CHAPTER THREE

SILENCE AND VOICE IN MARGARET ATWOOD

To see myself as victim is to know that I have already sustained injury, that I live exposed to injury, that I have been at worst mutilated, at best diminished, in my being.

Sandra Lee Bartky.

In the West it is generally believed with optimism that "the women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity" (Beauvoir 412). To "dethrone is alright", but the major problem that the Western women faces today, despite all her efforts; is- "is dethronement easy enough?" Especially in a world where women are taught to be obedient, patient and passive? Even if one assumes that women have reached that stage "where femininity is overthrown, the problem continues to haunt us: What after dethronement?" According to Margaret Atwood, the answer still eludes the modern women (Singh 44).

Sunaina Singh points out that our reading of Margaret Atwood's novels is from the Western cultural perspective. It has been stated by Northrop Frye that "...many Canadian cultural phenomena are not peculiarly Canadian at all, but are typical of their wider North American and Western contexts" (qtd. in The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study in Feminist Perspective 44). Atwood's protagonists are therefore seen as "an outgrowth of a culture" which is largely influenced by the Western way of life.

Atwood's first novel The Edible Woman (referred as EW hereafter) written in 1965 is a "Protofeminist" novel, since it was written well before the 'Women's Lib' came into being. It is a novel, which deals with the symbolic cannibalism of women. It shows clearly how it takes a long time
even for an educated and an employed, but a meek woman to "overthrow her weakness and susceptibilities" (Singh 44).

The central heroine of the novel Marian McAlpin, is a researcher working for Seymour Surveys- a highly "stratified, three-tiered, hierarchic organization" where all the respectable positions are held by men (Prabhakar 38). An arts graduate, Marian finds no other alternative but to continue working for a company which defines her place "as above matter but below mind" (39). As she herself says: "What, then could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys? I couldn't become one of the men upstairs; I couldn't become a machine person...as that would be a step down" (EW 14). Working for a company that largely benefits men, Marian gets grooved into the middle-point of the office structure for the whole of her life. Salat points out: "Marian's problematic of 'becoming' constitutes and expresses Atwood's feminist polemics against restrictive gender roles imposed upon women in patriarchal society. ...The hierarchical world Marian inhabits appropriates her identity and reduces her to being an in-between thing and a mind-less body" (95). Since Marian has absolutely no freedom in her work, she has absolutely no drive to perform. Moreover the company regards marriage and pregnancy as acts of disloyalty to the higher authorities. Prabhakar declares that Marian's predicament typifies the situation of women in a male-dominated society (39).

Marian's identity crisis "acquires a feminist coloration when she looks for choices in terms of alternatives to her present situation" (39). Luckily for Marian, the question of working after marriage does not arise because Peter dislikes a working spouse. So except for a dominating boyfriend, Marian has nothing that she can call her own. She seeks an alternative in Peter to fulfill her objective, knowing fully well what she is getting into. She sees in him "a rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability" (EW 92). She is attracted to him because of his pleasing manners and his
impressive way of talking. She concludes that he is an ideal match for her not realising for once if Peter also felt the same way. She fails to see that his attention towards her is "nothing but affectation intended to win her over" (Prabhatkar 41).

Peter is a law graduate well known for his purchasable hobbies. When all his friends get married Peter also decides to settle down. But he needs a wife only to complement his collection of knives, guns and cameras. Marian fits his image perfectly. He sees in her "the kind of girl who wouldn't try to take over his life" (EW 61). Since he finds her meek and docile, he proposes to her. He courageously tells her the reason he wishes to marry her. The reasons sum up his strategy of exploitation.

"A fellow can't keep running around indefinitely. It'll be a lot better in the long run for my practice too, the clients like to know you've got a wife; people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age, they start thinking you're a queer or something." He paused, then continued, "And there's one thing about you, Marian, I know I can always depend on you. Most women are pretty scatterbrained but you're such a sensible girl. You may not have known this but I've always thought that's the first thing to look for when it comes to choosing a wife." (93)

What Peter actually means by "sensible" is "conventional." Believing implicitly in male superiority, he feels threatened by outspoken women like Ainsley who dare to reveal the presence of a mind. He likes Marian for her passivity and her lack of of strong convictions. Coomi S.Vevaina declares:

Peter's manner of choosing a life partner on the basis of her outer or social life is not very different from that of choosing something like a packet of noodles at the supermarket based
on the attractiveness of the package. Having selected her with care, he then thinks he owns her and displays her with pride to his almost-successful friends. (106)

Marian on the other hand, remains oblivious to Peter's motives. She does not sit down to think why Peter chooses to marry her. Neither does she question him. Marian's curse is her own meekness, and when she realises this, the fear of disintegration makes her speculate about her place in Peter's life. A critical look at herself and her position leaves her shaky. During their get together with Len Slank, Marian begins to grasp Peter's attitude.

Peter smiled at me in the middle of one of his sentences, fondly but from a distance, and then I thought I knew. He was treating me as a stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline. He wasn't ignoring me, as perhaps I had felt...he was depending on me! (EW 72)

Marian understands that Peter is simply using her for his benefit. He knows that she would remain a pillar of strength for him. Learning that she hardly has a role to play as his wife, she decides to do something about it.

Peter and I had avoided talking about the future because we knew it didn't matter: we weren't really involved. Now, though, something in me had decided we were involved: surely that was the explanation for the powder-room collapse and the flight. I was evading reality. Now, this very moment, I would have to pace it. I would have to decide what I wanted to do. (79-80).

Peter's "macho hunting story" intensifies her panic, and in the mental image "she consequently conjures of the event," she is unable to see the victim of the tale, the rabbit (Vevalma 117). This is so because from this point onwards she recognises Peter as the male hunter. Likening herself to
the rabbit, Marian feels that all she can do is wait passively for her end. Hoping to avert her fate, she repeatedly attempts to flee from the clutches of her "hero-villain boyfriend" either by running away or by hiding from him (118). But when she sees the futility of trying to escape from him she accepts his proposal. Barbara Hill Rigney notes: "Marian's bizarre behavior is somehow attractive to Peter, and the evening ends with his proposal of marriage and her acceptance, although, in the flash of lightening which ominously accompanies his proposal, she sees herself 'small and oval, mirrored in his eyes' " (26). So her resolve to break free from Peter is only short-lived.

In the later 1960s a woman had no other option except marriage. So what would a woman do if she doesn't marry? Shouldn't Marian be happy that atleast Peter was ready and that he was willing to marry her? So shouldn't she be grateful for his offer? Her only response is "so this object then belonged to me" (EW 93). Sunaina Singh notes that "this is perhaps an inkling of Marian's satisfaction, a satisfaction that she is also using him for her advantage- a staircase to take her up on the social life" (47). Marriage is therefore a necessity for Marian and the significant factor is that "it is run by adjustments and not on principles" (47).

However as the date of marriage approaches Marian suffers from anxiety. Her frequent flights to Duncan, her laundromat acquaintance, increase her apprehensions. It begins to dawn on her that she doesn't know Peter well enough. Duncan frankly admits that Marian is "just another substitute for the laundromat" (EW 156) and that she should not expect anything from him. Marian is relieved to hear what Duncan says because she knows for certain that she is not being manipulated into something she does not know. "She knew where she stood with Duncan and that was important for Marian" says Sunaina Singh (48). But she's unsure of Peter's motives and is ignorant of his personality. Peter "makes her conscious of
the vague, slippery status of herself" (48). Who is Peter? Where does she stand in relation to him? - "that secret identity which in spite of her many guesses and attempts and half-success she was aware she had still not uncovered" (EW 125). Her quest for Peter's true self begins in earnest.

The day Marian gives her consent for marriage, Peter begins to size her up as he would his newly acquired camera: "How well she would perform, what would be her output, her complexity, weakness, how he would handle her and use her to the best" (Singh 48). Marian's visualization of herself as a camera in Peter's deft hands stretches further when she sees him eating: "...the capable hands holding the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures. How skillfully he did it: no tearing, no ragged edges. And yet it was a violent action, cutting..." (EW 162). It strikes Marian that Peter was treating her in a civilized way, a manner in which he handled the steak on his plate, "devouring it" with relish and style. Marian begins to understand that Peter could eat anything that was "once alive and throbbing" with a lot of "skill and patience" (Singh 48). It is this fear of being consumed that makes Marian give up non-vegetarian food. "Her phobia of killing someone or something becomes so acute" that she feels even a carrot is screaming with pain when sliced (48). It is clear that Marian is a victim of symbolic cannibalism. So where then is her redemption? Where is the answer to her growing apprehensions about Peter's motives?

Marian was being, she supposed, what they called "used," but she didn't at all mind being used, as long as she knew what for: she liked these things to take place on as conscious a level as possible. Of course Duncan was making what they had called "demands," if only on her time and attention; but at least he wasn't threatening her with some intangible gift in return. (EW 200)
Duncan's "extreme self-centeredness" is reassuring for Marian because he never demands anything from her. Whereas with Peter there is a constant fear. She is "always expected to do something, say something, make an attractive present of herself" (Singh 49). She is afraid that Peter might refuse to marry her if she did anything to displease him. She thinks twice before saying anything to him for the fear of being deserted. "...he might think that she was some kind of freak, or neurotic. Naturally he would have second thoughts about getting married..." (EW 223). A sophisticated, manipulating man, Peter expects Marian to conduct herself appropriately so that getting clients would not be a problem for him. She complies. But her reaction at the hairdressers reveals her gradually emerging spirit of revolt, and this could well be taken as evidence of the real self of Marian. "They treated your head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented" (229).

Looking at herself in the mirror, Marian realises that a woman's primary market value in marriage "depends upon the artificiality of her fascinating image" (Prabhakar 42). She is no longer herself but only the image of a wife that Peter desires and what the society cherishes. Prabhakar further notes:

The male gaze of Peter dominates and influences her appearance. Marian finds herself progressively divided and objectified in the marriage market. As she is made a mere decorative object she is reduced to insignificance. Marian is now defined as 'other' and becomes an object. As she turns from subject to object, consumer to the consumed, Marian loses her capacity to perceive anything. (EW 42)

It is Peter's overpowering authority that Marian is afraid of. But in order to "side step it" she invites her friends to the engagement party (Singh 49). She however lacks the courage to tell Peter that she has invited
friends because she failed to take his permission earlier. She is afraid that he might object to their presence. "...she didn't want to explain, she couldn't explain, and she dreaded questions from Peter about it" (EW 248).

It is this fear of Peter, which triggers questions about her own identity. Looking at Peter and his friends, Marian realises that she would also end up leading a discontented life like Clara. Peter is certainly bound to flourish with a woman like her beside him but what about her? The image is finally clear to Marian and she doesn't take time to recognise her own self. "...who was that tiny two-dimensional small figure in a red dress, posed like a paper woman in a mail-order catalogue, turning and smiling, fluttering in the white empty space..." (EW 268). If Marian marries Peter, her individuality would be crushed. What good would it be to lead such a worthless life? Is it worth leading a life at all when the very essence of a woman is going to be destroyed?

Marian understands that she still has time to get away. She does not wish to be trapped in a "decorative life where both her identity and individuality would be killed mercilessly. She didn't want to be caught in a whirlpool of lifetime claustrophobia. She needed the fresh air, the freedom of growth and character. The restrictive forces that Peter represents are beyond her coping spirit" declares Sunaina Singh (50). The image of the hunter and hunted becomes stronger in Marian's mind. So when Peter aims his camera at her she freezes. She screams because it startles her. Marian does not want to be caught in a posture of marriage, of submission: "Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (EW 269). To Atwood, the camera is an instrument frequently associated with guns or with psychological annihilation (Rigney 25). Marian believes that Peter was waiting for the right moment to charge and shoot. So the camera symbolizes a trap for her. "That dark intent marksman with his aiming eye
had been there all the time, hidden by the outer layers, waiting for her at the dead center: a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands \((\text{EW} \ 270)\). Prabhakar notes that the climax is reversed when Marian realises that she would end up being a slave in the institution of marriage. Marian senses the urgent need to wriggle out of the crisis. As her awareness of the victimization becomes acute she emerges out of the crisis with heightened consciousness \((43)\).

In a fit of anxiety, Marian flees. She seeks in Duncan, safety and shelter. But he takes advantage of Marian's credulous and gullible nature. He entices her into bed. He sees the red dress as a sign of seduction and looks upon her as a female equivalent of the male hunter figure. After seducing her, Duncan remarks: "It's no use. I must be incorruptible. I'm going to have a cigarette" \((\text{EW} \ 279)\). This statement shatters Marian completely. Prabhakar opines: "Marian may not be the first one to become the victim of Duncan's lust. Deceit is the very breath of his life and with his meticulous planning he exploits many women \((44)\).

After this incident, Marian's aversion for food grows so strong that she stops eating altogether. Her refusal to eat grows out of her unwillingness to be eaten in return. Emma Parker rightly says: "Her non-eating is a physical expression of her powerlessness and, at the same time, a protest against that powerlessness" \((350)\). She identifies herself with the hunted rabbit and other objects that men desire to possess. When she steps out of Duncan's room, he asks her: "Where do you want to go...?" \((\text{EW} \ 285)\). This question echoes the plight of those women, who are abused, exploited, oppressed, divorced and abandoned the world over.

It is sad to see Marian reduced to the state of a destitute. Nowhere to go, she becomes desperate. She begins to see both Peter and Duncan "in the true colors and recognizes her complicity in her victimization" \((\text{Prabhakar} \ 44)\). She feels ashamed for letting these two men exploit her.
But she refuses to take the stance of a victim. She decides to teach them a lesson.

Deciding that a verbal conflict with Peter would be a waste of time and energy, Marian decides to bake a cake. She believes that the cake would forcefully symbolize her feelings. "What she needed was something that avoided words, she didn't want to get tangled up in a discussion" (E&W 295). The cake-woman is a surrogate of her own artificial self she presented at the Cocktail party. The narrative at this point returns to the first person, as it was in the beginning, indicating that there is "a quality of self-direction, of autonomy" (Rigney 32). In her interview with Gibson, Atwood comments: "Marian performs an action, a preposterous one in a way, as all the pieces of symbolism in a realistic context are, but what she is obviously making is a substitute of herself" (25). As Prabhakar declares: Marian has now become the "sculptor rather than the lifeless statue erected in the name of beauty...It also reveals over-richness and over-decoration visible in the gender system of marriage" (45).

When Peter arrives at Marian's house, she offers him the cake. When he asks her for an explanation, she remarks: "'You've been trying to destroy me, ...You've been trying to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it?' " (E&W 299-300). Peter is surprised at Marian's outburst. He is shocked at being cornered. He realises that he can no longer play his game of deceit. Without making a fuss he leaves the house quietly.

Marian is fully aware that people like Peter will continue to thrive in this world. They know how to deceive a victim. "She could see him in her mind, posed jauntily in the foreground of an elegant salon with chandeliers and draperies, impeccably dressed, a glass of scotch in one hand; his foot was on the head of a stuffed lion and he had an eyepatch over one eye."
Beneath one arm was strapped a revolver.... He would definitely succeed" (300).

As soon as realisation dawns, Marian is able to eat. This gesture says Prabhakar, is symbolic of the empowerment of women (46). Marian has been evading the truth of her status all along. But it is in her final escape that she realises that "acknowledging the truth of your situation is preferable to concealing it" (Survival 33). Atwood rightly says that Marian succeeds in negating her impotence by the final act of baking the cake and "up until that point she has been evading, avoiding, running away, retreating, withdrawing" (Gibson 16). By eating the cake, Marian is not "rejecting her femininity" as Ainsley declares, but is rather asserting it.

As a woman, Marian has definitely changed from the "meek, docile, traditional woman to the bold, conscious, rebellious feminist" (Prabhakar 47). She is a representative of the modern woman who rebels against the system of gender and oppression. Atwood's claim that The Edible Woman is an "anti-comedy," only goes to show in a brittle way that in a consumer society where people are ready to consume each other, there really cannot be "a reaffirmation of the social order" (Singh 52). By the end of the novel, Marian has certainly learnt to live a meaningful life. But how long she will continue to stand guard is a question. What Atwood reveals through Marian is that- are women capable of withstanding these oppressive forces in the long run? Can they continue to resist till the end? In Second Words, Atwood remarks "...my heroine's choices remain much the same as they are at the beginning: career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it" (370). For Atwood as for the reader, Marian's recognition of her situation is a form of heroism. It is from here that Reannie of Bodily Harm takes over.

Although Bodily Harm published in 1981 is Atwood's fifth novel, it can well be seen as an extension of The Edible Woman. If The Edible
**Woman** exposes how even an economically independent woman takes time to understand her marginalization as the "second sex," **Bodily Harm** draws our attention to the horrifying status of women today (Prabhakar 38). Sunaina Singh says it is **Bodily Harm** which seems to answer the question about 'Women' in totality, that **The Edible Woman** seems to pose so effectively at the end of the novel" (53). As an active member of Amnesty International, Atwood demonstrates in **Bodily Harm** "how power operates and who has power over whom" (Vevaina 8).

The protagonist Rennie (Renata) Wilford is a journalist, living in Toronto with an advertising designer named Jake. Knowing that to be meek and docile is to easily give in as a victim, Rennie is careful in her relationships. She distrusts being in love because it involves commitment and later, pain. "... she'd decided she didn't much like being in love. Being in love was like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles...if you got through it without damage it was only by sheer luck" (BH 102). She has her "options" open which is better than committing to a painful marriage. She is aware that she is living in a post-feminist era and therefore does not worry about anyone trying to exploit her.

In order to comprehend the progression of Rennie Wilford's career as a journalist and a "Life-Tourist" writer, it is important that one takes into account her early life in the small town of Griswold, Ontario. Her father is an irresponsible man who abandons his wife for a mistress. As a result, Rennie is raised in an unhealthy, joyless and repressive environment by her grandparents. Rennie's impressionistic years of childhood are suppressed and spoiled by her grandmother's regimental approach. She is not given the freedom to think or feel independently. Rennie recalls: "As a child I learned three things well: how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them.... According to her, it was bad manners to ask direct questions (54).
We comprehend that women in Griswold relish sacrificing their lives in order to be of service to others. Rennie's mother is a classic example. She gives up everything—husband, home and family—in order to look after her aged parents. Detesting the self-abnegation of her mother and also to break free from the narrow constricting world of Griswold, Rennie leaves for Toronto. "I didn't want to be trapped, like my mother. Although I admired her—everyone was always telling how admirable she was, she was practically a saint— I didn't want to be like her in any way" (58). Thus she remains an outsider in Griswold but this small town forms the background to Rennie's career as well as her life.

A university scholarship from Toronto leads her to a life of freedom. To Rennie Toronto is a place where there are no fetters to bind her, as against Griswold which forces its inhabitants to repress spontaneity. Sunaina Singh notes: "After all such a kind of life had become a la mode' in the post-liberated Women's period- and women apparently were in full control of themselves (54).

With all these dreams, Rennie begins her life in Toronto. A versatile writer, Rennie contributes articles to a number of women-oriented magazines. In the course of writing a piece called "The Young and the Solvent" for Visor, Rennie meets Jake, a designer. He works for a packaging company. Living with him she learns that "people get trapped in things that are beyond their control..." (BH 47). This is when Dr. Daniel Luoma, a male gynecologist, diagnoses her of breast cancer. This shatters Rennie's hopes completely.

The partial mastectomy that Rennie undergoes drains her emotionally. The scars on her breast disturb her greatly. In fact she becomes obsessed with them. She identifies the scar on her breast as a mark of castration. For her, the damaged breast is like a "diseased fruit" and a "cut open melon" (60).
The surgery also changes her relationship with Jake. Before her operation, Rennie and Jake seem to be perfectly suited to each other. Brydon opines: "When Rennie and Jake are together, their frothy dialogue 'sounds like Hollywood movie repartee from the 1940s' " (qtd. in Re/Membering Selves: Alienation and Survival in the Novels of Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence 186). Jake is smart like Peter (The Edible Woman). He keeps up with the latest trends in fashions and "acts in accordance with the male images he finds in the magazines he reads" (Vevalma 186). After killing her plants, remodeling her apartment, and her look, he stages the ultimate erotic object: the perfect sexual poses as she parades in sexual lingerie. Everything seems to underline the power relations between male and female: he asks and she complies.

Rennie takes a long time to realise that Jake sees her as one of the objects he is packing. Like Peter he tries to "rearrange" her appearance so that she fits the image of his dream girl. But after the surgery Jake feels ill at ease in the company of Rennie. His fantasy of her gets destroyed and "she now seems like a faulty package to him" (187). He imagines the scar on her breast as "the kiss of death on her..." (BH 201). He abandons her feeling that life is not enjoyable with a diseased woman.

It appears that Jake deserts her only because of her mastectomy. Rennie believes it to be so. But this is not wholly true. Jake loses interest in Rennie because she is extremely passive and accepts his oppressive and abusive nature. When Jake leaves her, she watches him leave sitting in her kitchen. She takes no effort to stop him. She is the kind of woman that John Berger mentions in Ways of Seeing: "A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence... defines what can and cannot be done to her" (45-46).

With Jake's departure, Rennie loses confidence in her own doctor. She sees him as a victimizer who "directs technological assault on women
in the guise of medicine and surgery" (Prabhakar 73). Her remarks sum up the whole business of Daniel's surgery:

Maybe I'm not the only one... there's a whole lineup of them, dozens and dozens of women, each with a bite taken out of them, one breast or the other... he tells us all he loves us. Anyway he gets off on it, its like a harem... he's the only man in the world who knows the truth, he's looked into each one of us and seen death. (BH 142-143)

Rennie also depicts the predicament of a woman who has undergone Daniel's surgery: "... holding the hand of a blonde woman whose breasts he has recently cut off. Who wants to cure, who wants to help, who wants everything to be fine. You're alive, he says to her, with kindness and duplicity, compelling as a hypnotist. You're very lucky. Tears stream silently down her face" (283-284). Prabhakar rightly says: "This statement demonstrates how a doctor happens to be an oppressor and a patient, the oppressed in a broad social and historical context" (73). Elaine Tuttle Hansen notes that by creating the writer as both a woman and a patient in Bodily Harm, Atwood "confronts and demystifies masculine authority in the figure of the doctor" (14).

Rennie's association with Jocasta raises her consciousness of herself and helps her understand the nature of men. She realises that "women's liberation" is only "a distant dream" (Prabhakar 74). She is convinced that there is a lot to be done before this milestone is reached. Jocasta's "assessment of man-woman relationship" makes Rennie aware of how power operates. She begins to assess her relationships from a new perspective. In her article "Burned Out" Rennie writes about the death of the women's movement.

To overcome her dead-end relationship with Jake and Daniel, and also to counteract the shocking incident of a man who breaks into her
apartment leaving a rope on her bed; Rennie decides to take writing seriously. When she decides to do a write-up on pornography, she meets a male porn artist by name Frank. In Frank's studio Rennie sees sculptures of women "dressed in half-cup bras and G-string panties...locked into a sitting position" (BH 208). She realises that art is used as a medium "to depict women as ugly creatures..." (Prabhakar 75). But what scares her is Frank's remark about the moral function of art. He says: "Art is for contemplation. What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible..." (BH 208).

Her research later takes her to the Toronto Policemen's Pornography Museum. There Rennie sees visual representation of "male sadistic fantasies" (Prabhakar 75). The sight of naked women in different postures of brutality horrifies her. Some depict women copulating with animals. There are pictures of women's nipples being chopped off. The most repulsive of all is a picture where "the head of a rat" is seen moving in and out of a woman's vagina (BH 210). This sight appalls Rennie. All her hopes for a liberated society are completely destroyed. She understands that these pictures have been "deliberately contrived by a film-maker for sexual titillation which indicates the utter depths of human depravity and cruelty" and violation of human rights (Jones 91). One begins to wonder if the advocates of women's liberation are actually aware of the atrocities committed by men in the name of art.

Through Rennie Wilford, Atwood conveys the idea that in a so-called liberated society women are stripped off their identity and used as objects for male gratification. Men continue to destroy women's individuality in a subtle and invisible manner. Rennie also realises that she too is a part of the "raw material." As Robin Morgan reveals, "Pornography is the theory and rape is the practice" (qtd. in Feminism/ Postmodernism: Margaret Atwood's Fiction 76).
A couple of days later, Rennie is commissioned to do a travel piece for Visor. Rennie feels that the Caribbean would be an ideal place for her to recuperate from her dreaded disease. Also the sinister incident in her apartment prompts Rennie's decision to travel to the Caribbean and write a piece about the island of St. Antoine.

After she lands in the Caribbean, Rennie very soon gets involved with Paul, a tourist guide. Like Marian MacAlpin (in *The Edible Woman*), she is attracted to Paul because of his impressive manners and ideals. She finds him to be an ideal choice, "a good substitute to Jack or Daniel" who merely exploited her. Dorothy Jones comments: "Unlike Jake who tries to make into something else, or Daniel who sees her as the answer to his emotional needs, Paul accepts Rennie for what she is" (93). With Paul, Rennie feels that she might be able to live peacefully keeping her "options" open, as she did earlier. Unlike Jake, Paul does not size her up. He does not hate her for the scars on her breast. As a result, living with Paul renews her hope for a better future.

He reaches out his hands and Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before...this much is enough. She's open now, she's been opened...she enters her body again and there's moment of pain, incarnation...she's still here on the earth, she's grateful he's touching her, she can still be touched. *(BH 204).*

But very soon Rennie's hopes are shattered. Paul's remark, "Don't expect too much of me" disillusions her (226). It begins to dawn on Rennie what Jocasta says about men. Men are not interested in either love, understanding or meaningful relationships. They "want sex" says Jocasta "but only if they can take it. Only if you've got something to lose, only if you struggle a little" (167). Rennie's flights from her meaningless
relationships go to show her inability to take charge of her life. Like Marian, Rennie lets her men take control of her life.

Although Paul reconciles Rennie's body and self, he is typically a male. His taste for danger fits him neatly into the role of a renegade hero. He lives on the edge, he deals drugs, and he rescues maidens in distress. So the reasons for his action are purely amusement.

Even while touring the island Rennie discovers that there is no room for love, decency and humanity. Women are treated as non-entities. They are tortured and even sliced off into pieces. Rennie soon learns that women are not very different from the common man because both of them are powerless and hence abused. Thus, Rennie's travel piece expands and extends the implications of the term 'woman' to cover all the victimized and oppressed people in the world (Prabhakar 76). Jaidev rightly says "Women becomes a metaphor for all those who are damaged and abused only because they are powerless" (11).

Rennie discovers that women are still where they were a century ago. The freedom and identity of women that the post-feminists claimed to have achieved is literally non-existent in the island of St. Antoine. She realises that people enjoy torturing others, especially women. In the island, Mardson, the campaign manager, beats, tortures and keeps his woman tied to a tree for several hours. Yet nobody questions him. When a woman is disloyal to a man (even if he is not her husband) she is beaten severely. Mardson (in this case) chooses a cruder form of punishment for his woman.

... he made her take off all her clothes...and then he covered her with cow-itch. That's like a nettle, it's what you do to people you really don't like a whole lot. Then he tied her to a tree in the back yard, right near an anthill, the stinging kind. He stayed in the house, drinking rum and listening to her
scream. He left her there five hours, till she was swollen like a balloon. A lot of people heard her but nobody tried to untie her... (BH 214-215).

There is yet another shock awaiting Rennie. The worst crime in the island is not murder but robbery. "If you get angry and chop up your woman, that's understandable; a crime of passion, you might say. But stealing you plan beforehand" (225). So it is a greater crime and hence the punishment is very severe. "If one chops up one's woman it is linked with emotions and passions and so is pardonable. The man is both understood and forgiven by the society, precisely because it is the way of life. As for women, it certainly serves as a lesson" (Singh 56).

When Rennie becomes involved in the local political uprising she is imprisoned. There she meets Lora Lucas, a fellow prisoner. Thrust into each other's company, the two women pass their time by recounting their personal experiences. Lora narrates the story of her "non-violent" rape by her vicious stepfather with whom she spent a major part of her life. Lora's stepfather is another embodiment of the abused male. "He hit me because he could get away with it and nobody could stop him" she tells Rennie (BH 114). Lora's own mother, like Pecola's (Pauline Breedlove in The Bluest Eye), acts as an accomplice to her daughter's victimization—when Lora finally confronts her stepfather when he sexually assaults her, the mother turns on the daughter saying she has asked for it.

Lora's tales shatter Rennie's "attitude towards the high voltage feminism" (Singh 56). She is reminded of Jocasta once again. Women might ostensibly think that they are liberated but subordination still exists. Lora's mother is so hopelessly dependent on her husband that she remains a passive spectator even when her husband tries to molest his stepdaughter. Ultimately unable to withstand his abuse Lora escapes after stabbing him.
Following her escape from home, Lora gets a job in a boat. Her co-workers in the boat expect her to please them. If she does not comply then she will lose her job. Lora sums up the attitude of the fellow workers: "They think if they're renting the boat they're renting everything on it. Maybe I'm for sale. I'd tell them, but I'm sure as hell not for rent" (BH 213-214). Prabhakar notes that the "very assumption that a woman is meant for rent smacks of male arrogance" (77).

Rennie is a witness to all the atrocities committed on women even in the prison. She sees how Lora reluctantly obliges the prison guards for sex in return for news about her lover. Finally she is beaten, killed and mutilated by the perpetrators of law. Rennie realises that the policemen enjoy assaulting Lora not because they have orders to do so but simply because they enjoy torturing her. The sight of the uncared body of Lora jolts her out of her reverie. "Lora is no longer an individual but she becomes a symbol of the weak and helpless mass of humanity" (Prabhakar 78).

Whilst sharing the cell with Lora, Rennie and Lora are forced into a kind of bond. Lora's violent stories are intertwined with Rennie's. But when Lora begins to tell one story after another, Rennie's attitude to her changes. The social and sexual oppression that she experiences is different from that of Rennie's. In a male-dominated society, her voice remains unheard. Women like her, of her standing, are not taken any notice of and to oppose this, Atwood puts her dialogue and experiences alongside Rennie's.

This is why Lora is finally the silenced, victimized woman- she is attacked after a threat she lashes out at the guards. "I'll tell everyone about you, nobody screws me around like that, they can shoot you too for all I care!" (BH 292). Therefore despite Atwood trying to make Lora's story heard she is still muted and Rennie's tale is made predominant once again.
It finally dawns on Rennie that her breast cancer is simply a minor incident in her life. She refuses to be a victim although the mastectomy has left behind scars. "Once she would have thought about her illness: her scar, her disability, her nibbled flesh, the little teethmarks on her" (284), but now this holds no significance. She realises that she is not afraid of the disease but only the men around her. "She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening" (290). She wakes up to the fact that "nothing has happened to her yet" and that "she is unharmed" (284). But as Atwood mentions in the beginning nobody knows for how long she can continue to live this way.

What is significant in this novel is the fact that Lora has picked up certain tricks for survival in the course of her adventures. Rather than escaping from reality she fights till her last breath. Rennie is thus empowered to speak out the truth, "the disturbing truth" about all the exploited people, especially women in particular. Her adventures in the Caribbean make her so bold that she decides to publish her experiences in the form of a travelogue called "Bodily Harm." Using her pen as a weapon she decides to expose all the exploiters in the island.

Written in the aftermath of an over-conscious Women's liberation movement, Atwood says, "It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed... The goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we're living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the same subject" ("Introduction to The Edible Woman" 313).

Although more overtly political than her previous works, international best seller which won the Governor General's Award, The Handmaid's Tale (1985) is a classic example of "speculative fiction" (Davidson 26). Labeled as a "political-science fiction" by Lucy M. Freiburt, The Handmaid's Tale is also concerned with dismantling
patriarchal systems that oppress women. To quote Atwood: "It is not science fiction. There are no space-ships, no Martians, nothing like that" (qtd. in Howells 58). In keeping with the spirit of the age and the reality around her, Atwood gives us a nightmarish picture of life around the end of the twentieth century. So the novel on the whole is a brilliant indictment of twentieth century "achieved without recourse to special effects" (Prescott 48).

Set in the future (2195), in the Republic of Gilead which occupies part of the territory, of what was once the north east of the United States (Cambridge, Massachusetts), the novel shows how the individual identity is obliterated under "the banner of the collective good."

Offred, the narrator of the story, is trapped in a society where women are defined as objects who serve men. She is one of the several "Handmaids" recruited for "breeding purposes" because of her "viable ovaries" (HT 153). One of the most degrading practices from a woman's perspective consists in the Commander's engaging in ritualistic sexual intercourse with the Handmaid because his Wife is infertile. Once a month she is brought to her host's bedroom. There the wife secures her on the bed while the husband, in full uniform (because this is a service he renders for the state) attempts insemination. Should the handmaid become pregnant, she will be cosseted and envied until the baby is taken from her. The baby then becomes the child of the Commander and his wife. So the Handmaid must act as a surrogate wife and bear a child for the aging Commander with the collusion of his barren wife for a literal enactment of the device invented by Rachel in the Bible.

Carole Pateman argues "that the notion of 'ownership' of one's body can lead to a variety of 'social relations of subordination' including prostitution and surrogate motherhood" (148). In this way, the Handmaid is
"desexed and dehumanized by Gilead's oppressive ideology of contrast and property" (Prabhakar 88).

If in-case the Handmaid fails to conceive by the end of her third two-year posting, she will be declared an Unwomen and shipped to "the Colonies," where she will sweep up toxic and radio active spills until the labour kills her. Commenting on this inhuman practice, Amin Malak says, "the dictators of state policy in Gilead thus relegate sex to a salable commodity exchanged for mere survival"(9). But male sterility in Gilead is unthinkable. Offred testifies to this fact: "There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (HT 71). On the other hand, those who escape life in the Colonies end up being temporary 'illicit' mistresses with no status and an uncertain future or as 'Aunts.'

The 'Aunts' in Gilead occupy a premier position in the hierarchy. They are "the thought-police of Gilead," are clad in paramilitary khaki and entrusted with the difficult job of training the Handmaids. They fulfil their roles as disciplinarians and indoctrinators with great gusto. Since friendships are suspect, neither men nor women can converse with anyone around them. As a result, when the Handmaids meet each other, they can exchange only greetings prescribed for them. Instead of the usual "Hello" they are tutored to say" Blessed be the fruit," for which the accepted response is "May the Lord open" (294). According to Atwood, silence and powerlessness go together. By controlling what goes on in the minds of the Handmaids with the help of the Aunts, the authorities wish to control what comes out by way of speech and action. Aunt Lydia, who regards the Handmaids "as pampered and spoiled girls in a privileged position," is a pain to help them realise that there is more than one kind of freedom: "Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (34). She wishes to impress upon them the fact that women are protected in Gilead
(unlike the olden times) and those crimes like disrespect for women, violence and rape are punishable by death.

Women were not protected then. I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night.

....

Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles. (34)

However, Offred realises that "freedom from" implies a condition of powerlessness and that the promises made to them are "actually double binds." As Atwood says, "Any power structure will co-opt the views of its opponents, to sugarcoat the pill" (qtd.in "Atomized Lives in Limbo: Trapped in Alienating Circle Games" 77). Aunt Lydia instructs them to create a poverty of spirit and set boundaries in their relations with the other sexes. "Men are sex machines.... They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good. Lead them around by the nose; that is a metaphor. It's nature's way. It's God's device. It's the way things are" (HT 153). All flesh is weak according to Aunt Lydia and girls like Janine, who were raped in the past, actually led the men on. She strongly condemns the times when sexual permissiveness and promiscuity were at its peak and is contemptuous of women who made spectacles of themselves in the open.
Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. 

....

In the park, said Aunt Lydia, lying on blankets, men and women together sometimes.... (65)

So the Handmaids are taught the art of concealment. "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen- to be seen- is to be- her voice trembled- penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" (39). However, despite her "slogans, platitudes and preaching," Aunt Lydia does not seem to have succeeded in "her task of transforming them into smiling, docile, automaton-like idiots” (Vevaina 78). By transgressing the Handmaids with 'electric cattle prods,' the Aunts convince themselves that it is the Handmaids that are the suffering lot.

The average woman holds a secondary position when compared to the Aunts. The Wife, decorative in function and dressed in blue resembles the Virgin. Marthas, who cook and clean, wear green robes signifying their earthiness. Econo wives, who perform diverse roles wear red, blue and green stripped skimpy robes. All accept their position as victims. They know it is something inevitable and that their status is dictated by Biology and decreed by History. However, they do survive by sharing a bonding among themselves.

Cora and Rita (the Marthas) initially receive Offred contemptuously because she is "assigned to produce babies" (Prescott 48). When Offred enters the kitchen, she notices the frown on Rita's face. She realises that "the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. She thinks I may be catching, like a disease or any form of bad luck" (HT 19). Another day, she hears Rita telling Cora "that she wouldn't debase herself like that" (20) but would rather be shipped to the Colonies.
But slowly they understand Offred's predicament. On days when they have to attend 'Birthings,' they become amiable. Such occasions are rare and therefore a luxury. Their visit to Ofwarren's is one such event.

While I'm eating the second egg, I hear the siren, at a great distance at first... A proclamation, this siren... Joy to the world, rare enough these days. I leave the second egg half eaten, hurry to the closet for my cloak, and already I can hear feet on the stairs and the voices calling.

"Hurry," says Cora, "won't wait all day," and she helps me on with the cloak, she's actually smiling.

... 

"Who is it?' I say to the woman next to me...I almost have to shout, the noise is so bad.

"Ofwarren," she shouts back. Impulsively she grabs my hand, squeezes it, as we lurch around the corner; she turns to me and I see her face, there are tears running down her cheeks, but tears of what? Envy, disappointment? But no, she's laughing, she throws her arms around me, I've never seen her before, she hugs me.... On this day we can do anything we want. I revise that: within limits. (121-122)

Even though there is a strict regimentation, the Handmaids reach out to one another through whispers, lip reading and touch.

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learnt to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:

When Moira, Offred's lesbian friend from pre-Gilead times is brought into the re-education centre, Offred feels safe. Though they are constantly under the surveillance of the Aunts, the two friends decide to meet whenever they can. In order to gossip about their lives they decide on a venue for their secret meetings- the Washroom! While Janine, another Handmaid, is narrating her experiences, Offred makes a beeline to the washroom where Moira is waiting for her at the appointed time.

It makes me safer, that Moira is here. We can go to the washroom if we put our hands up, though there's a limit to how many times a day, they mark it down on a chart. I watch the clock... Two thirty comes during Testifying.

....

It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen...

....

Outside the washroom Aunt Elizabeth is standing guard. She nods, signaling that I can go in.

....

I go into the second one from the end... Of course there are no longer any locks. In the wood there's a small hole, at the back, next to the wall, about waist height, souvenir of some previous vandalism or legacy of an ancient voyeur. Everyone in the Centre knows about this hole in the woodwork; everyone except the Aunts.

I'm afraid I am too late, held up by Janine's testifying: maybe Moira has been here already, maybe she's had to go back. They don't give you much time. I look carefully down, aslant under the stall wall, and there are two red shoes.
I put my mouth to the wooden hole. Moira? I whisper.
Is that you? she says.
Yes, I say. Relief goes through me.
God, do I need a cigarette, says Moira.
Me too, I say.
I feel ridiculously happy. (81-83)

There is also a marked difference in the attitude of Serena Joy, the Commander's Wife towards Offred between the first half and the second half of the novel. Initially she is very cold and calculative, the reason understandable. She is infertile and therefore has to go through the repulsive 'Ceremony' with the Handmaid and the Commander. On meeting Offred in the sitting room, Serena says:

I want to see as little of you as possible... I expect you feel the same about me.
I didn't answer, as a yes would be insulting, a no contradictory.
I know you aren't stupid, she went on. She inhaled, blew out the smoke. I've read your file. As far as I'm concerned, this is like a business transaction. But if I get trouble, I'll give trouble back. You understand?
Yes, Ma'am I said.
Don't call me Ma'am, she said irritably. You're not a Martha.

(25)

But when Offred fails to conceive in the first two postings, she is obsessed with the need to conceive at the third and final posting. The Marthas are equally concerned on hearing that Ofwarren (another Handmaid) has given birth to a baby girl. Cora reminds Offred of what an occasion it would be if she gave birth to one.
"It a good baby?" says Cora as she's setting down the tray. She must know already, they have a kind of word-of-mouth telegraph, from household to household, news gets around; but it gives her pleasure to hear about it, as if my words will make it more real.


....

"That's good," she says.

....

"Maybe we have one, soon," she says shyly. By we she means me. It's up to me to repay the team, justify my food and keep, like a queen ant with eggs. Rita may disapprove of me, but Cora does not. Instead she depends on me. She hopes, and I am the vehicle of her hope.

Her hope is of the simplest kind. She wants a Birth Day, here, with guests and food and presents, she wants a little child to spoil in the kitchen, to iron clothes for, to slip cookies into when no one's watching. I am to provide these joys for her. (145)

Serena Joy comes to Offred's rescue when everybody in the household begins to speculate her fate. Serena sees reason (realises that her husband is aging and so might not be able to impregnate her) and suggests Nick, the Commander's chauffeur as the ideal candidate. She even promises to talk to Nick and get his consent.

"Well then," Serena says ... "Nothing yet?"

....

"No," I say. "Nothing."

"Too bad," she says... She'd like me pregnant though, over and done with and out of the way, no more humiliating
sweaty tangles, no more flesh triangles under her starry canopy of silver flowers. Peace and quiet. I can't imagine she'd want such good luck, for me, for any other reason.

"Your time's running out," she says.

....

"Yes," I say neutrally.

....

"Maybe he can't," she says.

I don't know who she means. Does she mean the Commander, or God? ... Either way it's heresy. It's only women who can't, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective.

"No," I say. "Maybe he can't."

....

"Maybe," she says, ... "Maybe you should try it another way."

....

"What other way?" I say.

"Another man," she says.

"You know I can't," I say... "It's against the law. You know the penalty."

"Yes," she says... "I know you can't officially. But it's done. Women do it frequently. All the time."

....

"I would help you. I would make sure nothing went wrong."

....

"Not with a doctor," I say. "No," she agrees.... It could be someone we trust."

"Who?" I say.

"I was thinking of Nick," she says.... "He's been with us a long time. He's loyal. I could fix it with him." (214-216)
Although the Wives constitute the elite class, most of them lead hopeless lives. Serena Joy's life is a case in point. Like the handmaids, she has also lost control over discourse. And like her husband, she suffers from a divided self. This is why she is not always stern, as she appears to be. There is a softer side to her personality which Offred alone is aware of. Having been a right-wing evangelical singer and a public speaker in her youth, she has now become speechless. So she detests her present position. Her bitterness is largely due to memories of her "amputated glory." She stays at home most of the time and that is not agreeable to her. So, in order to achieve a degree of autonomy, Serena resorts to gardening and knitting. She is forever seen knitting an endless number of scarves. The various pattern on the scarves (trees, eagles and little children) reveals her desire for a better and a more natural life. This hobby (other than gardening) becomes a mode of asserting her creativity in her otherwise infertile existence. From Offred's confession we learn that it is not only true of Serena but of most wives in Gilead. "Many of the Wives have such gardens, it's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (22).

But the Handmaids are an oppressed lot. They can perceive themselves only as child bearers, and are forced to accept the Aunt's definition of them as "two-legged wombs," "sacred vessels," and "ambulatory challices" (146). Klarer points out that Handmaids are treated as "unintelligent matter in the reproduction process which is, like everything else in the dystopia, dominated by men" (131). Although based on the Old Testament precedent, such dystopian procedures and practices also mirror male-biased scientific theory as enunciated by Aristotle that "the female provided only the matter, while the active principle were attributed to the male semen..." (Merchant 157). This theory elevated the position of man to that of a parent and reduces woman to the state of an incubator.
This is why occasionally a handmaid finds solace in suicide. Suicide is the only means of escape from the never-ending oppression that they experience. Offred's predecessor was one such who sought freedom by hanging herself from the light fixture in the room. Ofglen, Offred's shopping companion, also ends her life in a similar fashion. Scared of what might be in store for her in the Colonies, she hangs herself. Since the state cancels their original names in order to erase their former identity, they have nothing to look forward to. Since they are deprived of language and any form of leisure, they exist in a state of suspended animation like the women in the nineteenth century paintings depicting harems. There are times when Offred herself cries out in anguish: "What is to be done, what is to be done" (HT 62) but soon realises like the tramps Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," that there really is "nothing to be done" (62). However, Offred never loses hope. What is commendable is that she earnestly believes that she'll be united with her family one day.

"...I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out.... We will be all three of us together. Meanwhile I must endure, keep myself safe for later" (116). Offred's assertion of her autonomy of thought is often seen at night in the privacy of her room: "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will...But the night is my time out. Where should I go?" (47).

She extricates herself from boredom by recalling her life with her husband and daughter, her relationships with her mother and her friendship with Moira. What she mourns for is not the lack of physical intimacy with her husband Luke but for the love and warmth of a human being by her side.

... nobody dies from the lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from. There's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere...where they are or what their
names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person.

From time to time I can see their faces, against the dark, flickering like the images of saints... I can conjure them...

(113)

She begins to break the slavery syndrome by transgressing "the uniforms of Gilead." She steals onto the Commander's study to play the illicit game of Scrabble and discovers that there can be freedom even within the prison house of language. She begins to question him cautiously because questioning is a forbidden act. But when her visits to the Commander's room become more frequent, she relaxes. Her questions are no more tinged with fear. She tells him the real living conditions and the situations of the Handmaids. She takes the liberty to criticize and condescend him on certain issues. As a result, she becomes the Commander's favourite. The Commander presents her with women's magazines, which in her earlier days she had not bothered to read. Now she devours them all. Slowly, she gains access to the pen. Writing a line in Latin on a notepad, she is aware why "Pen Is Envy" (196). Verwaayen rightly notes: "The strange wording 'Pen Is Envy' reduces Freud's infamous doctrine of penis envy to pen envy, truncating, castrating penis to pen, a subversion/biologically-sanctioned locus of power in Gilead to the realm of discursive construction, to the erection of discursive practices. Biology thus need not be destiny because the scripts can be rewritten, voiced over"(45-46). Offred is quick to realise the power of the "pen." "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains.... Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal" confesses Offred (HT 196).

But whenever Offred witnesses the bloody "Salvagings," the ritual slaughter and dismemberment of women, she feels insecure. It dawns on
her that if her affairs with the Commander and his chauffeur became public, she would meet with a similar fate. She desires to escape from her claustrophobic environment but realises that the walls of Gilead are more secure than any other. Suicide therefore appears to be the best possible solution for Offred. She confesses: "I think about the chandelier too much...you could use a hook, in the closet. I've considered the possibilities. All you'd have to do, after attaching yourself, would be to lean your weight forward and not fight" (205). Another alternative that she considers is, "...I could noose the bed sheet round my neck, hook myself up in the closet, throw my weight forward, choke myself off" (304).

But soon she considers suicide an act of cowardice. She decides to endure oppression and resolves to live at all costs. She believes that prayers will give her the required strength to overcome all obstacles.

Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce.

.... I want to keep on living, in any form. (298)

She begins to assure herself that all will be well. The word "Faith" that is embroidered in her cushion cover also serves to reinstill this belief in herself. She feels a sense of pride for having been born a woman. She exclaims "Oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man" (204).

So what Atwood seems to be aiming at is, as long as one remains silent, one becomes powerless. The lives of those in Gilead testify to this. Offred is able to break away from the slavery syndrome only after she begins to voice her feelings. As long as she remains mute, she is one
among the resigned lot. She herself confesses- "I'm tired of this melodrama, I'm tired of keeping silent..." (305).

Ultimately the very language that is denied to her- the freedom to speak up, speak out, and be heard- becomes the medium through which she defines herself. Offred realises the centrality of language to the process of self-realisation and the struggle for equality. Language, the ability to speak, to tell one's story, is at the heart of Offred. She thus converts language into a liberating phenomenon. Language enables Offred to survive in Gilead and to raise her voice against the sexual oppression of the patriarchal society.

Arnold sums up Offred quite easily in one sentence by seeing her as a "passive" woman who is in need of a "man" to rescue her but, we can say that Offred unconsciously wills to overturn the society's regiment by getting her work done through the use of a man. So one can certainly not claim her to be timid and passive. As Karen Stein rightly says: "Through her appropriation of language, Offred constitutes herself as a subject, and makes herself visible to the reader" (272).