sells her daughter at the highest price, while Marvin drafts a marriage contract to secure his property rights in the trading (Yuan-Wen Chi, “Female Consciousness in Joyce Carol Oates’s *Do with Me What You Will* 65). Elena has to be a non-human being in his house. In “Rereading Femininity,” Shoshana Felman remarks, “Woman is reduced to a mere object whose sole function is to be possessed and owned by man” (24). Elena merely goes through the motions of the usual activities of a suburban matron: she entertains, attends charitable functions, takes classes, even receives letters from her husband’s mistress, but nothing creates in Elena any stirring of life. She is stuck in time and place, a self without a selfhood.

In Marvin’s eyes, Elena is simply a precious object in his spacious room, just like the antique furniture he collects from his clients. Though she has no love for her husband, she is obliged to obey him reluctantly. To cite
an instance, Marvin once asks her to lie down on an antique Italian bed to satisfy his capricious fancy. She is forced to obey him, though against her will, and much to her indignation: “Marvin’s voice had tightened and was no longer playful. She heard the sudden tension in it. So she obeyed [. . .]” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 118). What Marvin sees of Elena in the bed is “a body lying there” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 118).

Elena’s psychic energy is degraded into stillness by the marriage contract. Her personality also sinks into narcissism. As Waller comments:

> She is a “doll” to everyone. [. . .] Her life constantly “prepared” for her. She is sheltered, passive, manipulated, belonging to others. When she marries, her husband keeps his work and most of his life away from her; she is a statue, a reminder of passive, ideal beauty, uncontaminated, a merely visible woman. (169-70)

She is regarded as an object which can be viewed by all, at all times.

Though Elena leads a very luxurious life in Marvin’s house, she never derives any conjugal bliss from her nuptial bed. Oates predicts this when describing her very first night with Marvin:

> On the first night of their marriage, when he had knelt above her and slowly, cautiously, and then in a kind of angry frenzy made love to her, helpless to control himself, she had lain like this and suddenly she felt herself inside his head, contained by
Oates describes how Elena leads an inert, blank, empty prison-like life in Marvin’s house: “And when he made love to her in the months afterward, she felt no pain, no alarm; she felt nothing, but drifted like this, absolutely still, gentle, opened to him and empty, her soul flawless as the undersides of her eyelids seeing nothing” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 119).

Marvin’s main concern is his profession as a lawyer. His commitment to his profession is more important than that to his married life. He says to Elena, “‘My work is human beings. My religion is human beings. That means I have to love them. . . . in order to save them, I have to love them’” (Oates, *Do with Me What. You Will* 122). He often goes away on professional trips and hardly ever stays at home. If he stays at home, he merely watches and looks at and talks to his wife without any sign of sexual stimulation.

Living painfully in this sordid environment, Elena experiences sexual repression. Marvin never tortures her, insults her, or treats her badly. He provides her with all luxuries. But, he fails to be a husband to her or to consider her a woman. This sort of condition in which Elena lives is reckoned as sexual repression.

3.4 Psychological Repression

In general, women are subjugated by men through psychological means. Enforcing the traditional values prescribed for women, men
subordinate women at home as well as in society. In *Do with Me What You Will*, Marvin employs psychological repression to bring his wife under his subjugation. Though she is permitted to enjoy all comforts at home, she finds no opportunity for sexual gratification. She is forced into sexual nullity. She has been suffering such a sordid predicament for nearly eleven years.

During this long span, she endures chaos and ennui in her married life. She undergoes a conflict—whether to continue her loveless marriage or to engage herself in a quest for self-discovery. She has been waiting for the opportune moment. Oates shows how she finds the appropriate occasion “to hurl the hard cover that enveloped her psychic energy and to discover the kernel of her potential to awaken her from long sleep” (*Do with Me What You Will* 122).

Elena goes out to attend a function, namely, the Mentally Handicapped Children of Wayne County Fund Raising Luncheon, on Monday, April 12, 1971 in Detroit. At 1.45 p.m., she stands near *Alger Memorial*, which is a statue called “The Spirit of Detroit.” The statue is a human figure. “In his left hand the figure holds an object meant to be the sun, with stiff spike-like rays of gold emanating out from it; in his right hand the figure holds a small couple, a man and a woman, the woman holding an infant, and all these small figures are raising their hands to the sky...” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 162). Coming closer, Elena reads the inscription on the base of the statue: “*God, through the Spirit of*
Man, is manifested in the family, the noblest human relationship” (Oates, 
Do with Me What You Will 163). Fascinated and mesmerized by the beauty 
of the statue, Elena stands still, contemplating the family figure and the 
inscription. Her mind feels the reality of life: “yes, I understand what is 
being said” (Oates, Do with Me What You Will 163). She has been waiting 
long for neither a golden touch nor a magic touch, but a human touch that 
can arouse her from her psychotic slumber. Pier observation of the beauty of 
the statue “bears a message of freedom, spirituality, and communion” 
(Bender 75). She understands the value of a healthy joyful marital 
relationship that is now strongly embedded in her mind.

While on his way to keep an appointment with an ophthalmologist, 
Jack Morrissey, Marvin’s junior, happens to notice Elena standing near the 
Alger Memorial. She is totally absorbed by the beauty of the statue.

Attracted by her beauty, he wishes to talk to her. He feels restless. “He 
passed by her again, very close to her, only a few inches away. Fie wanted 
to touch her, just lightly, with his elbow [. . .]” (Oates. Do with Me What 
You Will 305). He intends to say, “you, what’s wrong? Are you sick? 
Paralyzed? Hypnotized?” (Oates, Do with Me What You Will 306). He 
addresses her as Mrs. Howe, but she does not hear him. He edges close to 
her, touches her, arouses her with his human touch, and addresses her again.

This is a vital encounter.

The encounter between Elena and Jack near the Alger Memorial 
fuses their minds. The statue, which is the symbolic representation of noble
human relationship, becomes a catalyst to instil love in their minds. Elena, the wife of Marvin, and Jack, the husband of Rachel, are unintentionally bought together to commit the crime of adultery, propelled by erotic love. Love and a new relationship sprout between them. Waller says, “A new relation, new relatedness hurts somewhat in the attaining. . . . Each time we strive to a new relation, with anyone or anything, it is bound to hurt somewhat. Because it means the struggle with and the displacing of old connections” (216). Both Elena and Jack are swept off their feet by the power of love. Elena begins to employ this erotic love to overcome her repression. Moved by her love for Jack, she seeks redemption from her psychosexual problems.

Elena leads a loveless life in Marvin’s house. He is very attached to her. He is very firm in his aim of retaining her presence in his house. When she falls ill and is admitted to hospital, he stays by her side to take care of her. After her recovery, she is taken home. At home, he shows her a map and asks her to choose the place where she wants to live. She chooses to live in Maine.

But all his attempts to retain her at home do not work out because there is no real love for him in her heart. Though she experiences a surge of conflict about her critical situation, she is very confident about her independent decision. Her meeting with the mystic Meredith Dawe triggers her sexual awakening, which leads her to assert her potential and self-confidence.
Elena’s love for Jack induces her to contact him over the phone. While she is staying in Marvin’s friend’s house in California, she invites Jack there. It is her maiden attempt at talking to a strange man. Responding to her call, Jack meets her near a gas station near San Francisco. For the first time she experiences sexual urge and derives complete sexual gratification from Jack. After this pleasant assignation, they have frequent sexual contacts. After a short period of time, Marvin happens to learn about Elena’s sexual contact with Jack. He listens to the recorded phone talk between them and confirms the illicit affair. He is not at all perturbed, but decides to deal with Elena prudently.

Once Marvin urgently returns home, and interrogates Elena about not answering his telephone calls. She stuns him: “i’m leaving. I’m not going to stay here. I want to leave [. . .]” (Oates, *Do with Me What Yon Will* 535). She tells him categorically, “i can’t stay married to you” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 536). She openly declares her love for Jack. Stunned by her decision and her adultery, Marvin falls silent.

Once, when Elena returns home, she finds Marvin burning some photos and letters. She understands that they are all the evidence of her sexual affair with Jack. She guesses that Marvin has found out about her adultery with Jack. But she remains unperturbed. After learning of Elena’s adultery with Jack and burning all the evidence, Marvin Howe does not loathe Elena. He plans to detain her in his house. So, he sends her to Maine in order to sever her contact with Jack. He allows her to stay there for a long time.
time. He tells her of his own good dealings with her. He reminds her of his role in saving her from her mother’s plan of marrying her to Sadoffand saving Jack’s father from a murder case.

On another occasion Marvin says to Elena, “I’ve felt a little guilty about you . . . about whether you might want children, but... but... I couldn’t help it, I was resolved never to have any more children, never. And I don’t regret it now” (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 551). Through such psychological methods, Marvin attempts to retain Elena under his control as his own beautiful wife for ever. But she foils his plan. She has already resolved to leave him. During the long span of her marriage to Marvin, she has felt her bed to be a grave and her life in Marvin’s palatial house to be hell. She has now decided to leave the hell. She awakens the next day, thinking, “This is the last time I will sleep here [i.e. Marvin’s bed]. . . (Oates, *Do with Me What You Will* 387). In her life with Marvin, Elena is subjected to sexual repression and psychological repression.

3.5 Emotional Repression

Oates’s novel *Unholy Loves* presents the academic activities and the academicians of Woodslee University along with the social rituals and the scandals. Arranging social parties is quite common there. When the female protagonist Brigit has been there as an English teacher for nearly three years, the dean of the university, Oliver Byrne, and his wife, Marilyn, host a party for a famous British poet Albert St. Dennis. Oliver’s friends and colleagues have gathered for the party. Oliver welcomes Brigit and asks her
about her parents. This makes her reminisce. She recalls that every member
of her family has been responsible for her emotional repression.

When Brigit is with her parents at Norfolk, her mother demands a
successful marriage from her. She often reminds her that everybody in the
family is leading a happy and successful married life. There is no precedent
for disintegration or divorce in their family. Her sister Janet is cited as an
example: “she made a success of her marriage without even trying” (Oates,
Unholy Loves 35). When Brigit goes home, too many Stotts drop by and
inquire after Stanley, her husband. To them Stanley “‘seemed so courteous.
Seemed so gentlemanly’” (Oates, Unholy Loves 35). They are not aware
that Stanley has been a devil to her. They fail to recognize her reputation as
a novelist and as a bold woman who has separated herself from her
husband. They pester her to make a success of her marriage, which is their
desire. But her own ambition is to become a successful artist (novelist).

For Brigit a successful marriage is an impossible endeavour. She
experiences emotional repression by her husband. Stanley is a New Yorker
who wears costly clothes like a rich man. After a month’s acquaintance, she
marries him and begins her married life. Initially, their marriage goes well.
But, later, she suffers emotional repression. What he desires is not at all
possible for her to provide. The reasons for his disgust with her are that
“Brigit was always headstrong and mouthy and wouldn’t have the first idea
of how to make a man happy” (Oates, Unholy Loves 35). He never thinks of
a man’s responsibility to make a woman happy.
Brigit’s love for Stanley was very deep and intense before marriage and even after marriage. Now, such love “turned inside out to be something resembling a furious unremitting ‘hatred’ nearly infantile in its intensity, Brigit, like a stunned onlooker at a disaster, wondered at times if she were losing her sanity [... ]” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 24). She feels “as if part of her soul were in bondage to a stranger” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 36). Upon her separation from Stanley, she anticipates “A storm of emotions, roused into life and now beyond control” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 24). Stanley seems to hate Brigit more than she hates him. Her incapabilities as a wife, according to him, are her “her infamous anemia and frigidity” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 24).

As Stanley is a man of intense feelings, he expects the same intensity from her. As she fails to meet his expectations, separation and disintegration result. As a representative of patriarchy, he wants to force her to obey his orders. On the other hand, he is not ready to recognize her own needs. This is what happens in male-dominated society. So Brigit is subjected to emotional repression.

Alexis has the habit of ridiculing Brigit on occasion. He often points out that her oversensibility in certain areas is outrageous in the face of her insensitivity in others. He points to her carelessness about a missing decorative button on her costly dress. Moreover, he accuses her of rudeness in her talk to the wife of the President of Woodslee University. He shows unwarranted zeal in forcing her to conform to his own norms.
On New Year’s Eve, Albert St. Dennis hosts a party for his friends at his house. Alexis and Brigit have been invited to the party. St. Dennis has invited Lee Hawley, a lecturer in psychology. Alexis and Lee are submerged in drinks. Lee, who is notorious for his habit of teasing and humiliating women, insults Brigit. So, she asks Alexis to withdraw from him. But Alexis does not oblige her. The presence of Lee irritates Brigit. Yet Alexis continues to talk with Lee. Alexis’s conduct rouses an emotional outburst in Brigit first. Later, she becomes furious and throws her glass at Lee and Alexis. As a result, there is a quarrel between Alexis and Brigit. In consequence of this quarrel, Brigit terminates her love affair with Alexis.

3.6 Intellectual Repression

“Feminism is women finding the courage to think, speak, act, and live for themselves,” writes Carissa Marie Nelson in her article “The ‘F’ Word” (28). In “The Unity of Feminism,” Pndres Chktnesian presents a conversation between her and her grandmother:

“I want to be a writer,” I declared to my grandmother one evening while discussing my future plans.

“That is an impossible job for a woman who has to clean the house and take care of children. You should think of an easier, less time-consuming job. How can you be a writer and a housewife at the same time?”

“I am not going to be a housewife,” I snapped and then walked away. ([29])
This excerpt from the article is quite analogous to Brigit’s situation. Her main concern is to become a successful writer. Her rational thinking and her intellectual productivity are discouraged and impeded. The sources of such impediments are her parents, her husband, and her colleagues. She is ingenious in distinguishing between holy love and unholy love. According to her, romantic love is “unholy.” Her love of art is “holy.” She intends to pursue such “holy love” of writing.

In *Unholy Loves*, Oates shows how Brigit is repressed intellectually also. Whenever she goes to her parents in Norfolk, she is discouraged. She is called “bookish” and “strange” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 39). The Norfolk Stotts eye Brigit, “seeing not the thirty-eight-year-old university professor and novelist, seeing, in fact, not a thirty-eight-year-old woman at all, but just Brigit, Hannalee’s old daughter [. . .]” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 35). Brigit’s parents and relatives detest her separation from her husband and accuse her of inability to keep her husband happy. Her desire to become a novelist is repressed by her own parents and relatives.

Another important person who represses Brigit intellectually is her husband, Stanley. Once he insults her saying, “I can read the thoughts rising like bubbles in your brain, he said, plagiarizing Pope [. . .]” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 36). He is a perennial source of disturbance to her. “It was not simply that her husband had come to resent her writing, since the meager success of the first novel and spoke of it in a certain bantering tone she came to find intolerable [. . .]” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 260). His negative
attitude and his jealousy are regular impediments that hinder her writing. In
the course of arguments he slaps and beats her. She is crushed by shame
and embarrassment. Though she is able to endure his slaps and blows, she
can't bear his jeering. In a moment of heated argument, he passionately tells
her, “you really think your work is more important than our marriage
[..]” (Oates, *Unholy Loves* 261). All these sordid incidents are really
disruptive. They hinder her writing and threaten her dream of becoming a
famous novelist.

Alexis has been at Woodslee for three years and so has Brigit. They
have never been close to each other. In fact, they have not spoken to each
other except occasionally. After her separation from Stanley, Brigit has
been virginal and busy", pursuing her academic work. The special visit of
Albert St. Dennis, the British poet, throws her together with Alexis. They
become lovers. But his love for her soon becomes a hindrance to her
writing, with his frequent visits and demands for pursuing their love affair.
As a result of his insistence, they take a trip to Montreal. Taking undue
advantage of her, Alexis exercises power over her affairs.

The New Year’s Eve party in Albert St. Dennis’s house becomes an
occasion and cause for friction. After the fight during the party, she loathes
his presence. After the accidental death of Albert St. Dennis, she and
Alexis are reunited, but they remain just friends. In the closing pages of the
novel, Alexis compels her to be his lover again. During a conversation, he
advances and gets close to her. As he tries to catch hold of her hand, she
becomes furious and hits him on the nose. He is shocked at his bleeding nose. After that, she plans to move to Norfolk, hoping to write her third novel. These are instances of the intellectual repression imposed on Brigit.

3.7 Rebellious Efforts

Joyce Carol Oates's *Do with Me What You Will* explores the human need for commitment to something, or more accurately, to someone. The theme of the novel—Elena’s need to be transformed from an object to a person—is contemporary.

Love is delicate, elusive and above all spontaneous. It thrives on honesty and sincerity and naturalness combined with mutual responsibleness and concern. At the beginning it just happens but to flourish and endure it requires the full capacity for giving of the open heart and soul. (Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* 165)

Oates is a potent mythmaker. The focus of her myth is the greed, the overreaching, the “experimental” excitement in human relationships. This noble human relationship is initially misinterpreted in the life of Elena and, finally, it plays a vital part in transforming her life into reality. This human relationship, on the one hand, acts as a web that detains and represses Elena’s psychic energy and selfhood, and, on the other, it redeems her from such repression and directs her to realize the reality of her selfhood and her identity through the instrument of love. As Donovan states, “Women
develop love as a psychological means of dealing with hopeless oppression” (152).

Oates often writes unconsciously about love, as she herself states:

“I think I write about love in an unconscious way. I look back upon the novels Eve written, and I say, yes, this was my subject. But at the time I’m writing I’m not really conscious of that. I’m writing about a certain person who does this and comes to a certain end.” (qtd. in Kazin, “Oates” 159)

Oates creates Elena to realize this concept of love and to seize love as a reality to re-live her life and convert her nightmares into a real drama of life.

3.7.1 Elena’s Redemption (Do with Me What You Will)

Oates has conceived her primary role as an artist who must dramatize the nightmarish conditions of the present with all the attendant anxiety, paranoia, dislocation, and explosive conflict.

Her fiction has often focused particularly on the moment when a combined psychological and cultural malaise erupts into violence; and despite the notable variety of her character portrayals, there are several representative “types” that recur frequently and present distinctive facets of the turbulent American experience. (Johnson, Understanding Joyce Carol Oates 10)
Do with Me What You Will and Unholy Loves bear testimony to this nightmarish condition of contemporary society, in which the patriarchal culture is dominant. It is echoed in Donovan’s contempt: “women remain enslaved because of a corrupt process of socialization which stunts their intellect and teaches them that their proper purpose in life is to serve men” (8). Oates recasts this condition of women in her portrayal of Elena. In addition, as a feminist, she celebrates Elena’s act of negating the traditional role of stereotype passivity and transcending the territory of patriarchal dominance.

In her three phases of life—childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—Elena is conditioned to assume the role of a passive object. In these three phases, she suffers physical repression by her father, her mother, and her husband respectively. She has been repressed for twenty-eight years, two months, twenty-six days. She is really degraded into a non-human being and called “doll,” “statue,” “stone,” “thing,” and “sleeping princess.” In everyone’s eyes, she is an object. She herself confesses, “I looked down upon my own body and saw that it had gone into stone [ . . . ]” (Oates, Do with Me What You Will 101).

Elena’s husband Marvin, as he later explains to her, is attracted to her otherworldly quality, her being seemingly so untouched by the corruption of the world: “you’re someone in a vacuum, you’re from the outside of everything that’s physical and degrading [ . . . ]” (Oates, Do with Me What You Will 553). However, his real motive is to degrade her to a
thing he possesses. This degraded status of woman is customary in patriarchal culture, Wollstonecraft states that “blind submission tends to vitiate the woman’s vitality and reduces her to the state of degradation” (18-19). On the basis of this tradition, Elena has to be submissive. She has to yield to what she is bidden to do, without demur. Otherwise, she will be punished for her deviation.

She has been a psychic slave to others’ desires and she has been incapable of finding her own strength. Actually, her repression during this long span of time insulates her like the outer shell of an egg. This long span of time is actually an incubation period. As the right occasion arises, she discovers her potential and bursts out as a woman with tremendous power—as a chick comes out with life from an egg—and emerges as a bold woman with life and strength.

During her abduction by her father, her sickness helps her to be redeemed from her father’s repression. In her adolescent period, she is redeemed from her mother’s oppression by her beauty, which attracts Marvin’s attention. In her life with Marvin, she accomplishes self-discovery and realises her potential. While she is in his house in Detroit, her perception of others’ experiences propels her to move out of the house.

Elena’s contact with Meredith Dawe and her listening to his speech uncloud her vision and propel her towards liberation from the clutches of her husband. Meredith Dawe is presented as an anti-materialist who
preaches transcendent love and helps to unite the two dominant concerns of the novel—law and love.

Ardis often warns Elena not to have children as her pelvis is very weak. When Elena is seventeen, Ardis arranges a marriage between her and Marvin, an extremely rich and powerful lawyer whom Elena has seen only twice and who is twenty-four years her senior. The marriage is sealed with a contract that Marvin makes up, containing forty-five clauses, none of which speaks of love, but one of which dictates that they will never have children—a clause insisted upon by Ardis and readily agreed to by Marvin. Complying with this clause in the contract, he offers no chance for Elena to have children. There is no sexual contact between them, though she is very-eager to bear children. In a passage in which she recalls a cocktail-party conversation, she wistfully remembers: “That day I learned from them about the immortality of the womb; you can’t kill it” (Oates, Do with Me What You Will 132). She remembers her mother’s words: “You don’t want children, you don’t have the figure for it. Your pelvis is too small. Don’t ruin yourself” (Oates, Do with Me What You Will 132). Now she defiantly declares: “And now I want a child” (Oates, Do with Me What You Will 132). Rebelling against her husband’s prohibition against children and against her mother’s warning, Elena longs to have children. So, she increases her sexual contacts with Jack.

A mute rebellion goes on in Elena’s mind while her husband is in bed with her, but without stirring her sexual urge. Her thirst for sexual
accomplishment and her longing for children and freedom mark the process of the brewing of her psychic energy. Her first step towards liberation is her moving from her house to the Alger Memorial in Detroit. Her husband’s office is within five minutes’ walking distance. But she does not go there. She stands stationary before the statue, gazing at its beauty.

Her observation of the statue and her interpretation of the inscription on the pedestal sow the seeds of the spirit of liberation in her mind. It is during this episode that the first encounter between her and Jack occurs. This is Elena’s initial redemption from her physical repression by her husband.

Oates positions Elena’s second redemption in San Francisco, where she has been sent to meet her and Marvin’s friend. Suddenly, she remembers Jack. She locates his address and talks to him by phone, asking him to come to an appointed place near San Francisco. This meeting opens an opportunity for sexual contact. It is her first sexual experience in life. This occasion of sexual awakening redeems her from sexual repression.

This initial sexual affair goads her to have more assignations with Jack. Elena becomes strong and bold, and, contacting him by phone, invites him for sexual enjoyment. Her psychological repression ends when she finds out that her husband is aware of her liaison with Jack. While Marvin bums the evidence of her affair with Jack, she remains silent. Next, she grows bold enough to tell Marvin her idea of leaving him. She rejects his pleas to remain with him.
Elena is now totally free from all forms of repression. Her rebellious act of leaving home and trimming her hair turns her into a strong woman. She transcends her passivity and crosses the territory of repression. Steered by the power of love, she goes to Jack’s house. He is surprised to see her at the door. Sending her away and closing the door, he stands paralyzed in his house. Accusations from his wife Rachel and calls from Elena leave him confused and indecisive. When Elena goes to his house a second time, he is prepared to leave his family and house. Overcome by the power of his love for Elena, he moves with Elena to a new married life. Elena achieves salvation through her love for Jack. “Love, not law, becomes the vehicle of liberation” (Creighton, Joyce Carol Oates 87).

Oates introduces this novel with an epigraph from Henry James: “the world as it stands is no illusion, no phantasm, no evil dream of a night; we wake up to it again for ever and ever; we can neither forget it nor deny it nor dispense with it” (qtd. in Oates, Do with Me What You Will, n.pag.). The phrase, “we wake up to it” is a clue to Oates’s celebration of the awakening of female consciousness in Elena. At the end of the novel, Oates reiterates this idea through Elena’s realization of the necessity of shedding her passivity, her former stupor: “She was awake. She realized that everything is awake, the universe is awake; that it cannot be escaped” (Oates, Do with Me What You Will 531).

Elena is created as a female protagonist to project Oates’s ideal image of woman: “a woman who exists beyond the fantasies of her man,
beyond the striving for power, beyond thingness, beyond words and names; beyond subjectivity, beyond even the obvious meaning of Miss Oates’s title” (Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Stalking the Eternal Feminine” 35).

Living in the shadow of patriarchy for more than twenty-eight years, Elena is regarded as a “doll”. As she comes to be aware of her status as a plaything, she perceives her predicament—she is an object, not a human being. Her effort to shake herself free of such misnomers is parallel to that of Patricia Hill Brunett, to whom Oates has dedicated this novel. Once a beauty queen, Brunett, Oates’s close friend, was converted into a member of the Women’s Liberation Movement (Creighton, *Joyce Carol Oates* 91).

Oates and feminist critics share a common goal to shatter the stereotype of female identity and to improve the status of women in contemporary American society. The occasion on which Elena asserts her awareness about herself as a woman parallels the occasion of the formation of the Women’s Liberation Movement and the National Organization of Women in America, which generated feminist awareness among women. Therefore, Elena’s awakening is viewed as all women’s liberation.

Through the structure of the novel, the development of the plot and the effect of symbols and imagery, Oates traces the burgeoning of her female protagonist into feminist consciousness. Once her feminist consciousness is awakened, Elena proves her capability of transcending the traditional barriers and boldly moves into a new direction.
3.7.2 Brigit’s Redemption (*Unholy Loves*)

Oates’s novel *Unholy Loves* discloses her belief in “the redemptive power of art and in the importance of the human soul’s struggle to attain redemption” (Giles 216). The novel lays bare the soul of Brigit, a recent divorcee, a writer and a member of the English department at the University of Woodslee, modeled after Syracuse University, where Oates earned her B.A. degree. The main focus of the novel is the portrayal of the relationship between the masterful husband Stanley and the self-abnegating wife Brigit. During the long span of their marriage of sixteen years, Brigit suffers pathetic, sad, soul pricking moments. Her persistent desire and dream to become a successful artist is hindered by various forms of repression. The main hindrance she experiences from her husband is physical repression.

Brigit is created as a tough, stubborn, bold woman with intelligence and diligence. Her husband is very possessive by nature and aggressive in attitude. She first finds him a good looking and well-dressed, smart young man. Within a few months, she falls in love with him and marries him. They lead a successful married life only for a short period. By and by her commitment to writing novels is restricted and resented by him. His patriarchal dominance overrules her expectations and desires from her husband. As an intellectual modern American woman, she is bold enough to resist his authority. She quits his house and leads a separate life. She refuses to be submissive to her husband. She terminates her traditional role
as a passive and obedient wife to her selfish husband. She considers her separation from her husband her only means of redemption. Separation and loneliness are her only solutions to escape his physical repression.

Brigit’s parents want her to lead a successful married life with Stanley. They are not aware of his true nature. She is blamed by her parents for her incapability to be a good wife to him. This emotional disturbance affects her very much. To avoid this disturbance and to redeem herself from emotional repression, she intensifies her deep involvement in teaching and waiting novels. Her dedication to teaching provides her a source of solace and relief from repression. An unexpected occasion at Woodslee attracts her to Alexis. Their short-lived love affair and Alexis’s passionate involvement with her are unpleasant experiences. Alexis turns out to be another man who represses her emotionally. So she discards her love for him and remains virginal and peaceful. Her detachment from Alexis is a bold venture in releasing herself from emotional pressures. Her friendship with Lewis and Oliver is a convalescing strategy for Brigit at Woodslee University.

In the New Year’s Eve party hosted by Albert St. Dennis, Brigit’s conversation with him opens her vision about her future. She finds it an opportunity to get answers for her doubts about life. This meeting enables her to involve herself more in writing novels and to pursue the working of her third novel. Her first two novels earned her a minor reputation as a novelist. She considers her love of writing a “holy” love and resolves to
continue it. It is her final resolution and a means of redemption from intellectual repression.

At the end of the novel, Brigit is freed of all kinds of repression. Her reunion with her parents and relatives provides her social security. Her hope of getting a new job in a small college in Norfolk sustains her emotional relief and balance. Her proposal to resume the writing of her third novel provides her with spiritual salvation and fulfilment. Thus, she achieves her redemption through her own rebellious move and her revolutionary decision. She is a free woman who is optimistic about her “holy” love of art. Stepping into the living web of the world of art, she is determined to maintain her own identity. “By the end of the novel, Brigit moves beyond the artist’s sin of pride and possession and the academic ambitious scandals and achieves the strength to prove her vocation with more genuine interest” (Paramjit Kaur, “Solitude in Society: A Study of Character Relationships in the Novels of Joyce Carol Oates” 203).

The New Feminist Movement began to shed the old traditional female values such as passivity, sacrifice, dependence, obedience, etc., and charted some modern “American” female values. According to these values, “a woman must be active, aggressive, individualistic, independent, unemotional, objective, competitive, and achievement oriented” (Cardon 23). Oates instils these modern American values in her female protagonist Brigit, a woman of the contemporary American society, in order to enable her to resist the physical, emotional, and intellectual repression caused by
the patriarchal figures such as Stanley and Alexis. Redeeming herself from repression, she achieves the emancipation of her female soul as her own revolutionary experience. According to Emma Goldman, “True emancipation begins in woman’s soul” (qtd. in Donovan 51). “Unholy Loves takes on great importance as a revelation of Oates’s artistic and critical project” (Kaur 196). It is also one of her most affirmative books and it records Brigit’s breakthrough into autonomy and maturity and artistic commitment. Creighton endorses it stating, “the love of art offers a kind of redemption and salvation to the central character of Unholy Loves” (Novels of the Middle Years 18).

Admiring Brigit’s spiritual strength, Creighton says, “some facets of Brigit’s experience recall earlier Oatesian portraits of women: Elena in Do with Me What You Will and Laney in Childwold. Brigit also looks forward to later women: Monica and Sheila in Solstice and Marya in Marya: A Life” (Novels of the Middle Years 18-19). Brigit emerges as a role model to the women of contemporary America. Through the experiences of Brigit, Oates traces the means to overcome loneliness and estrangement. At last Brigit seems to be capable of discovering the “holy love,” which is her work of writing novels. Her capability of enduring repression, her tenacity in overcoming it by pursuing her love of art, and her act of creating a revolution by exercising empowerment as spiritual growth are relevantly portrayed in this novel.
3.7.3 Growth of Feminist Consciousness

Oates’s two protagonists, Elena and Brigit, achieve liberation and redemption, and create a revolution. They achieve the feminist concept propounded by Daly:

> The women’s revolution . . . is an ontological, spiritual revolution, pointing beyond the idolatries of sexist society and sparking creative action in and toward transcendence . . . . It has everything to do with the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God. (Beyond God the Father 27)

Elena and Brigit achieve an upper level in the evolutionary progress of the female consciousness from the initial level set up by Clara and Maureen in Oates’s earlier novels *A Garden of Earthly Delights* and *them*.

In *The Female Experience*, Lemer proclaims, “Any woman who defies her role—be it refusing to be a mother, wanting to be a biochemist, or simply refusing to cater to a man’s ego—is defying the sex role system. It is an act of rebellion” (450). Both Elena and Brigit transcend their traditional role and offer a suitable answer to the woman’s question. They reflect the feminists’ hope to transform a society that is dominated by patriarchal culture and the contradiction of sexist ideology. Elena is transfigured from a profane object to a sacred symbol. She is a character emblematic of womankind. Brigit finds a call to life through her pursuit of the new direction as opposed to the thorny, sordid direction of traditional
bonding. Both Elena and Brigit leave their footprints for their successors, Sheila Trask and Monica Jensen of Oates’s novel *Solstice* and Marya Knauer of the novel *Marya: A Life*, to follow in. Treading the path paved by Elena and Brigit, Monica, Sheila, and Marya establish their female identity and exercise their individual empowerment.