CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In Canada the modern feminist movement started in the early 1970s. It was an outgrowth of the women's liberation movement of America of the late sixties. The women's liberation movement in Canada showed women as a severely oppressed group. This movement, as in the USA, demanded equality for women in all social, economic, cultural, judicial, and sexual matters. The newly enlightened women launched a systematic campaign against economic discrimination, violence against women, and sexual ignominy. It is the patriarchal set up which reinforced the discriminatory treatment of women. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise observe that the essence of feminism is its idea about the personal, its insistence on the validity of women's experience and "its argument that an understanding of women's expression can be gained only through understanding and analysing everyday life, where oppression as well as everything else is grounded."¹ Such oppression and tyranny affecting a woman are fundamentally the basic themes of the feminist movement.

Discussing the role of the writer in society Atwood remarks that the writer tends to concentrate more on life, not as it ought to be, but as it is, as the writer feels it, experiences it: "Writers are eye witnesses, I witnesses."²
In her writing Atwood is concerned with the weak as against the strong victim versus the victimizer. A key word in any Atwood discussion is “survival”. By survival Atwood does not mean continuity of mere physical existence, but a striving for dignity in the battle with society and circumstances. Almost all her protagonists are victimized - either by man or by authority or by a particular social environment. Atwood examines the place of women in modern society. She explores her identity in a commercialized, technological age. On the question of moral perfection traditional society has demanded of women, Atwood says thus:

Women are still expected to be better than men, morally that is, even by women, even by some branches of the women’s movement and if you are not an angel, if you happen to have human failings, as most of us do, especially if you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not human. You are worse than human, you are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive power scary monster.

Atwood allows her women protagonists the imperfection a normal human being possesses. She criticises the social system that assigns roles to the sexes and labels them as inferior or superior. Her portrayal is of a woman concerned with selfhood and with that vigorous aspiration deviating from norms of subservience to the dominant gender. A woman writer is seen as an aberration, neurotically denying herself the delights of sex.
Regarding the male attitude towards the female and vice versa, Margaret Atwood says thus:

Why do men feel threatened by women? I asked a male friend of mine... "I mean," I said, "Men are bigger, most of the time, they can run faster, struggle better and they have on average a lot more money and power. They are afraid of women laugh at them," "he said, "Undercut their world over," then I asked women... Why do women feel threatened by men?" "they are afraid of being killed."

From this Atwood came to the conclusion that men and women are different in the range and scope of their threatenability. It is this threatenability, the victim-victimizer relationship, that Atwood explores in her novels. Her new woman refuses to be a victim, but in the process of refusal she faces the indignities that are showered upon women.

Yet another important feature of Margaret Atwood's fiction is that it is post-modern in its use and abuse of traditional literary conventions, including novelistic realism. Also, as some one "formed" in the 60's, Atwood is at ease with the political dimension of post-modernism. In the early seventies she was best known for her Canadian nationalism and for her feminism. Her short and powerful lyric poems were written alongside her long narrative pieces almost as a kind of allegory of the tension between product and process that persists in her work. An advantage of the narrative as a form of investigation for a political writer like Atwood is that
while poetry is often seen as the place where language is renewed, the novel has been seen as a more powerful and appropriate vehicle for social and ideological critique. The novel posits greater common assumption between reader and writer or it carries a didactic desire to create that commonality. But if the novel is written in metafiction, a new tension between didactic motivation and the more inward-directed self-reflexivity is introduced. Atwood’s first novel, *The Edible Woman*, may on the surface look like straight-forward realist fiction. But its feminist and anticonsumerist politics actually find their expression through the articulation of postmodern contradictions in metafictional themes and forms that we usually associate with more narcissistic, formalist impulses in fiction. This tension is precisely what drives the novel’s plot and structure. When her friend, Duncan, informs the protagonist Marian, that hunger is more basic than love, he echoes the view that the entire conduct of the world is controlled by these twin appetites. Thus poles of paradox that order the entire novel, a novel about the various forms of consuming, are set up. George Woodcock has seen this as the theme of “emotional cannibalism.”

Like many feminist theorists, Atwood challenges male definitions of selfhood as applied to women. She destabilises, de-centres the normal notions of subjectivity. For women selfhood has often been seen as defined
primarily through relationships. However, Atwood renders "being in love" a most problematic state. It becomes the focus of all the possession motifs of the novel. Marriage is presented as an entrapment, even as a consuming. Images of the coldness of unnatural death and stasis are associated with love and marriage. Images of dynamic warmth have totally other associations. From her restricted perspective Marian first thinks that cold is preferable to heat. It keeps her "self" whole. But to be whole in this novel is also to be fixed, static, isolated - an object, like Ainsley's doll that Marian cannot help identifying with. The final image of the edible cake woman is explicitly the most consumable object image of the novel. It is also the figurative coming together of the hunger and love poles.

**Surfacing** is a novel whose importance lies in its discovery of the falsities of human perceptions in the modern age. In Margaret Atwood the protagonist is always a woman. The woman is always young but she is old enough for her experience of the modern world to have driven her into some kind of life crisis. There are no old women like Margaret Laurence's Hagar Shipley among Atwood's heroines. They are in fact women who have accepted the mores of the twentieth century consumer society and lived according to them. Marian in *The Edible Woman* is actually a consumer research analyst, as Margaret Atwood herself was for some period. The unnamed narrator and protagonist of **Surfacing** is a
commercial artist. Rennie Wilford in *Bodily Harm* is what she calls a “lifestyle journalist” making her living by writing on food and fashion. This in a way implies a support of the consumer-oriented society and an acceptance of its values. In *Surfacing* the individual is led towards liberation to self-understanding and self-realization. With the publication of *Surfacing* Margaret Atwood became recognized as a woman novelist speaking for and to women. A parody of the traditional ghost tale, *Surfacing* tells of a coming to terms with the haunting, separated parts of the narrator’s self, including her aborted child. More than the predicament of women, the matter of the environment is the great theme of *Surfacing*. When we abandon the roles of dominators and destroyers, we recognize the place and pattern, and then we release ourselves from the perils that threaten us.

George Woodcock describes *Surfacing* as the account of a rite de passage: “it is a novel of self-realization, hence of life-realization,” in which “Surfacing” becomes possible “only after submersion,” as is emphasized by the recurrence of metaphors involving drowning:

Her (the narrator’s) brother is almost drowned as a child; her father, she discovers, drowned searching for Indian paintings on a rock wall falling sheer to the lake; her own crisis is precipitated when, diving to locate the painting, she encounters her father’s floating corpse; her surfacing becomes almost literally a rising from death into life.6
It is a surfacing which in the end represents a journey through and beyond the primitive mystical participation in nature.

In *Bodily Harm* themes of violation (physical, psychological, and ideological) provide the focus for Atwood's challenge to the male-universal. The view that Atwood discovers political commitment only in the novel *Bodily Harm* is an idea one cannot accept when one takes into consideration the total body of Margaret Atwood's work.

Atwood's feminism and her Canadian nationalism are very closely related political concerns with which she has consistently been engaged. Exposing the tendency to ignore gender, class, and race is where the real risk lies today, according to many feminist and postcolonial theories. *Bodily Harm* is a novel more overtly of human rights and politics. The theme of the subtle interconnections between bonding and bondage takes on a new dimension in this novel.

Although the fifth novel, *Bodily Harm* can well be seen as an extension of *The Edible Woman*. All other novels of Atwood deal with one or other aspect of women's identity. *Surfacing* explores the protagonist's quest for self. *Lady Oracle* deals with Joan's defiant attitude: “accept me for what I am.” *Life Before Man* deals with problems of modern marriage. It is *Bodily Harm* which answers the question about
women in totality. In the novel Atwood starts with Rennie, a free-lance journalist. Rennie knows that to be meek and docile is to be a victim. Her idea is that to be in love is like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles. She lives with Jake with open options which is better than committing oneself to a painful marriage. Rennie chooses to break away from a narrow and constricted environment which she leaves in order to lead a life of freedom. Her visit to the Caribbean to recuperate makes her journey into another awareness – that life is unstable, one's body is erratic and unpredictable, that people are unpredictable. Women, Rennie discovers, are still where they were a century age. The much spoken about freedom and identity are only delusions. To a Rennie stunned by the attitude towards women in the Caribbean, her own obsession with her pinched up flesh seems insignificant. The final scene where Lora is sexually assaulted leaves Rennie horrified. The awareness that women are still where they were centuries ago makes Rennie feel impotent. The brutality done to Lora is the real bodily harm which surpasses the little mastectomy done to Rennie. The heartless mutilation of Lora is symbolic of the limited gender – specific role of women in society. Once Rennie would have been obsessed with her scar, the cancer, but now she realises to her great relief that she is unharmed.
The Handmaid's Tale is an important novel in the Atwood canon. We are constantly made aware of the fact that a fictive world is created and our participation in that world involves us in the process of creation which we share with the author. Here is the core of Atwood's postmodernism. With the participation comes the responsibility - political and moral; public and personal. The Handmaid's Tale is a novel where politics and metafictive parody meet in a nightmarish projection of both history and its modes of narration. The oral/written paradox appears in the frame tale. Here it is again the female who is associated with the oral and the male with the written. A simultaneous mixture of involvement and distance constitutes this postmodern novel. Self-conscious about the fact that this is a dystopia created out of words associated with feminist rhetoric, consumerist advertising, literalist fundamentalist ranting, The Handmaid's Tale offers us a world carried to an extreme. It gives us a vision of the implications of current ideological trends. Here men still rule and women still collude. It would not be hard to read this novel in terms of the extreme of the imposition of a certain kind of female order. Women are respected above all for their mothering function. Women burn pornography and punish deviation from the norm. There exist an Underground Femaleroad. Gilead may be patriarchal in form, but in content much is matriarchal. The Handmaid's Tale is an overtly political fable. The narrator self-consciously tries to tell her story. It is a true one, but the narrator realises
that it is ordered, constructed, and fictionalised. The protagonist tries to become pregnant in order to retain her position in her society as one of the rare fertile women. The travails of creativity are thus both narrative and physical. Atwood once declared that "fiction is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community." Atwood thus is one of the most important novelists belonging to the postmodern phase. She is at the centre of the Canadian imagination. Survival for her means that there is no dominance or submission but that all individuals are free to determine their lives as equals.
REFERENCES


