Joyce Carol Oates’s literary output is remarkable for its volume and breadth. She has been busy pursuing her reading and writing for more than four decades without any let up. Her productivity in different genres and her mastery of the portrayal of characters take on different dimensions. Hence, she is regarded as an inexhaustible “writing machine” (Jonathan Yardley, “Joyce Carol Oates on Automatic Pilot” 3). The valuable substance that issues from such a machine is Oates’s celebration of female community and woman culture. It is also her record of the expression of female individual identity and development through her protagonists.

4.1 Expression

Since discriminatory sex-role differentiation is a major organizing principle of contemporary society, the list of its carriers and modes of communication will be unending. Hardly any political, professional, educational, or leisure time activity is free of the blight of sexism. Few personal relationships too are free of it. Feminist consciousness is something like paranoia, especially when the female first begins to apprehend the full extent of sex discrimination and the subtle and various ways in which it is enforced. So, woman hates male support and wants to go it alone. Sometimes woman seeks another woman’s support. In these ways, woman tries to establish her individual identity. It may be rephrased
as the expression of female individual identity. The expression of female individual identity concerns the concepts of separatism, sisterhood, and self-empowerment.


4.2 Themes

The central themes of these two novels are built on the well-known feminist concepts of separatism and self-empowerment, which are characteristics of female community and female culture. Even in the 1980s, patriarchy still dominated American society and women were marginalized. Oates, as a conscientious feminist, could not countenance this. In a talk with her friend Patricia Brunett, a veteran feminist and painter, Oates remarked that “women should be utterly independent in their marriage, and lead their own lives, and not be the pawn of husbands [. . .]” (qtd. in Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 168). To escape marginalisation, and patriarchal domination in general, the women community began to seek ways of living without male support. Feminists called this *separatism and sisterhood*. Elaine Showalter has acknowledged this, stating, “The community of woman is not idyllic, but torn by rage, competition, primal jealousies, ambiguous desire, and emotional violence, just like the world in which women seem subordinate to and victimized by men [. . .]” (“Joyce Carol Oates: A Portrait” 142).
Radical feminists like Ti-Grace Atkinson propose separatism as the ultimate goal of the feminist movement. In this sense, separatism means both a social arrangement and a political stance. “Radical feminism advocates separate organisations for women and men and that women maintain separate culture—by dealing as much as possible only with women, by living with women and living by ‘feminine’ values [. . .]” (Humm, “Separatism” 200).

Humm adds:

There are two main uses of the term ‘separatism’ in feminist theory, which can be summed up in the difference between the socialist feminist concept of alternative institutions and the radical feminist concept of a woman culture. Radical feminism intends that alternative institutions will enable women to withdraw as far as possible from the dominant culture. Socialist feminists, by contrast, argue that alternative institutions will only partially satisfy existing needs and that women and men must experiment with new forms of working together. In this sense separatism does not mean segregation but an organisational or political separation from men. (‘Separatism’ 200)

What feminist theory agrees upon is that separatism is a powerful political force if used as part of a conscious strategy of liberation. In addition, autonomy must take the place of separatism. In other words,
women must: separate themselves from male-dominated or male-defined institutions which operate to maintain male privilege rather than equal rights.

In “Radical Feminism,” Lisa Tuttle says:

All radical feminists believe in the necessity of an autonomous, women-only, women's movement. Men—not merely ‘the PATRIARCHY or male-dominated institutions— are identified as the enemy, because all men benefit from women’s oppression. Therefore, all radical feminists agree with the need for some degree of SEPARATISM.’ (267)

Separatism is ultimately recognized as a feminist theory that defines women’s search for autonomy. This concept of separatism is central to Oates’s novels Solstice and Marya: A Life.

Sisterhood includes the idea and the experience of female bonding and identity discovered in a women-centred vision and definition of womanhood. Humm says: “sisterhood is based on a clear awareness that all women, irrespective of class, race, or nation have a common problem— patriarchy, the term is an important part of contemporary feminism” (“Sisterhood” 210).

Approaches to sisterhood in feminist theory have undergone a series of changes over the past twenty years. Sisterhood emerges as an offshoot of consciousness-raising. Sisterhood and women’s community are regarded by feminists as providing both a refuge from and a challenge to the
oppressive facets of a patriarchal culture. These ideas formed the
foundation of the radical feminist movement of the early 1970s. To heal the
rifts which a patriarchal culture creates between women, feminists strove to
achieve political solidarity by focusing on the common aspects of female
experience. Hester Eisenstein, as quoted by Paulina Palmer in

*Contemporary Women’s Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory*,
says:

> Through consciousness-raising women sought (not always
> with success) to identify and to develop the qualities that
> united them, across the boundaries set by social categories:
> mothers with nonmothers; heterosexual women with lesbians;
> white women with women of color; and privileged women
> with poor women. Ultimately, it was thought, the condition
> and experience of being female would prove to be more
> important in defining women than the specifics of our
> differences from one another. (126)

The sentiments expressed above were put into practice by American women
of the 1980s. Eisenstein affirms this trend:

> Contemporary feminism has propelled thousands of women of
> one generation to make an irreversible commitment to
> womankind and radically reform their relationships with other
> women on the basis of solidarity and pride rather than
> competitiveness and shame . . . Not only do we take each
other more seriously, we have also discovered en masse the delights of women’s company . . . (qtd. in Palmer 143-44)

In the 1980s female friendship gradually became popular and was adopted in practical social life. This practice came to be regarded and referred to as sisterhood. Fascinated by the influence and the value of sisterhood, Oates introduces sisterhood as a theme in her novels Solstice and Marya: A Life. This chapter deals with the two prevalent approaches to relations between women in Solstice and Marya: A Life. The first approach—social and political—conforms to the radical feminist idea of women’s community as the basis for female organisation. The main strategy of this approach is rejecting patriarchy and achieving autonomy. In fiction, this approach is represented by the female protagonist aiming at the achievement of a unified identity and integration within the feminist community. The other approach to relations between women is the psychoanalytic approach. The main aspects of this approach are the psychological and the personal attributes of women. Exploring the emotional complexities of relations between women is the main strategy of this approach, including the shifting power relations between two friends, problems arising from feelings of possessiveness, over-dependence, and the confusion of ego-boundaries. In addition, the mother-daughter bond is also explored. These two approaches are employed to analyse Oates’s interest in promoting sisterhood among the female characters of her novels Solstice and Marya: A Life.
The design of Oates’s *Solstice* and *Marya: A Life* foregrounds the value and the necessity of sisterhood and women’s community. The idea of feminist community as a source of solidarity and confidence and the difficulties and problems faced by women in achieving this goal are themes central to *Solstice* and *Marya: A Life*. The female protagonists of these two novels attempt to achieve autonomy and aim at establishing their female individual identity.

In *Unholy Loves*, Brigit experiments with the concept of separatism for a short period (nearly three years) at Woodslee University. But, in *Solstice*, the female protagonist Monica implements it permanently as does Sheila. They constitute the sisterhood pair in *Solstice*. “Sheila and Monica are opposites—dark and light, willful and passive, stormy and quiescent, mannish and feminine, earthy and intellectual, visual and verbal [..]” (Creighton, *Novels of the Middle Years* 59).

The novel projects the subtle and sometimes surprising shifts of control and submission, dependency and dominance between Sheila and Monica. They struggle to arrive at a solstice, an equilibrium, in a bond both visceral and quixotic. They find themselves locked in what is indeed a life-and-death struggle for ascendency, control and ideal balance. In the early chapters of the book, Oates describes the situations wherein these female characters make their individual choice of separatism. She claims that her “characters generally fall in love with people who will unlock a ‘higher’ self in them” (qtd. in Dale Boesky, “Correspondence with Miss Joyce Carol...”)
Oates” 482). Monica and Sheila, after forming a bond of sisterhood, strive to liberate their individual “self”

4.3 Initiative towards Separatism

Separatism offers an opportunity for women to shake off male domination and take the initiative towards sisterhood. In Solstice Oates explores the circumstances in which women are obligated to live in loneliness. Monica and Sheila adopt separatism in their respective lives. Monica is a tough and bold woman. She is just 29 years old. She has already alienated herself from her parents in Wrightsville, Indiana, and has been hired as a teacher on a three-year contract at the Glenkill Academy for Boys, Glenkill, Pennsylvania. She married at the age of twenty-one, and divorced at the age of twenty-nine. Her eight-year-marriage disintegrated.

Monica’s husband, Harold Bell, is known for his male chauvinism and arrogance. Monica gets pregnant and wants to have her baby. But Harold demands an abortion and forces her to submit to one. She is not allowed to have her desire fulfilled and is denied equal rights. It is sheer male dominance. She resists it. The result is divorce.

Once, during a heated argument, he shoved her towards a table and she sustained a severe injury on her jaw. As a result, she carries a visible scar on her face. Wounded physically as well as psychically, she resolves to live alone. She loathes suicide. She detests a second marriage.

After getting the teaching assignment at Glenkill, Monica moves into a rented house at Olcotsville. Teaching is her only solace. “You’ll get
married again,’” say her friends, and Monica responds, with dignity,

“‘Yes—there are different kinds of marriage’” (Oates, Solstice 16). She has
no faith in soul or salvation, but she believes in survival: “Survival was a
clear, frank, unpretentious matter, a primitive need which she hoped to
cultivate, with hard work and idealism, into something approaching a life”
(Oates, Solstice 16). Her faith in survival propels her to live alone. She
wants to establish her female individual identity and, therefore, she opts for
separatism. She does not want to get trapped by patriarchy again.

“Monica saw herself unsentimentally as a woman, a former girl, who
had had the power—derived from where, she couldn’t have guessed—to
convince others, for a while, of her goldenness, her specialness. The
emotional logic of loving her” (Oates, Solstice 17). After eight years, she is
herself again—Monica Jensen, not Monica Bell. After the divorce, “she
was free, as he was. [. . .] she was alone and undefined and in a curious
battered way virginal again [. . .]” (Oates, Solstice 18).

Sheila is an artist and her husband Morton Flaxman is a sculptor.
When she was nineteen years old, she married Morton, who was then 42.
After his death, she resolves to remain a widow. She never thinks of a
second marriage. She believes in survival and pursues her work of painting.
She embraces separatism. Both Monica and Sheila opt for self-
determination. In Donovan’s opinion, “self-determination enables a
woman to develop personal strength in her encounters with the world, [. . .]
it enables her to stand on her own” (33).
4.4 Hindrance to Separatism

4.4.1 Threat

Women who choose separatism as an alternative to patriarchy face problems in their life. Oates’s *Solstice* describes the problems experienced by Monica and Sheila. When Monica is in Glenkill, she happens to learn the whereabouts of her former husband Harold. He is on the West Coast, working for a cultural foundation in San Francisco. This information often disturbs her. She anticipates a threat from Harold. Once, Monica is informed about a man wandering near her house. Presuming that he may be Harold, she expresses her fear to Sheila.

4.4.2 Exploitation

At the school, the failure of her marriage disrupts Monica’s peace: “She was scarred—yes, literally and not merely figuratively—by her recent inglorious past: in fact she often found herself stroking her barely visible three-inch wound, her prize, her bitter solace […]” (Oates, *Solstice* 16). As a remedy, she buries her memory of her failed marriage by working to exhaustion at the school. The Chairman of the English department exploits this to the hilt.

4.4.3 Loneliness

Sheila is a tall, dark-haired woman in her mid-thirties. She is five or six years older than Monica, and she is quite attractive, almost beautiful. She is a very good artist. Her married life with Morton was quite delightful and successful. She stayed married to him for seventeen years. He was
considered a remarkably loyal husband. After his death, she decided to remain his widow. She intensified her commitment to art. But, living in a huge house at Edgemont, she feels lonely. She often says to her friends, “I'm afraid I really don’t have any neighbors, Edgemont is so isolated.”

(Oates, Solstice 15).

Her loneliness—almost claustrophobia—in a huge house without any social company seems to be a hindrance to her separatism. It drives her from Edgemont to nearby places to find people for socializing. She often comes to Glenkill and mingles with the people there.

4.5 The Journey from Separatism to Sisterhood

“Not only do women need to have the freedom to unfold their faculties and discover their own truths as individuals, they need, collectively as women, to discover who they really are. Such a process must be done separately, with other women [. . .]” (Donovan 34). This impulse to form a women’s community is a decisive stage in the development of feminist consciousness. The forces that hinder separatism urge the women to cement their friendship. Immersing herself in her teaching work, Monica wants to wash away the painful memories of her marriage. To escape her loneliness at Edgemont, Sheila makes regular visits to Glenkill.

Mr. Harry Greene, the headmaster of the school, and his wife Ruth arrange a party for their local friends. Monica is also invited to the party by the Greenes. The party provides an appropriate occasion for Monica and Sheila to meet. Monica is just 29 years old and Sheila is in her mid-thirties.
Sheila is a rich woman and Monica is just a teacher. Sheila is manly and dark, and Monica is feminine and light. Despite all these differences, they are attracted towards each other. They begin to develop a friendship. It is the beginning of their sisterhood.

Feminists advocate “promoting sisterhood as a part of establishing feminist consciousness among women” (Register 23). It is a new arrangement for women to have autonomy and express their female identity and womanhood. Oates reiterates the same idea in the female friendship between Monica and Sheila in *Solstice*. She also traces the difficulties experienced by them. At the same time, however, she presents the positive attributes of female friendship that develop sisterhood and female relations.

4.6 Social and Political Aspects of Female Friendship

A concept which has been instrumental in fostering and promoting the political implications of sisterhood is woman-identification. Palmer, quoting Ti-Grace Atkinson, says that radicalesbians explain it as follows:

Only women can give to each other a new sense of self. That identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men............For this we must be available and supportive to one another, give our commitment and our love, give the emotional support necessary to sustain this Movement. Our energies must flow toward our sisters not backward to our oppressors. (132)
Affirming these positive attributes, Oates dilates upon the theme of female friendship in her novels *Solstice* and *Marya: A Life*.

Oates's representation of the development of female friendship between Monica and Sheila is to be seen in the light of Adrienne Rich’s comment: “More and more women are creating community, sharing work, and discovering that in the sharing of work our relationships with each other become larger and more serious [. . .]” (“Conditions for Work,” qtd. in Palmer 133). Asserting the value of female friendship, Oates expresses her eagerness to promote the new feminist culture which rejects male domination. Monica and Sheila aim at building a friendship between them with their protest against male domination. Both regard patriarchy as a constraint and attempt to overcome it. The attributes prized by Oates are hard work, loyalty, co-operation, independence and the development by the female subject of a strong identity with which to confront the oppressive aspects of patriarchy. She endows Sheila and Monica with these attributes.

4.6.1 Patriarchal Aggression

Sheila visits Monica at Glenkill. Her advice to Monica at this meeting makes a good impression on her: “it is a hospitable place for a single woman; don’t be deceived. Don’t let them coerce you into feeling lonely” (Oates, *Solstice* 26). Sheila’s concern for the younger woman is soothing and encouraging. Their second meeting strengthens their friendship. “It was a heady, disorienting sensation, a very odd development—a friendship that had taken root and grown in secret, without
their conscious knowledge or guidance [. . .]” (Oates, *Solstice* 32).

Monica’s explanation of the scar on her face and Harold’s brutal behaviour pain Sheila intensely.

Even after their divorce, Harold does not stop troubling Monica: he frequently writes threatening letters to her. Whenever Monica receives a threatening letter, she feels frightened and hands it to Sheila, who advises her not to read the letters. As a true friend, Sheila assuages Monica’s fear and rage. She is attracted by Monica’s frankness and her readiness to help with the domestic chores. Monica learns of Sheila’s past marriage with Morton and their happy married life of seventeen years. Mutual sharing of personal details between these two women and their frequent visits nurture their friendship.

Sheila is about to complete a series of a paintings for an individual exhibition in late February. ‘The series was called ‘Ariadne’s Thread’. It had to do, Sheila explained, with the idea or memory of a labyrinth, not the actual labyrinth—‘in which,’ Sheila said mysteriously, ‘we don’t always believe’ [. . .]’ (Oates, *Solstice* 40). As their friendship waxes, Monica encourages Sheila in the preparation for the show. However, she is careful and keeps within limits: “She wanted to be honest with herself—she had always prided herself on being honest, even ruthless, with herself if not with others. What she felt for Sheila Trask was more than simple affection: it had to do with admiration, awe, even—perhaps—envy [. . .]” (Oates, *Solstice* 45-46).
Sheila acquires the habit of plunging into cheap pleasure with the local people in public taverns to break the monotony of her life and work. Usually she goes there disguised as Sherill Ann. Once, she insists on Monica accompanying her. Monica goes with her, disguised as Mary Beth. Calling themselves working class divorcees, they visit several taverns for drinks and relaxation. Sheila mingles with truck workers and indulges in teasing them. Monica is disgusted with Sheila’s odd behaviour and their barhopping and falls silent. Provoked by Sheila’s teasing, Fitch, a truck driver, begins to take liberties with her and Monica. The women have to struggle hard to escape from him.

Farley, the chairman of the English department, often imposes heavy work on Monica. Sheila warns Monica not to be exploited by him and reveals that Farley had once mocked and insulted her. Monica sympathises with her. This situation illustrates the feminist belief that women are the best helpers of one another.

After a week’s holiday, Monica returns to Glenkill to resume her work. As she has a busy schedule, she cannot move out of the school. Meanwhile, Sheila goes on a trip to Morocco. After her return from Morocco, Monica visits her and receives her gifts: a necklace and a pair of silver earrings.

Sheila hosts a dinner for her friends. One of them is Jack Winthrop. This notorious local monster entices Monica and solicits her attention.

While the party is in full swing, Monica, who is drunk, wants to go home.
Sheila wants her to be under control and not to mingle with the local men. She has already warned Monica against Jack: “If I were you I wouldn’t see him” (Oates, *Solstice* 164). Ignoring her warning, Monica goes home with Jack, who believes in the notion that women are meant to be raped. This patriarchal figure rapes Monica. The raping seriously affects Monica’s mind. Sheila consoles and calms her. The party has created a crisis in Monica’s life. In their single state, Monica and Sheila are repeatedly threatened or endangered by patriarchy.

4.7 Psychoanalytic Approach

Alongside her exploration of the social and political aspects of the female friendship between Sheila and Monica, Oates investigates its psychological and personal attributes. The positive attributes of their friendship are love, power-relatives, co-operation, ego-boundaries and possessiveness. Sheila’s loneliness and claustrophobia and Monica’s fear of her husband bring them together as friends. Monica’s painful marriage arouses sympathy in Sheila and Sheila’s warning against exploitation by low class people arouses sympathy in Monica.

4.7.1 Love and Co-operation

Once, Sheila contracts flu. Though she is ill, she is busy painting her canvases. Monica notices her weak condition and advises her: “Go to bed, [. . .] call a doctor, better yet let me drive you to a doctor—you have to take care of your health” (Oates, *Solstice* 46). Monica’s concern for Sheila is
obvious. She is helpful to Sheila at Edgemont and attends to all the domestic chores:

Monica knew secretly that her capacity for love—for love and what is meant by ‘passion’—was deficient set beside Sheila Trask’s; she knew that Sheila was exaggerating her warmth, her good nature, her ‘blond optimism’—the attributes, mysterious and somewhat patronising, she claimed to find in Monica. [. . .] (Oates, Solstice 47)

Monica is always troubled by the painful memory of her failed marriage. During her talk with Sheila, she reveals her past life with Harold. She pathetically complains that Harold made her have an abortion and then stopped loving her. Upon this, “Sheila rose without a word and, stooping, cradled Monica’s head in her arms, rocked her slightly, comforted her. Monica was utterly helpless, she couldn’t have said where she was, weeping, clutching at someone, a presence, a strength, so much superior to her own [. . .]” (Oates, Solstice 58). Sheila’s affection and tenderness soothe Monica. Oates highlights the fast female friendship between them.

4.7.2 Ego-boundaries

Oates cites an occasion wherein Monica and Sheila manage their ego-boundaries skilfully: “Monica told herself that she wasn’t jealous—well, perhaps she was slightly jealous—of Sheila Trask’s talent” (Oates, Solstice 48). At the same time, she “took pride in her work as well [. . .]” (Oates, Solstice 49). For her part, Sheila is always very generous in offering
presents to Monica without expecting any return. Once, when Sheila presents her a water colour painting, Monica expresses her inability to present anything in return, and Sheila replies, “‘Friendship isn’t a matter of barter, is it?’” (Oates, Solstice 52). Their friendship is “Ariadne’s thread: the labyrinth as a state of mind, a region of soul: heroic effort without any Hero at its center [. . .]” (Oates, Solstice 53).

4.7.3 Power-relatives

The pubcrawl has hurt Sheila very much. As the winter solstice approaches, preparations for Christmas are on everywhere in Glenkill. Monica has been invited for Christmas by the Starkies. She tries to contact Sheila over telephone, but fails. So she rushes to Edgemont. She finds the door locked from inside. She calls to Sheila to open the door, but receives no response. At this, she becomes emotionally upset, thinking that something is wrong with Sheila. She stands before Sheila’s door, shouting to her to open the door. After a long time, she hears someone moving inside the house. Perceiving that Sheila is quite all right, she returns to Glenkill with a sense of relief. The winter solstice marks a deterioration in their friendship but, after the solstice is over, their friendship flowers again. Sheila goes to Morocco and spends time there. Monica goes to Wrightsville to visit with her parents. After her return from Morocco, Sheila has to complete her “Ariadne’s Thread” canvases for the show in April. Monica is busy with her academic work. Due to Farley’s exploitation, and excess work, Monica becomes very weak. Further, she faces certain problems
because of her students and is worried. As she is ill and weak, she cannot
go to Edgemont, and cannot meet Sheila. Sheila successfully conducts a
grand show of her paintings in Monica’s absence. The summer solstice is
nearing. Monica is suffering from anorexia and dehydration. She is
confined to her room. After her successful show, Sheila comes to Glenkill,
and finds Monica on her deathbed. She immediately arranges for an
ambulance and takes Monica to hospital. She comforts Monica and rescues
her from death.

Oates dramatizes their friendship through ebbs and flows. However,
she is very particular about showing their friendship haloed by the sanctity
of mutual help and power relations. There is no vulgarity, no erotic love,
no selfishness in their friendship. Their friendship enables Monica to
become a good, hard-working, dedicated teacher and encourages Sheila to
achieve her ambition of conducting the grand show’ of her paintings to get
recognition from the community of artists. Their female friendship
enhances their individual assertion of female identity and assists their
achievement of self-empowerment.

As Solstice focuses on the theme of expression of female individual
identity through the medium of female friendship between Monica and
Sheila, it is regarded as a feminist critique:

In Solstice, Oates turns from parody to prophecy: she acts as
Ariadne, uncoiling clews, moving through torturous turnings
and dangerous passages, past the leaden hour, the block,
evading the still point of closure. She also paints an oddly familiar yet disturbing picture of female intimacy. As Monica and Sheila, teacher and artist, draw upon each other’s energies, they seem to violate conventional expectations both of women’s relationships and of the novel itself. (Bender 158)

Monica and Sheila go against the traditional pattern of social life and achieve complete fulfilment of their dreams of womanhood. They display their feminist consciousness through their wariness against patriarchy. As Bender comments, Oates, in *Solstice*, “has joined her own energies to the contemporary feminist critique [ . . .]” (154).

4.8 Woman-Identification

Immediately after the publication of *Solstice*, Oates published *Marya: A Life* (1986), an exceptionally forceful piece of fiction tracing the advancement of an abandoned girl from a hard-bitten immigrant community. This novel characterizes feminist consciousness as wariness. “Wariness is anticipation of the possibility of attack, of affront or insult, of disparagement, ridicule or the hurting blindness of others; it is a mode of experience which anticipates experience in a certain way [ . . .]” (Bartky 30).

This novel, named after the female protagonist Marya, analyzes her life experiences and her several irksome relationships with men and women. The theme of *Marya: A Life* is rooted in separatism and sisterhood. The crux of the novel is Oates’s intention of validating symbiotic bonding.
In *Marya: A Life*, Oates creates Marya Knauer as a woman who, beginning at an early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society cares to allow her. The novel realizes Donovan’s explication of Margaret Fuller’s idea of individual potential: “each individual is born as a seed with a unique design imprinted within; it must be allowed to unfold through one’s life course. [. . .] This is what she [Fuller] means when she states that women must learn to follow the rule within, and not be dictated to from without [. . .]” (33).

Marya is forced to evolve her own life pattern, often living alone, learning usually much earlier than her sisters, Monica and Sheila, about the essential aloneness of life and the reality of illusions. Marya’s principal goal is to achieve and establish her female identity. She chooses the path of “aloneness” (separatism). She is committed to attaining self-empowerment. She curses the myth of marriage and explodes the illusion that woman is weak. In Fuller’s words, “What Woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold [her] powers . . .” (qtd. in Donovan 33). Oates’s *Marya: A Life* embodies Fuller’s message. According to Oates, the novel depicts “Marya’s grimmer experiences with men” (“Preface to *Marya: A Life*” (376). However, it shows how Marya is illtreated by women also.
Marya undertakes a torturous journey to reach her destination of attaining female identity. Patriarchy wields its power to obstruct and break her journey. Fuller declares, “We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man” (qtd. in Donovan 33). Accordingly, Marya overcomes the patriarchal threats which block her journey and achieves her goal of self-empowerment. The perspective gained from her journey is “the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women—because we are all women” (Lerner 443). Lerner’s vision is achieved through Oates’s portrayal of Marya in the novel, which is very much a feminist text.

Oates’s portrayal of Marya covers a long span of her life—more than three decades. During this period, she faces a lot of impediments posed by men as well as women. The period of her life is classified as childhood in the domestic domain, adolescence in the institutional domain, and adulthood in the professional domain. In these three domains, she strives hard to establish her female identity and to attain the liberation of her self. To achieve this goal, she resorts to separatism. In Fuller’s opinion, separatism provides a means of developing self-reliance (qtd. in Donovan 33). To sustain the achievement, she follows the matriarchal vision—mother-daughter bonding. The system of mother-daughter bonding is also recognized as sisterhood. As Maggie Flumm explains, “There are other definitions of sisterhood, for example Catherine Beecher’s idea of separate
spheres. Sisterhood is also implied in the Maternalists’ affirmation and celebration of unique qualities of female experience as well as Mary Daly’s vision of women-centered separatism” (“Sisterhood” 211). The concepts of separatism and sisterhood are illustrated in Marya: A Life/

4.9.1 Domestic Domain

In the androcentric American culture, the male sensitivity is destructive and hostile to women. Androcentricity is expressed not only in cultural affairs but also in the domestic organisation of society. “The male is esteemed ‘the head of the family’; it belongs to him; he maintains it; and the rest of the world is a wild hunting ground and battlefield wherein he competes with other males as of old” (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Home 41). Women remain men’s property in the household. They are little more than objects, whose purpose is, first and foremost, to serve as a means of pleasure to them. In American society, every family is androcentric and women are degraded and oppressed. Every law and custom of the family relationship is arranged from the masculine viewpoint, which spawns the dictum that the woman shall serve the man. Being so kept under the clutches of man, she cannot develop humanly, as he has, through social contract, social service, true social life. Amidst these sordid conditions, woman is treated as a servant. Marya, in Marya: A. Life, is treated as a servant by her parents. Oates creates her as a bold woman who challenges this dispensation and moulds herself as a new woman who achieves freedom.
Marya: A Life opens with the details of the poor wretched condition of a working class family. Joseph Knauer and his wife Vera live with their three children in a small house. Marya is the eldest of the three children. At home, she is burdened with domestic chores. She has two brothers, Davy, three years old, and the baby, Joey. Her father Joseph had worked in the mill until the mill shut down, and then he started work with the Shaheen Mining Company until there was trouble there—but Marya didn’t know what kind of trouble except he was ‘dropped from the pay roll,’ that was how he phrased it, but he was expecting to go back, he was waiting to go back any day [...] (Oates, Marya: A Life 6)

There is a similarity between the Howard Wendall family of them and the Joseph Knauer family of Marya: A Life. Both Howard and Joseph are often fired from their jobs. Howard meets with an industrial accident and dies. Joseph is murdered. Both Maureen and Marya are very young at the time of their respective fathers’ death. Maureen is passive, but Marya is aggressive. Marya’s mother Vera is an alcoholic. She is portrayed as an irresponsible and selfish woman. As the parents are poor and irresponsible, the young girls are denied the privilege of freedom in the family.

Oates says, “It [Marya: A Life] contains some autobiographical material, particularly in its opening sections, and it is set, for the most part, in places identical with or closely resembling places I have lived [...]” (“Preface to Marya: A Life” 376). In writing the book Oates returns to her
childhood home in upper New York State, to “look around.” She claims that the book is

a kind amalgam of events from my mother’s life, some events from my own life, and perhaps some events that I heard about when I was growing up. . . . It was my mother’s father who was murdered... . There are gloomings of real people in the book . . . things in it that are palpable ... I could say when it happened and where I was and what I was wearing. (qtd. in Phil McCombs, “The Demonic Imagination of Joyce Carol Oates” CI 1).

One night, Marya is suddenly woken up by her mother and is taken to see her father’s mutilated body. When she begins to cry, Vera silences her and tells her, “‘Don’t you start crying [. . .]. Once you get started you won’t be able to stop” (Oates, *Marya: A Life* 5). Marya tucks away her mother’s advice in her heart permanently. Her father has been cruelly murdered by some unidentified strangers. Immediately after her husband’s death, Vera takes her children to a town, leaves them there and disappears. At the age of eight, Marya’s life of hard and grim experiences begins.

Adopted by uncle Everard and aunt Wilma, Marya faces several difficulties and challenges in her life in her uncle’s house on Canal Road in Innisfail. She is given no straightforward information about her father’s death or her mother’s disappearance: “These were the years of secret glances exchanged over Marya’s head. Of mysterious allusions and hints.
‘The trouble,’ it was sometimes called, ‘the bad luck [. . .]’ (Oates, Marya: A Life 16).

Marya’s twelve year-old cousin, Lee, often takes her to his father’s junk car yard and teases her sexually. At those moments, innocent Marya goes “into stone” (Oates, Marya: A Life 15). She survives through such tactics, but the survival is at considerable emotional expense. So, she exacts her revenge. Years after her cousin’s abuse of her body, she knocks down the jack holding a car up over him and gloats: “How do you like it now pig pig pig pig pig pig” (Oates, Marya: A Life 43). Lee, as a patriarchal representative, unconsciously, and without purpose, troubles Marya. But, as a tough and bold girl, she challenges him and takes revenge on him. After a few years, Lee gets a driver’s job and leaves the family. Marya’s aunt Wilma loathes her presence at home and imposes heavy domestic chores on her. As an adjustable, talented girl, Marya endures all these troubles. Her uncle Evarard is very affectionate towards her. His love and care give strength to her.

4.9.2 Institutional Domain

Terrorized by the cruel “secret logic” (Oates, Marya: A Life 23) of the playground at the hands of Lee, Marya seeks the sanctuary of the schoolroom. In her article, “Stories that Define Me,” Oates describes a similar predicament in her own life:

Such systematic, tireless, sadistic persecution had the consequence of making me love with a passion the safe, even
magical confines of home and schoolroom (cynosures of gentleness, affection, calm, sanity, books) and, later, library. For outside these magical confines the true brutes, or merely brutish Nature, await us. (16)

The protected environment of the schoolroom is the beginning of Marya’s gradual liberation from the limitations of her origins through the help of male mentors.

Brandon P. Schwilk is hired as an English teacher. He is an object of ridicule in the classroom, and is troubled by the pranks of the boys. Marya shares in the cruel jokes and the jeering aimed at him. She is bitterly contemptuous of his initial attitude towards the students. In her composition assignments, she risks writing florid stories. Longing for her teacher’s approval, she submits her stories to him. Instead of being encouraged and praised, she is humiliated and betrayed before her classmates. Schwilk comments, “You have a most feverish imagination [. . .]” (Oates, Marya: A Life 59). Unfazed and asserting her proud autonomy, Marya counsels herself: “Don’t give in. [. . .] Once you start crying you won’t be able to stop” (Oates, Marya: A Life 59). Schwilk’s insult hurts her sorely. In silent fury, Marya resorts to devious vengeance. Ironically, taking her cue from the teacher, she turns on him to demand literal explanations of his soaring pedantic metaphors, inciting the savage laughter of insensitive classmates and quickly transforming the classroom into an arena of cruelty.
Schwikl recognizes her intelligence and her ability to understand and react, with a smirk or a surprised little laugh, to his allusions and his fanciful asides. “‘Dear Marya!’ he said once, after class, blinking at her. ‘It would be so lonely here without you!’” (Oates, *Marya: A Life* 60). He initiates her into the mysteries of Blake, Dickinson, and William James, and awakens her inherent passion for language and creative expression. However, he soon collapses of strain, overwork and exhaustion, and leaves the school. Later, he falls ill and is admitted to hospital. On learning of his illness, Marya feels sorry for him.

As soon as Schwilk is discharged from the hospital, he disappears from Innisfail, after turning over his salary for the remainder of the year, so that a poetry prize can be instituted in his name. Fortuitously, it is Marya who wins the first of the annual Brandon P. Schwilk Poetry Awards for a poem of fifteen lines which she writes in his memory. It is the first evidence of her intelligence and her talent for writing.

Marya grows into an intelligent and meritorious girl, much interested in learning. She is harassed by some envious classmates, particularly boys. Outwitting all these patriarchal representatives, she emerges as a tough, stubborn and brilliant girl, quite capable of facing the troubles that clip her freedom.

Another patriarchal figure that traps Marya is Father Clifford Shearing. He is a cancer patient in Joseph’s Hospital in the hilly riverside section of Innisfail. He inspires in her a spate of devotional Catholicism.
As a result of her contact with him, she becomes a Catholic convert, and an acolyte to the dying priest. Assisting him in his scholarly work, Marya is introduced to the fascinating world of “masculine” argument: “To be able to write so well, to wield such a vocabulary; to argue so powerfully; to ferret out miscalculations in a rival’s thesis to a mere hair’s-breadth of a degree . . . she wonders if it is an entirely masculine skill, an art of combat by the way of language, forever beyond her” (Oates, *Marya: A Life* 95). Marya sustains her contact with Father Shearing for eighteen months. Upon his death, she inherits his watch and sheds all her dealings with the Catholic order. The institution of the Catholic church, under the influence of Father Shearing, obstructs Marya’s regular life and her spirit of freedom. Upon understanding this, she abjures the thraldom. Her self-awakening about her enslaved predicament due to the influence of Catholicism liberates her from such fetters.

Marya progresses steadily in her studies. She acquires a boyfriend named Emmet Schroeder. Falling in love with her, he expresses his wish to marry her: “‘We love each other, we should get married, shouldn’t we get married? [. . .]’” (Oates, *Marya: A Life* 101). She spurns his offer because she detests marriage. She does not want to be trapped by a man in the name of marriage. She wants to maintain her individuality and desires to establish her female identity. So, she seriously pursues her studies. She achieves the honour of class valedictorian and becomes the recipient of a scholarship to the State University. She thus proves that she is different
from and superior to the other students. The most significant moment in school is her valedictory address. She speaks well, quoting excerpts from the great writers, as if delivering a public address. But, her manner of speaking is not liked by the local audience, the teachers and the boys. She is upset by their resentment and hatred.

Marya repeatedly makes a spectacle of herself in a community with very different expectations from women. She is boastful, vain, sarcastic, theatrical, experimentally flirtatious and daringly provocative. She boldly flings back dirty words at crude boys. “Being good, Marya thought, wasn’t a problem she had to worry about. [. . .] Her ‘feeling’ for boys, for men, was largely a matter of daydreaming. If she fastened upon a boy in school he was never so interesting in person as he seemed in her head, in her wild, floundering imagination [. . .]” (Oates, Marya: A Life 113).

Marya shuns marriage and adopts the notion of separatism in order to give birth to a new self through academic study and scholarship. Jealous of her progress in studies, a gang of drunken boys begin to torture her. At the farewell party organized for her before her leaving for college, she is assaulted by the gang, who indulge in shearing her beautiful waist-length hair. The boys’ violent behaviour makes her feel symbolically genderless. Marya is a “new woman” who feels free from traditional binding. So, she declares that she feels “inviolable—autonomous—entirely self-sufficient” (Oates, Marya: A Life 207).
The beginning of college life is another challenge to Marya. Her spirit of autonomy and her ambition to be a writer dominate her mind. To achieve this goal, she makes a strenuous effort at college. But she does not find a congenial scholastic climate there. Living in the garret of a dilapidated house for scholarship girls, she finds no suitable company and worries about funds. She is scared of failing in her subjects, for many gifted students fail in many subjects. However, she receives good grades. A group of girls, who constitute a sorority, begin to disturb her and her loneliness. Ignoring their humiliation and disturbance, she prizes her “aloneness, her monastic isolation at the top of the house tucked away in a comer” (Oates, *Marya: A Life* 134). She adopts a life of separatism in order to attain progress.

Marya’s voracious reading of the works of great authors provides her with new experiences and kindles her spirit of creative writing. She feels that “the experience of reading was electrifying, utterly mesmerizing, beyond anything she could recall from the past” (Oates, *Marya: A Life* 134-35). This new experience enables her to escape into the pleasures of the life of the mind:

A writer’s authentic self, she thought, lay in his writing and not in his life; it was the landscape of the imagination that endured, that was really real. Mere life was the husk, the actor’s performance, negligible in the long run...
could it be anything more than the vehicle by which certain works of art were transcribed .. .? (Oates, Marya: A-Life 135)

Her self-sufficiency offers her spiritual strength. She begins to write stories. Two of her stories are accepted for publication. She treasures her straight ‘A’ grades in most subjects. But she is shocked to get a ‘B’ grade in one subject. She goes to the professor and tells him that he has failed to read her second blue examination booklet. Although he agrees to change the grade, she loathes his attitude and his sense of condescension towards girls. So, she takes revenge on him by stealing his costly Parker pen.

Marya’s friendship with another girl student named Imogene Skillman becomes an irksome experience to her. Imogene is a beautiful, rich, self-possessed, sorority girl. In Marya’s opinion, friendship is “the most enigmatic of all relationships” (Oates, Marya: A Life 147). She knows that Imogene is a campus personality and has “a reputation for being as recklessly improvident with her female friends as with her male friends” (Oates, Marya: A Life 163).

Imogene and her friend Matthew request Marya to go with them for a week-end date. She accepts their invitation and goes with them. Matthew tries to molest her. Perceiving his intention, she escapes from the place and reaches her residence on foot. The following week, she hears a rumour about her sexual relationship with Matthew everywhere in the campus. She understands that Imogene has spread the rumour among the students. This scandal upsets Marya very much. Later, she breaks off her friendship with
Imogene. In her journal, she writes that friendship is “a puzzle that

Marya has a bitter exchange of harsh words with Imogene and then
she exacts her typical revenge on her: she steals a pair of Imogene’s
earrings. She gets her ears pierced and wears those earrings. Imogene is
surprised to see her wearing her (Imogene’s) earrings. They engage in a
bitter and violent quarrel. Marya draws blood from Imogene’s mouth and
knocks her down. It is the end of their friendship.

4.9.3 Professional Domain

Oates dramatizes Marya’s personal relationship with professional
men. In her adolescent period at school and college, she is very cautious
and careful in maintaining her virginity. She is never caught or trapped
sexually, either consciously or unconsciously, voluntarily or accidentally.

Marya becomes a research assistant to Professor Maximilian Fein.
She is the only woman scholar pursuing research under his guidance.

Though Maximilian gives scholarly assistance to her, he begins to exploit
her innocence and her eagerness for academic progress. Fascinated and
influenced by his scholarship, she becomes submissive to him. She
undertakes various roles under Maximilian’s coaxing: copyist, clerk and
house-sitter. Her association with and her helpfulness to Maximilian bring
her benefits. She gets funds and scholarships and his help in the publication
of her papers. He takes her with him to various seminars. Allowing her to
enjoy full freedom in his house, Professor Fein coaxes her to come to his
bed room and traps her for his sexual gratification. After this affair, she feels sorry for her ignorance and keeps a distance from him. “She hadn’t intended to fall in love with Fein or even to fall under his spell, as so many people, male and female, evidently did. That wasn’t Marya Knauer’s style, that wasn’t quite the way she saw herself in this phase of her career [ . . . ]” (Oates, Marya: A Life 186).

She wants to remain a virgin. “She supposed she had remained a virgin so long because she hadn’t exactly believed in other people—in men. In what they might bring to her that she didn’t already possess, in the most secret inchoate depths of her being” (Oates, Marya: A Life 208).

Expressing her hatred for men, Marya terminates her contact with Maximilian.

After Maximilian’s death, Marya completes her Ph.D. work with another scholar and in another field. She is hired as Assistant Professor of English in a prestigious but rather small, old New Hampshire College. A black ruffian named Sylvester is appointed janitor to assist Marya in her department. She is much annoyed at his uncivilized, wanton behaviour of shuffling files, opening the table drawer, stealing things, displacing things on the table, using her toilet and sitting in her chair. Vexed at his indecent and insolent behaviour, she lodges a complaint with the authorities. Her efforts to transfer him do not bear fruit. So, she has to bear with him.

Marya’s tenure is almost over and she has to appear before the academic committee for the renewal of her tenure. Gregory, her colleague,
also competes for the renewal of his tenure. The tenure and promotion reviews are going on. Marya has a lot of merit-testimonials. She has published a well-received scholarly book and articles and reviews in her field. She has a very good reputation of being a dedicated and diligent teacher. She has learned how to succeed within the standards defined by the academic committee and to keep her inner creative part well-hidden. Gregory often takes her for bicycle rides during leisure time. On the day of the tenure decisions, she agrees to go on a bicycle ride with him to get rid of their mutual anxiety. Both take a long ride for many miles. During the downhill ride, she becomes exhausted, falls off and gets her leg hurt. Returning to her room, she feels very tired. She fails to go to the meeting. But Gregory goes to the college and attends the review meeting. However, in an ironic reversal, Marya’s tenure is renewed while Gregory’s is terminated. Their relationship ends abruptly.

During her teaching tenure, Marya continues her correspondence with Eric Nicholas, the editor of the journal *The Meridian*, which publishes her articles. As their relationship develops, she resigns her teaching job and joins Eric’s journal as a professional journalist. She works under Eric as a cultural critic. She works hard. Eric takes her to many national and international seminars and conferences. He drains her energy. Her relationship with him develops into love. Eric is a famous editor and a married man.
Once, while Marya is attending an international conference, she is informed of Eric’s death in an accident. She worries about it. After his death, she feels that her future is empty. She resolves to make it meaningful by following the philosophy appropriate to America: “what one is follows directly from what one does” (Oates, Marya: A Life 294). She considers her current uncertain position the result of her doings.

4.10 Mother-Daughter Bonding

During the three phases of her life, Marya has nurtured her thought of her mother in her inner mind. She wants to find her mother. She asks her aunt Wilma about her mother and learns about her mother’s place: “‘Up in the northern part of the state, New Canaan County [. . .]. But not under any name you’d know—not Knauer, or Sanjek. It’s Murchison [. . .]’” (Oates, Marya: A Life 308). Immediately after learning of her mother’s whereabouts, Marya writes to her to find out whether she has any interest in her. After a few days, she receives a letter from Vera Murchison.

She placed the envelope carefully on a table and sat in front of it, staring, smiling, a pulse beating in her forehead. [...] Marya, this is going to change your life, she thought, half in dread. Marya, this is going to cut your life in two (Oates, Marya: A Life 310).

Finally, she opens the envelope and finds a sheet of paper and a snapshot of her mother. As the snapshot is not clear, she moves to the window and sees her mother’s face.
Marya’s choice of sisterhood, community, and mother-daughter bonding is very helpful to her to establish her identity. The story of Marya ends with her return to her mother. Her journey of self reaches its wholeness in mother-daughter bonding. Her liberation of self faces a good deal of impediments throughout the journey. The hurdles that obstruct the journey are overcome and the journey comes to an end with the establishment of matrilineal relationship.

Marya’s decision to join her mother Vera Sanjek after a long gap of more than two decades is similar to the ideology of sisterhood proclaimed by the radical feminists. Luce Irigaray reiterates the value of woman-woman relationship: “The mother-daughter relationship may be the source of a reenergized authentic feminine Imaginary, a revolutionary feminine ideology’ (qtd. in Donovan 116). Unlike Elena and Maureen, Marya spurns traditional marriage because, like the feminists, she considers traditional marriage “a primary formalization of the persecution of women” (Atkinson, qtd. in Donovan 143). Marya, as a radical feminist, rejects this institution (traditional marriage) both in theory and in practice. Instead, she opts for her ambition of becoming a good writer and a reunion with her mother. As mother-daughter relationship is woman-woman relationship, it is also termed sisterhood. In consonance with this idea, Marya’s future will be shaped as a writer of fiction (Anita Brookner, “An Uncomfortable Voice” 27). Dean Flower points out that, at the end of the novel, Marya looks at the blurred outlines of her long-lost mother and that, though this will not
solve her identity problem, she is at last looking in the right direction
(“Fables of Identity” 309-10).

In the three phases of her life—childhood, adolescence, and
adulthood—Marya experiences the evolution of her self and establishes her
identity at every level of her growth and development. Donovan believes
that “the cultivation of women’s powers of critical thinking will enable
them to grow spiritually, to develop their souls” (9). With her critical bent
of mind, Marya attains her identity as a writer and she realizes the value of
spiritual freedom. Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope state:

The treasures that attend the discovery of the true heroic self
are wholeness and community. [. . .] This hard won ability to
celebrate the self and all experience—without escaping,
repressing knowledge, pain, oppression or evil—enables the
hero to love, and to find a community with other people. (The
Female Hero in American and British Literature 226)

Marya’s final decision illustrates the observation of Pearson and Pope.

Palmer, quoting Joanna Ryan, asserts, “It is vital, [. . .] that women
feel free to analyse their relations with one another in terms of the mother-
daughter attachment without regarding it as in any way invalidating” (138).

Oates’s insistence on Marya’s abiding attachment to her mother provides
the psychological relief from her anxiety about her future. The reunion
between the mother and the daughter is an appropriate testimony to Lemer’s
statement about the third step in the development of feminist consciousness,
that is, “the reaching out toward the other women, first for mutual support and then in order to improve their condition” (463). Out of the recognition of communality, there emerges feminist consciousness—a set of ideas by which women autonomously define themselves in a male-dominated world and seek to substitute their vision and values for those of patriarchy.

Monica and Sheila express their female identity through their female friendship; Marya expresses and establishes her female identity through her reunion with her mother. All these three women achieve their woman-identification by transcending their traditional roles.

In the 1980s, feminism developed into humanism. As the feminist thought stresses woman’s role in the family, Oates's female protagonists play their due roles in families. Oates portrays the fully developed stage of feminist consciousness in another two novels, namely, *American Appetites* and *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*. 