Post Modern Feminist Consciousness

INTRODUCTION
Margaret Atwood, the champion of Amnesty International, and the Canada's Civil Liberties Union, draws attention to the deleterious dimensions of gender discrimination the world over through her fictional world. She attacks the narrow, dominant, social and aesthetic constructions of identity and gender. She is critical of the post-modernist aesthetics of impersonality, autonomy and dehumanization.

Emma Goldman observes, that history may be a compilation of lies; nevertheless, it contains a few truths, and they are the only guides we have for the future.

Margaret Atwood is the internationally known, read, translated, and critiqued contemporary Canadian, woman, fiction writer. The London Review of Books has claimed her as "the most distinguished novelist... currently writing in English". George Woodcock, the eminent Canadian critic, founding editor of Canadian Literature avers:
"No other writer in Canada of Margaret Atwood’s generation has so wide a command of the resources of literature, so telling a restraint in their use as Margaret Atwood". Atwood’s literary career as a contemporary novelist, begins with her maiden novel, The Ediblewoman (1969) followed by Surfacing (1972), Lady Oracle (1976), Life Before Man (1979), Bodily Harm (1981), The Handmaid’s - Tale (1985), Cat’s Eye (1988), The Robber Bride (1993) and Alias Grace (1996), has established her as one of the world’s leading women novelists writing in English today. Her work has been translated into more than twenty languages and published in twenty five countries.

A prolific writer, versatile social critic, and a keen and perceptive observer of life, Atwood has produced nine novels, ten books of poetry, three short story collections, and two books of literary criticism to her credit. She has also written two children’s books, compiled and illustrated The Can Lit Food Book in 1987, and edited Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English and co-edited Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English.

Margaret Atwood is also a perceptive critic, whose most influential work of literary criticism, Survival : A Thematic Guide to
Canadian Literature is often described as her "literary history", "the victim survival thesis" and "layman's guide". It is not only a guide to Canadian literature, but also to her work. Her second work of criticism which is a compilation of her reviews, speeches and so on, is aptly titled Second Words. She is not primarily a critic although the contents of the book range from Canadian poetry and contemporary women's writing to feminism and international human rights. Her Conversations - a collection of twenty one interviews covers a broad spectrum of topics and reveals her stance as a feminist writer. Atwood's poetic collection, The Circle Game published in 1966 won the prestigious Canadian literary prize, the Governor General's Award.

In an interview with Mendez Egle in 1983, talking about her responsibility as a writer, she declared that she wrote "not as a writer, but as human being". Margaret Atwood is increasingly involved and has become a prominent figure in national and international cultural politics. She is also on the editorial board of the newly established Anansi Press in Toronto, a founder member of the Writer's Union of Canada and an active member of Amnesty International and P.E.N. Atwood has done wide reading and travelling and has worked as Professor of Creative
writing at several universities. She had won the Ida Nudel Humanitarian Award for 1987.

Atwood's fiction provides a comprehensive review of the problems women confront in attaining full recognition and enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, echoes forth the message that: "human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights".

At each and every stage, Atwood has pondered beyond the issues addressed by the Feminist Movement. Her feminist concerns are "her wider humanitarian concerns with basic human rights and their infringement by institutional oppression". Atwood transcends the usual concerns of the feminist world and writes from her "sense of the enormous complexity, not only of the relationships between man and woman, but also of those between those other abstract intangibles, Art and Life, Form and Content, Writer and Critic, etc.". Atwood's writing is involved with human rights of women and thus her feminist ideology has "a larger, non-exclusive picture" as provided in her Second Words, which endorses and broadens her Survival thesis. Thus, her fiction is a
reflection of the violation of women's rights and it includes: "any act, omission or conduct by means of which physical, sexual or mental suffering is inflicted, directly or indirectly, through deceit, seduction, threat, coercion, or any other means, on any woman with the purpose or effect of intimidating, punishing or humiliating her, or of maintaining her in sex-stereotyped roles, or of denying her human dignity, sexual self-determination, physical, mental and rural integrity, or of undetermining the security of her person, her self-respect, or her personality, or of diminishing her physical or mental capabilities". It is important to discuss the history of feminism, different feminist approaches and Atwood's feminist ideology. It is vital to define what a 'perspective' is. As Susan Wendell says: "perspective is a pattern of thought,... of emotion, perception, expectation and motivation"; in other words, it reveals to us "how to think, feel, perceive, expect and act". Feminist perspective as a woman-centered theory provides strategies for change: The fundamental goal of feminist perspective, according to Maggie Humm, is "to understand women's oppression in terms of race, gender, class and sexual preference and how to change
As such the feminist principle is an "uncompromising pledge" and an antidote to all types of exploitation and oppression of women.

As the time passed, feminism blossomed into an international movement, and several schools of feminist thought such as Liberal, Marxist, Radical, Psychoanalytic, Socialist, Existentialist, and Post-Modern came into existence. Feminism, thus is very comprehensive and covers many aspects of human life, aiming ultimately at women's liberation.

'Feminist consciousness', which is a consciousness of victimization, is an integral part of feminist perspective. Feminist consciousness, according to Sandra Lee Bartky, is "a joyous consciousness of one's own power, of the possibility of unprecedented growth and of the release of energy long suppressed". Whereas, a feminist perspective as Freeman defines, is something which is "practical as well as theoretical, it illuminates possibilities for the future as well as criticizes the limitations of the present".

Feminism, both as a concept and a movement, has emerged as a reaction against the atrocities of patriarchy. Throughout history, and in all civilizations, the personality of women has been sought
to be damaged and distorted and her very status as a human being 'interiorized' under the overwhelming male domination. According to Sara Grimke, all history is 'male-centric' and she attests that: "man has subjugated woman to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort, but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could do to debase and enslave her mind; and now he looks triumphantly on the ruin he has wrought, and says, the being he has thus deeply in his inferior.....". Thus, women's personality is distinguished and they are confined to "the footnotes of history". As Kate Millet says: "The history of patriarchy presents a variety of cruelties and barbarities" perpetrated on women. Irrespective of the economic, political and social progress, invariably in all countries women are subject to gender discrimination according to the report of the South Commission. The following statistics illustrate the extent of the problem of violation of women's human rights at global level. In the USA, a rape occurs every six minutes and violence occurs in 2/3 of all marriages. In Papua, New Guinea, 67 per cent of rural women and 56 per cent of urban women are victims of wife abuse. In Santiago, Chile, 80 per cent of women are victims of violence in their homes.
Bangladesh, 50 per cent of the murders women are the victims of spouse's violence\textsuperscript{21}. In India there have been 11,259 dowry-related murders in the last three years\textsuperscript{22}. In Pakistan 99 per cent of housewives are manhandled by their husbands\textsuperscript{23}. In South Africa about 3,80,000 women are raped each year\textsuperscript{24}. Thus, women are deprived not only of equality with men, but also exploited by them. The UN declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defines violence as: "that which results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life"\textsuperscript{25}. Govind Kelkar, human rights activist from India, expands this concept of violence to include: "exploitation, discrimination unequal economic and social structures, the creation of an atmosphere of religio-cultural and political violence"\textsuperscript{26}.

There are objections to traditional ethical theories which are categorized into "feminine" ethics and "feminist" ethics. According to Susan Sherwin, which she labels as "feminine", ethics, "consists of observations of how the traditional approaches to ethics fail to fit the moral experiences and intuitions of women"\textsuperscript{27}.
According to "feminine" ethics, the traditional ethical theory is anti-woman which defends explicitly gender-biased and misogynist values. While men's virtues were those required for freedom and political life, women's virtues consisted in obedience and silence.

In Indian social thought, Manu, the law giver of Hindu Dharmashastra assigns woman a secondary position in relation to man. According to Manu Samhita, a woman should depend upon a man from her cradle; to grave and should never live as an independent entity: "During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, upon her husband; her husband being dead, upon her sons; if she has no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband; in default, upon those of her father, if she has no paternal kinsmen, upon the sovereign; a woman must never govern herself as she likes." Manu Samhita endorses servile existence of woman and therefore curbs the growth and development of woman as a free and autonomous human being.

Kathryn Morgan asserts that the traditional measures lead women to "moral madness," as they deny women's capability of full reasoning and thereby restricting them to the domain of the private and forcing them into a series of perverse moral double binds.
In short, feminine measures show that moral theorists have legitimized the oppression of women by insisting on their moral, rational and epistemological inferiority. Thus, feminist ethics arise from moral objections to oppression. They are derived from an explicit political perspective, which sees the section of women as morally and politically unacceptable.

However, within the "parameters of commonality are extreme differences: in political strategy, in vision about what constitutes women's liberation, in attitudes to men, in understanding the roots of women's oppression, in setting priorities, and in identifying constituencies and allies" 31.

Liberal feminist theory is a traditional theory, which has evolved from liberalism, a school of political thought. It seeks to apply the liberal principles of justice, liberty and equality "to women, without questioning male power" 32. This perspective originates from an outstanding, early, English feminist and freethinker, Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft's book, A Vindication of the Rights of Women 33, Johnstaurt Mill's, The Subjection of Women 34, Harriet Taylor's Enfranchisement of women 35 and Betty Friedan's The Feminine
Mystique\textsuperscript{36} and The Second Stage\textsuperscript{37} belong to this school. Liberal feminist school of thought explains that women's subordination is rooted in a set of traditional and legal constraints such as sex and race. In other words, liberal feminist vision envisages the establishment of the equality of opportunity between the sexes and thus removes the barriers of competition. What it insists is gender justice based on humanism.

From Betty Friedan down to present day liberal feminist thinkers like Blodwenpiercy, co-editor of Humanist in Canada, all equate feminism with humanism and echo, "Good Feminism is Good Humanism - and vice versa"\textsuperscript{38}. This concept urges women to work with men and even for men to produce a human society. What it fails, however, to recognize is that humanism is essentially male-centric and therefore it is premature to instruct women to become humanists.

Radical feminist school is of the view that women's oppression is the deepest form of human oppression and therefore it cannot be eradicated by means of the abolition of class society as the Marxists suggest. This theory is chiefly concerned with the issues arising out of 'pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape and woman battering'\textsuperscript{39}. This thought believes that woman's sexuality is controlled for
male pleasure through “foot binding, Suttee purdah, clitoridectomy, witch-burning, and gynaecology”\textsuperscript{40}. In order to be liberated from sexual oppression, radical feminists prescribe a strategy to “create an exclusively female sexuality through celibacy, auto-eroticism, or lesbianism”\textsuperscript{41}. In other words, radical feminists are against heterosexuality. They are also known for their rebellion against the traditional roles of women as faithful housewives and child-bearing machines.

The weakness of radical feminism is that it advocates outright rejection of key social institutions such as the family and heterosexuality. Further, this ideology separates women from the mainstream, rather than integrating them into it.

Psychoanalytic feminist theory is an interpretative theory of the social construction of femininity and masculinity on the basis of the findings in social sciences, and psychoanalysis. According to this approach, gender is the product of sexual maturation. The perspective originates from Sigmund Freud's Three Contributions to the Theory of Sexuality\textsuperscript{42}, “Infantile Sexuality” and “The Transformation of Puberty”.

In psychoanalytic feminist theory, the centrality of sexuality is emphasized. According to this theory, the root cause of
women's oppression is embedded in Oedipus complex. This perspective is both pro-woman as well as anti-woman and thus leads to perpetuation of sexual politics. Freudian theories often become targets of feminist attack on account of their phallocentrism. Kate Millet asserts: "Freud, beyond question is the strongest individual counter revolutionary force in the ideology of sexual politics". In her thought-provoking book, *The Female Eunuch* Germaine-Greer comments: "Freud is the father of psychoanalysis. It had no mother" and "Freud himself lamented his inability to understand woman". The best approach to Freud's assumptions about women is that of psychoanalyzing Freud himself as done by Dr. Ian Suttie. The cornerstone of the Freudian theory of psychoanalytic feminism is the masculine conviction that "a woman is a castrated man".

Marxist, radical, and psychoanalytic perspectives do not satisfactorily describe women's "otherness". Whereas existentialist feminist thought explains comprehensively women's oppression embedded in "otherness". Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is the key theoretical text of twentieth century feminism. It offers an existentialist explanation of women's situation. It argues that woman is oppressed.
because of "otherness". It reveals that woman is defined and established as the "other", because she is not man. Throughout history, women have been subordinate to men not by means of "the result of a historical event or a social change", but by their lack of understanding of "the contingent or incidental nature of historical facts". Consequently, man proclaims himself that he is the subject, the free determining being. As a result of this exclusion, woman is made to be the "other", the object. De Beauvoir, in her book, challenges the norms of patriarchal society and questions the marginalization of woman as the "Second Sex".

Post-modern feminist perspective tends to be more complex than the other feminist perspectives. It attempts to criticize the dominant patriarchal order and to valorize the woman who is the 'other'. According to Cixous, woman must develop feminine writing to change the male defined world. In other words, woman must write herself by putting into words her "otherness". The strategy prescribed by Luce Irigaray for liberation is that women should join together and speak boldly in the active avoiding false security.

Unlike Cixous and Irigaray, Kristeva resists identification of the "feminine" and the "masculine" with biological women
and biological men, respectively. She goes beyond sexual division to a pluralistic society, which is not constructed by gender. Thus, Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva have distinctively post-modern feminist perspectives, but they share a commonalty of non-binary and non-oppositional thoughts. All of them believe that women can overcome binary opposition, phallocentrism, and logocentrism by breaking silence, speaking and writing.

Socialist feminist theory is the result of Marxist feminists’ discontent with the gender-blind character of traditional Marxist thought. Marxist categories, like capital itself, are sex-blind. Socialist feminism has developed two different approaches - Juliet Mitchell and Heldi Hartmann's dual-systems theory and Irish Young and Ailson Jaggar's unified systems theory to overcome the limits of Marxist, radical and psychoanalytic currents of feminism. Thus, socialist feminist theory explains comprehensively the nature and modes of women's oppression. Socialist feminist analysis emerges out of historical materialist approach. According to this perspective, women's oppression is deeply embedded in existing social and economic structures. It analyzes women's oppression in terms of gender, class, race, and sexual orientation. It
challenges the power relations in patriarchal capitalist system and argues that equality of opportunity can never be possible in society as long as there are fundamental differences in wealth, privilege and power. Thus, socialist-feminist struggle is not against male domination alone, but against systems of exploitation which disempower women. Thus, socialist-feminism addresses the struggle against both patriarchy and capitalism.

Mitchell's *Women's Estate* argues that woman's oppression is deeply rooted in "over-determination" of her condition. The status and function of woman are jointly assessed by her role in production of material, and in reproduction, socialization of children and sexuality. In other words, woman has to play multiple roles as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a lover, and a worker. In her later book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Mitchell pleads for transformation of woman's interior world corresponding with the improvements in her exterior world. In this way, socialist-feminist thought makes a concerted effort to interrelate the myriad forms of women's oppression. In her book, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Alison Jaggar reveals how each and everything under capitalism is a cause of woman's disintegration. Thus, socialist-feminism is a radical critique of the institutions and practices of the entire society. As it is a community-based perspective, it believes in collective organizing
and consciousness-raising. It finds fault with post-modern feminism for its overemphasis on difference without any standpoint among varieties of feminist thinking, which leads to intellectual disintegration.

Thus, feminism is very complex and has many perspectives corresponding to the multiple and diverse problems of women. Each of the feminist perspectives is considered to be a partial as well as a provisional answer to the emancipation of women. Therefore, it is a major challenge to contemporary feminism to achieve unity in diversity. Feminists of all brands and schools need to share a common vision and to work in close collaboration with each other as "partners in virtue and friends in action"\textsuperscript{52}.

Feminism, therefore, is a source of a new awareness, power and knowledge to the contemporary thinking and its subject is women's past, present, future and contemporary history. Feminism is a global as well as a revolutionary ideology. It extends its scope to meet the growing problems of man - woman relationships. In the words of Rosemarie Tong: "..... change and growth are necessary to life and ..... what makes feminist thought liberating is its vitality, its refusal to stop changing, to stop growing"\textsuperscript{53}.
CHAPTER-I

Feminist movement with its multidimensional character and concerns deeply influenced many an intellectual, especially the writers. It has been a major influence on many a female fiction writer. A whole range of women writers of various political hues began looking at the realities as women and thus contributed new perceptions and perspectives. Through the narrative strategy of irony and fantasy, these writers not only demand revision of social values and conventions, but also envision alternate worlds in which women would be autonomous and self-defining citizens.

Women writers in the eighteenth century were ignored by men by restricting their creative writing only to certain possible areas of life. They were forbidden to focus in their works on all domains of human experience. Thus, the creative talent of women writers was suppressed and it was not possible for them to deliver a full-throated expression. Jane Austen's comment on the privilege of men is worth noting. According to her, "Men have had every advantage.... in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands". Out of the anxieties of woman's life, a distinctive female literary tradition has grown questioning sexist
assumptions and challenging the denial of female voices in literary judgements. Due to the very reality of woman's life situation and her sordid predicament, women writers have been drawn more to fiction writing. The social environment and the conditions of life have changed tremendously, since the days of Jane Austen. Women writers of fiction in the contemporary world enjoy a greater measure of freedom. Overthrowing the age-old dominance of the male view in the world of letters, women writers of fiction have projected a feminist view of life and its problems in the context of recent fiction in English. Recent fiction responds emphatically to this new awakening, as it has been close to the path of realism.

Realistic fiction began against the popular romance in the late 1960s. Women writers of fiction attempted to subvert the marriage plot of the popular romance. They have been protesting in their novels against the imposition of legal, economic and social restrictions so as to change the destiny of women. Nora Johnson views the feminist novel of the 1960s and 1970s as "the story of the awakening housewife."55
Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood and a host of other women writers have registered a great measure of success as feminist writers and are acclaimed as "major" contemporary women novelists. The women's movement has provided many of these novelists with the courage and motivation to break out of traditional patriarchal forms to depict how women have been abused, exploited and oppressed.

Canadian women writers of fiction from Ethel Wilson, down to present times are concerned with a woman's struggle to discover herself and find self-fulfilment. Their stories deal with the woman's encounter with the world. Canadian women writing in the post-1960s played a key role in setting in motion many radical ideas in terms of women's individuality and autonomy, power and politics, "through their own language through body determined experiences, and their own strategies of rebellion through tropes of madness, silence, illness and guile. The aim of the Canadian women's fiction is to make women, "critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structures." Feminist challenges have been written into women's texts by contemporary Canadian women writers. Therefore, Canadian women
writing is characterized by the urge to - "throw the storyline of traditional power structures open to question" and to implement "disarrangements which demand new judgements and solutions"\(^\text{58}\). Many of the women's stories narrated by these writers are about the lives of girls and women between the 1950s and 1980s. They are concerned with the exploration and survival, crossing boundaries, challenging cultural and psychological limits and glimpsing new prospects.

Protagonists in many Canadian novels are women writers and artists, "engaged in a struggle with language and inherited literary conventions to find more adequate ways of telling about women's experiences, fighting their way out of silence to project more authentic images of how women feel and what they do"\(^\text{59}\). Thus, women writing in Canada are committed to bring about remarkable changes in the lives of Canadian women and society thereby, "improving women's life-chances, and have the sense that women can contribute to the building of a major peaceful caring world"\(^\text{60}\). In other words, women writers have aimed at restructuring social and economic relations in the light of gender equality in Canadian society. They stress in their writings, the need for revision and a resistance to open confrontation with the power politics of gender.
Many of the experiences chronicled by these writers are shared by writers elsewhere and thus cross national boundaries.

Margaret Laurence has been the most prominent contemporary Canadian woman novelists in English. The Manawaka novels are Margaret Laurence's greatest literary achievement. The series of four novels, The Stone Angel, A Jest of God, The Fire Dwellers and The Diviners published between 1964 and 1974 form 'the Manawaka Cycle' and explore the lives of several generations, who have come to build and settle in the town of Manawaka, Manitoba in the country side. The fictional town of Manawaka is a state of mind - "private world of Laurence", rather than a physical, actual, geographical entity. The woman protagonists in Manawaka fiction, Hagars, Rachels, Staceys and Morgas, who quest for justice, liberty and equality, are all humanized and individuated women, while the male characters are marginalized, inferiorized, and dehumanized. The greatness of this fiction is its exploration of the personality of both men and women in its totality. Each of the Manawaka novels depicts the women protagonists struggle leading to a conflict with the inherited social or personal history.
Thus, the protagonists in Manawaka fiction typify every human being, particularly Canadians in the contemporary world. Clara Thomas says: "Margaret Laurence’s Manawaka world is Everyman’s and Everywoman’s, but its particularities are emphatically Canadian. Grounded in a small western town, her people move out into the wider world, but they carry Manawaka with them." Laurence is not an exclusivist or essentialist. As a moderate feminist, she writes within a humanist tradition and advocates a more balanced view of man-woman relationship. She emphasizes the education of men as an integral part of feminist struggle. Thus, Laurence adopts the stance as a liberal feminist - "an equal-rights feminist" and pleads for "individual freedom" to both men and women.

A fellow writer, Alice Munro is essentially the author of short fiction. Munro confronts society not merely as a woman, but also a female artist who expresses woman’s freedom through the medium of art. In her short fiction, she presents a variety of female characters ranging from childhood to old age, whose lives are misinterpreted and misrepresented by patriarchal society. The progress of Love is the touchstone of human experience and the record of cultural dimensions of
female sexuality. Rasporich says: "By this sixth volume, the feminist odyssey has truly become a female epic". Thus Munro's struggle is for genderless justice. Like Margaret Atwood, she begins with "the traditional female concerns with personal relationships and the details of daily life and expands these concerns to include a wider and wider swath of human experience". Thus, the contemporary women's novel is distinguished from the earlier fiction with its focus on: "the inevitability of change and its representation of the variety of women's socio-economic, ethnic and sexual orientations and experiences". In short, the main concern of the contemporary women writers of fiction is to explore and propose as mutable - "the gender relationships".

More than any other Canadian writer, Atwood has attracted maximum critical attention from various parts of the world. So far, no full-length study has adequately explored Atwood's theme of feminism as a major shaping her writing. Her feminist ideology, which has been most powerfully expressed through her fiction and non-fiction, is explicitly stated in an interview with Jo Brans in 1988. Atwood says: "I'm defining my feminism as human equality and freedom of choice".
This dimension of Atwood's feminist ideology has not yet been adequately attempted by any Atwood specialist either in India or abroad. A large area of her feminist perspective, which is global in character in her fiction remains unexplored. Hence, there is a genuine need for an intensive study of Atwood's novels from her feminist perspective which is 'holistic', 'anti-militaristic' and 'moralist' in character. Atwood's feminist thought, which is positively pro-woman and anti-man, seeks to offer a 'life-affirming', 'survivalist' and 'human rights' approach for placing woman on equal footing with her male-counterpart. The basic premise of Atwood's feminist thought is survival which shows to women the ways of struggle and the means of survival in an antagonistic, male chauvinistic and sexiest society.

Thus, Atwood moves beyond the boundaries of Canada and proposes a model of gender victimization corresponding to the Canadian paradigm, 'Survival': first three basic victim positions - 1. "To deny the fact that you are a victim; 2. To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of fate, the will of God, the dictates of biology, the necessity decreed by history, or economics, or the unconscious, or any other large general power idea; 3. To acknowledge
the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that
the role is inevitable. It works as a helpful method of approaching
woman's grievances and it is also helpful to explore victim-victimizer
syndrome in Atwood's fiction. Atwood's march of thinking is influenced
and carried forward by such books as Betty Friedman's The Feminine
Mystique (1963), Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1953), Juliet
Mitchell's New Left inspired study, Women: The Longest Revolution
(1966), Robin Morgan's Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of
Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement (1970), Hilda
Bruch's The Golden Cage (1975), Phyllis Chesler's Women and
Laura Mulvey's Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975),
Andrienne Rich's Of Women Born (1976), Susan Brownmiller's Against
Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (1975), Laura Mulvey's Visual
Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975), Andrea Dworkin's
Pornography: Men Possessing Women (1981), Ellen Moer's Literary
Women (1976), Elaine Showalter's A Literature of their Own (1977) and
Tillie Olsen's Silences (1978). In "An Introduction to The Edible
Woman in Second Words Atwood refers to these texts as the most
significant influences and says: “like many at the time I’d read Betty Friedman and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors... as a young woman... in Canada in the early sixties”68. Thus, Atwood seems to respond to these seminal writings produced by the most significant feminist movement of the past thirty years.

What Margaret Atwood is concerned with, therefore, is the imaginative depiction of socio-realistic themes with woman as the central character. Atwood’s primary concern has been with the weak as against the strong, victim versus the victimizer. To Atwood, survival is the most important factor. By ‘Survival’ she does not mean continuity of mere physical existence, but a striving with dignity in the battle with society and circumstances. Almost all her protagonists are victims either of man, of authority, or of a particular social set-up. The theme which has set up Margaret Atwood’s imagination is the place of woman in modern society and an exploration of her identity in the highly commercialized, technological age.

There is still a lot of social pressure on women, demanding them to be morally perfect. Elaborating on this argument, Atwood says: “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 more than human, you are a witch, a Medusa, destructive power scary monster." Atwood wants here protagonists not to be solitary weepers, but to make decisions, perform actions, be ready to face the consequences, whatever they be, and to be ambitious. But "a woman aspiring to selfhood is by definition selfish, deviating from norms of subservience to the dominant gender." Atwood herself, as a writer, was found to be deviating from the social norms and had to face such shocking questions as, "Gosh, all the housework and you are a writer too." The tone suggests incredibility coupled with the notion that she was capable of this intellectual exercise, despite being a woman and doing such things as washing dishes.

A woman writer is seen, Atwood says, as an "aberration, neurotically denying herself the delights of sex, kiddies and other fun" by indulging in an intellectual arena, hence unforgivable. She is seen as a crazy freak and other questions levelled against her go as
“do you think you are in danger of going insane?” Criticizing such chauvinistic attitudes, Atwood refuses to see women as belonging to different species assigned with different roles. She defends them and entreats to accept them as human beings first. She agrees that women are different in being able to become mothers. Apart from this, there is only one other difference which is discernible in the male attitude towards female and vice versa: “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 an average lot more money and power. They are afraid women will laugh at them, he said, “undercut their worldview”, then I asked women.... why do women feel threatened by men? “they are afraid of being killed”.

This was the answer Atwood got. After this interrogation Atwood says, “from this I concluded that men and women are different, if only in the range and scope of their threatenability, if in nothing else. It is this threatenability, victimizer image that Atwood explores in her novels. Her ‘new woman’ refuses to be a victim, but in the process of refusal she still has to face indignities and be compliant.
Margaret Atwood, the champion of Amnesty International, and the Canada's Civil Liberties Union, draws attention to the deleterious dimensions of gender discrimination, the world over through her fictional world. She attacks the narrow, dominant, social and aesthetic constructions of identity and gender. She is critical of the post-modernist aesthetics of impersonality, autonomy, and dehumanization. She shows, in her novels, how gender variously restricted the educational opportunities open to women who aspire to be researchers, writers, journalists, artists and painters. As Christine Gomez says: “At the thematic level, Atwood novels examine themes related to the politics of gender such as the enforced alienation of women under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of woman as a function, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women, the gradual carving out of female space by woman through various strategies and woman's quest for identity, self definition and autonomy .... Not only at the thematic and structural levels, but also in the organization of women characters, Atwood's novels are based on the politics of gender”.

This thesis examines and analyzes the politics of gender as it emerges through the novels of Atwood. Her novels expose
the silent and hidden operations of gender and confront its politics thereby recommending for rewriting of women's history. They transcend gender and plead for healthy human relations between man and woman. Through her novels, Atwood not only demands demolition of the gender system - the real source of women's oppression, but also envisions a new world in which men and women are equals at every level of existence.

In the process of struggle for change, the protagonists in Atwood's fiction are sought to be organized into a powerful force and are invested with a streak of rebellion. Thus, Atwood's novels are governed by feminist consciousness, which runs as an under-current and serves as the unifying principle.
References


6. Atwood, 282.


10. Wendell, 300.


CHAPTER 1


22. APDC, 15.


46. Greer, 83.


66. Atwood, *Conversations* 142.


72. Ibid., 200.

73. Ibid.


75. Margaret Atwood, *Writing the Male Character*, *The Second Words*, p.414.
