PREFACE

Since winning a Governor General's award for the Circle Game, Margaret Atwood has created a substantial body of writing - poetry, fiction, and criticism - which has gained her an international reputation. The first phase of Atwood's writing beginning with the Circle Game and passing through The Journals of Susanna Moodie and Power Politics and through the novels The Edible Woman, Surfacing and Lady Oracle utilises a stock and unemotional style which can startle readers out of conventional expectations and into new ways of perceiving. Frequently written from the point of alienated individuals sometimes on the verge of nervous breakdowns, this poetry and fiction express a distress of the everyday world, finding it a place of deceptive appearances and emotional shallowness. To this world Atwood opposes the claims made on us by dreams, hallucinations, and visions, showing her readers the necessity of making a journey into the interior and suggesting that it is only through a descent into the psyche and the rediscovery of the primitive and mythic dimensions of both mind and world that one can experience wholeness. For Atwood the problem of inauthenticity is a central theme especially associated with women, as seen in The Edible Woman and Surfacing.

Atwood has written on the dangers of a colonial mentality and the consequent lack of Canadian identity not only in her fiction but also in
Survival, a popular work of literary criticism. Survival also sheds light on her own work. Her fiction and poetry develop out of the tradition she describes in Survival and they are intended as a corrective to it. To refuse to be a victim is the final lesson learnt by the protagonist of Surfacing. In novels like Bodily Harm and The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood does not abandon the concerns of her early writing but she turns more political. The sense that Canada must look beyond its own border is evident in Bodily Harm, with its tale of a Canadian travel-writer's naive involvement in a political coup in the Caribbean. At the thematic level The Handmaid's Tale explores how female space is wrenched out of patriarchal power structures. The Handmaid's Tale is set in a futuristic dystopia, a politically totalitarian regime in which individual identity is obliterated under the banner of the collective good. Atwood takes seriously both the power of the written word and the writer’s duty to society.

The present study makes an attempt to read four of Atwood's novels The Edible Women, Surfacing, Bodily Harm, and The Handmaid's Tale and analyses how they carve out a distinct female space and retrieve the submerged self. While I have enjoyed reading Margaret Atwood, taking into consideration the limitations of time and the availability of resource material on Atwood, I have restricted the present study to just four novels,
though in the process I have tried to reflect on and illustrate the familiar Atwoodian themes.

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