CHAPTER-VII

Towards a Gender Equitable Global Community

CONCLUSION
Atwood's feminist vision is much broader than that of Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro, who are liberal and existentialist feminists, respectively. She is not a liberal feminist nor is she a Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, existentialist, socialist and post modern feminist. As a feminist thinker, Atwood's pleads for a unified theory, which is inclusive of all these currents of feminism. Her fiction deals with: "a comprehensive range of social issues and from such a variety of perspectives, that it eludes the simplicity of any single 'feminist' position."¹

Atwood challenges "Post modernist aesthetics"² in respect of feminism, along with contemporary women writers like Fay Weldon, Joanna Russ, Doris Lessing, Marge Piercy, Muriel Spark, Angela Carter, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, who raised their voices against the gender-based injustices and proposed feminist alternatives through their writing. She cautions women writers of her generation thus: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."³
Hence, her concept of feminism is very comprehensive and is chiefly concerned with all the modes of victimization of women all over the world and their liberation from the chains of oppression and bondage. In her novels, Atwood has chosen to examine gender-based violence, which is directed against women in patriarchy and their struggle for change. Thus, Atwood questions and challenges the concept of gender specifically, sexual status, role and temperament, because women's oppression is ingrained in the gender system of patriarchy. The goal of her feminist perspective is to establish a gender equitable, 'global community' to empower women who are not in a position to assert and protect their basic human rights through her fictional world of Marians, researchers; Joans, writers; Rennies, free-lance, Journalists; Offreds, narrators; Nameless women, artists; Elaines, painters; Elizabeths, dragon ladies; Zenias, guerilla fighters; Rozs, Mother Teresas and Tonys, historians.

More than any other Canadian writer, Atwood has attracted maximum critical attention from various parts of the world. There have been a good number of full-length studies on her works. The earliest among those studies are contributed by Sherrill-Grace’s Violent Duality (1980), Arnold E. and Cathy N. Davidson’s The Art of Margaret Atwood (1981) and Sherrill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir’s “Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System” (1983). Further, numerous critical essays, the world over, have been
proliferating in various literary and non-literary journals and sometimes duplicating various aspects of Atwood's works.

Sherrill Grace's book *Violent Duality* (1980) is a pioneering study - a germinal assessment of Atwood's works: *The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle* and *Life Before Man*, Poetry: *Double Persephone to you Are Happy* and *Two-Headed Poems* and non-fictional prose: *Survival*. According to Grace, Atwood's central aesthetic concern is with a "violent duality". Grace has not attempted to discuss Atwood from any specific critical perspective. She explores Atwood's double vision of art and life in terms of the old subjective-objective dualities. She looks at Atwood's dynamic of violent duality as a function of the creative art. The book is regarded as an interpretative guide to form theme in Atwood's works.

*The Art of Margaret Atwood* edited by Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson is an exploration of the talent and diversity of Atwood as a novelist, poet and critic - the writer of many facets. This book studies Atwood's first four novels as stories about multifaceted characters. It has multiplicity of approaches and provides the necessary background for further exploration. Sanda D. Jaw's essay *The where of here: Margaret Atwood and a Canadian Tradition* is an explication of the poetry's Canadian landscape and Atwood's heritage as a poet. The second essay in the
collection of Prof. Judith McCombs, an American Poet and Critic focuses on Atwood's *The Circle Game*, *The Journal of Susanna Moodie* and *Power politics* and discusses the international traditions perceived in Atwood's poetic corpus. The third essay by Sherrill E. Grace analyses the poetics of duplicity in Atwood's poetry. "A checklist of writings By and About Margaret Atwood" appended to this Book by Alan J. Horne is very exhaustive and useful for Atwood Scholars.

**Margaret Atwood : Language, Text and System (1983)**

edited by Sherrill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir is a structuralist analysis of Atwood's dialectic processes in her writing. In this book, Grace challenges *Survivals* critics as well as Franky Davey's Gorgon opposition. Linda Hutcheon attempts a study of language in Atwood's first four novels from the structuralist point of view. Jerome H. Rosenberg's *Margaret Atwood* published in 1984 is a collection of essays which provide a fuller account of Atwood's *Survival* controversy.

The 1987 is a milestone in Atwood criticism. The late 1980s witnessed the surge of critical works on Atwood. In 1987 Barbara Hill Rigney's *Margaret Atwood*, Beatrice Mendez-Egle's *Margaret Atwood : Reflection and Reality*, a collection of critical essays were published. Roberta Rubensteins *Boundaries of the Self : Gender, Culture Fiction (1987)*
provides an extensive discussion on Atwood's novels through The Handmaid's Tale. Likdikodo Papp Carrington's Canadian Writers and Their Works (1987) provides an in-depth analysis of Atwood's doubles in fiction and short fiction from The Edible Woman through Blue beard's Egg.

Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood edited and published by Judith Mc Combs in 1988 is a comprehensive collection of journal work in Canada, USA, Britain and Commonwealth through mid-1987. It focuses on themes and patterns of social criticism, feminism and women's literature, Gothic and popular genres and folklore in Atwood.

Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms (1988) edited and published by Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro is a new comprehensive anthology of essays - a study of Atwood's first six novels, poetry and non-fictional prose. The book focuses on the enduring concerns in Atwood's works, namely, feminism, ecology, the Gothic element, the theories of Frye and Jaynes and cultural politics.

Shannon Hengen's book, Margaret Atwood's Power: Mirrors, Reflections and Images in Select Fiction and Poetry published in 1993, provides a psychoanalytic overview of examining Atwood's treatment of women and power. She attempts to examine Atwood's select works: The Edible Woman and Surfacing, Lady oracle and Two-Headed poems, Bodily
Harm and The Handmaid’s Tale, Cat’s Eye and Wilderness Tips from psychoanalytic feminist point of view.

Sharon Rose Wilson’s Margaret Atwood’s Fairy Tale Sexual Politics published in 1993 is an analysis of Margaret Atwood’s sexual politics through a study of fairy-tale images patterns such as water colors, drawings, collages, book cover designs and comic strips. It offers a new reading of Atwood and a fresh appreciation of the traditional fairy tale’s ability to illuminate modern literature. It is the first study to apply the folklore classification to the tales and motifs used by Atwood in The Edible Woman, Surfacing, Lady Oracle, Life Before Man, You are Happy, Bodily Harm, Interlunar, The Handmaid’s Tale and Cat’s Eye. Colin Nicholson’s Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity published in 1994 is an assemblage of a valuable international collection of essays, which deal with a wide variety of theoretical approaches to Atwood’s poetry, short stories and five of her novels.

A recent book, Margaret Atwood 1996, published by Coral Ann Howells, an outstanding Atwood Scholar is a critical study - an assessment of Atwood as a poet, a colonial writer and a feminist. The book evaluates Atwood’s treatment of the Canadian wilderness over the twenty year period from Surfacing and Survival in the early 1970s to Wilderness
Tips in 1992, which reflects national identity and environmental issues related to ecology and pollution. One of the chapters of the book is devoted to Atwood’s feminism, through a discussion of the representations of the female body in terms of “Feminine, Female, Feminist: From The Ediblewoman to the The female body. It explores sexual power politics by questioning the stereotypes of national identity and gender. The book also discusses the pervasiveness of Gothic, throughout Atwood’s career from Lady Oracle to The Robber Bride. The remaining chapters of the Book focus on other novel forms: Science fiction, and the Bildungsroman in The Handmaids Tale and Cat’s Eye. In short, the book is an exploration of Atwood’s Canadian landscapes, her Canadianness and feminism.

Professor Frank Davey's Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics, published in 1984 is a study of Atwood's six novels. This book seems to be biased and it offers a male perspective. This study is a misinterpretation of Margaret Atwood's progressive protagonists. It argues, that the doctrine of liberalism is refused in all Atwood's novels and all her protagonists are opposed to the reconstruction and improvement of the world by 'human technological intelligence'. Davey says: "From Marian Mc Alpin onward, most, Atwood protagonists desire to be 'whole', and mistrust all technology, whether in the form of freezers, cameras, guns, medicine, law or language itself."4

The point is that Atwood's protagonists are not averse to 'human technological intelligence' to restructure and improve the world. What they mistrust is the technologically oriented people, who direct the technological assault on women by means of cameras, guns, medicine, law and language. In this way, Davey misreads her fiction and accuses Atwood of exaggerating the problems of women in her fiction. In fact, Atwood has not exaggerated the problems of women, but holds a mirror to women's grievances through her protagonists, who are true to life. She has painted her canvas with the portraits of realistic protagonists. As the author of realistic fiction, Atwood cannot claim for her characters greater autonomy than actual women can reasonably claim. Thus, Atwood has practised what
she professed in her *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* by creating believable characters in her fiction. She is alive to the social matrix in which her characters and readers exist.

The fictional world of Atwood reflects various modes of gender victimization of women in the name of tradition, modernity, technology, and marriage. The protagonist, in the eight novels which form part of this study, emerge from the elite section of the society. In the course of their interaction with the world around them - nature, men and women their experiences are enriched; their enlightenment is sharpened and their horizons of understanding are widened. Thus, they open "the doors on their prisons, and take truer control of their images of self and their future directions."\(^5\) They learn the cruel lessons of life and subject them to a careful scrutiny in order to derive lessons for their future. The rebellious streak in each of the protagonists checkmates effectively the designs of male-centered society to manipulate and exploit her. In the ultimate analysis, Atwood's protagonists confront all the adversities with courage and fortitude. They are involved in a grim struggle to attain "freedom and full human status after millennia of deprivation and oppression."\(^6\) They are conscious of their own power and proclaim that they are no longer victims. Thus, we find 'unprecedented growth' and 'release of energy' in Atwood's protagonists, who are long suppressed. Their feminist consciousness articulates the hidden and
suppressed voice thereby generating power in the victimized women, out of their own victimization. They also have a reverence for life. Through these protagonists, Atwood suggests the following strategy for women's liberation:

a. Ignore your victimization, and sing song like "I Enjoy Being A Girl".

b. Think it's the fault of Biology, or something, or you can't do anything about it; write literature on How Awful it is, which may be a very useful activity up to a point.

c. Recognize the source of oppression; express anger; suggests ways for change.  

In other words, Atwood teaches women to "refuse hobbles and deformity and take possession of their body and glory in its power, accepting its own laws of liveliness.... have something to desire, something to make, something to achieve, and at last something genuine to give... to claim the masculine: Virtues of magnanimity and generosity and courage." Thus, Atwood attempts to instil pride, confidence and dignity in women through her novels. She pleads for the need to create a conducive atmosphere for the development of the personality of a woman corresponding to her tastes, interests and sensibility. She also castigates the social system that assigns roles to women.
A careful scrutiny of Atwood's fiction from *The Edible Woman* to *The Robber Bride* shows that her novels are feminist texts, that rise above gender. They do not widen the gulf between man and woman, but hold promise to real, healthy and balanced human relationships - "the relation of man to woman, the most natural relation of human being to human being." Atwood claims "human equality" and "human freedom of choice" for women as "one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman." Therefore, Atwood, in her novels, advocates human rights of women and gives a clarion call for the destruction of gender-based social system which is "a most ingenious form of interior colonization." What she proposes is a 'holistic', 'anti-militaristic' and 'life-affirming' society, that aims at the all-round human development of women. Feminism, in her fiction emerges as a point of view to reorganize the unpleasant realities about women's predicament. In other words, her feminist approach is a 'human rights', 'survivalist' and 'holistic' approach to life - a step towards sanity in human relationships. In this way, Atwood's feminist vision is quite broad, comprehensive and offers a fresh perspective on women's problems.

Atwood's world view envisages opposition, not only to the male domination of women, which is a historical fact, but also to the female domination of men, as evidenced in her novels, *Life Before Man* and *The Robber Bride*. For her, *Survival* means, that between man and woman
"there should not be any dominance or submission, but that all individuals be free to determine their own lives as equals." The essence of Atwood's feminism is that it is neither male-centred nor female-centred, but it is a sort of half-way house, in which both women and men need to look upon themselves as equal partners in the creative enterprise of life to ensure “the attainment of both sexes to a viable humanity.”

Even a cursory survey of Atwood's fiction from The Edible Woman to The Robber Bride shows, that she is one of the most imaginative practitioners of realistic fiction. Even though her fictional landscape is Canada and the characters are drawn invariably from the Canadian Society, the novels do not suffer from the parochialism. It is the treatment of the issues she handles in her fiction which gives it a universal character and appeal. In an interview Atwood says:

"I write for people who like to read books. They don't have to be Canadian readers.... You can pick up a lot of things from context."
REFERENCES


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