CHAPTER VI
Summing Up

Feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s centred on women’s inequality in the areas of family, work, sexuality, and politics. Feminists began to question the assumed natural differences between men and women. To fight for women’s emancipation and for equality for women, feminists generally identify women as a specific social group with a collective identity that forms a basis for struggle. They argue against biological determination and move the emphasis away from physiological differences between men and women to the social process that shapes masculinity and femininity. They also explore motherhood, the women’s lot as the major difference between men and women. Some feminists consider motherhood a burden to women’s liberation and others a rescuer from male control – a natural gift to women.

In the late 1970s, there is a shift of attention from androtex - books by men - to gynotex - books by women. The female writers excel in the range and quality of perception when they write on women’s problems. They present, more authentically, their ideas on female creativity and also on the problems of female language. According to Julia Kristeva:

Feminism begins with liberalism, when women demand equality with men; then, reacting against equality feminism, radical feminists reject patriarchy in favour of a separatist matriarchy; finally, women come to reject altogether the difference between masculine and feminine as metaphysical. (Tolan 337)

The first two stages respond to equality (anti-essentialism), and difference (essentialism) respectively. Both have competed for ascendancy throughout the history of second wave feminism. The second wave of feminism in the 1970s had its impact on pro-feminism.
Pro-feminist men condemn the violence of men against women, pornography, rape, and psycho social suppression of women. The rehabilitation, not only in terms of social crisis but also as a gender-specific issue, is represented as a pro feminist value in fictions. Canadian women writers of fiction are concerned with women’s struggle to discover their ‘self’ and find self-fulfillment.

Margaret Atwood, a Canadian woman pro feminist depicts in her novels how women have been abused, exploited and oppressed physically as well as psychologically in the society. She presents the multiplicity of traditional influences deconstructing the traditional cultural dependencies in her protagonists’ quest for physical and metaphysical freedom. She advocates the demolition of gender system that oppresses women, and the triumph to find and celebrate the difference in women.. Her affinity to Canadian soil and its wilderness led to her metaphorical use of wilderness and animals in her literary works.

In her feminist perspective Margaret Atwood is not limited by the regional or geographical boundaries. She proposes the world where all women enjoy human rights and lead a stable, peaceful and healthy life. As a feminist thinker she is concerned with all the modes of victimization of women and their rebel from oppression. As Howells says, “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” (14). In her novels, Margaret Atwood has chosen to examine gender-based violence, which explores women’s painful realities, their suffering and endurance of life’s perversities. She questions and challenges the concept of gender because women’s status in patriarchal society is ingrained as victims. She wants to protect the basic human rights of women
through her fiction. In her fiction she explores various forms of gender victimization of
women in the name of tradition, modernity, technology, and marriage.

A woman feminist writer “is perpetually wishing to alter the established values”
(Woolf 81). Atwood’s protagonists refuse to be victims of male consumption and want
to be new women. But in the process of refusal they have to face contemptuous
treatment in the patriarchal society. Atwood sketches all those indignities, faced by the
protagonists in the male dominated society. All her novels expose various problems of
women such as male’s attack on women in matters of profession, marriage and
motherhood and hence their marginalization. She remarks in her prose piece Second
Words, “…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” (226). She
wants her protagonist to be a rebel through the interior journey of her own mind by which
she can realize her power and strength.

Atwood, through her women characters, tries to convey the fact that unless
women try to find their self identity, they can’t refuse to be victims of male dominated
society. Each protagonist struggles to identify her ‘self” and self identity eventually gives
self confidence to her. Atwood stresses the fact that economic independence alone is not
enough in the quest for freedom. Economic independence might help, but it certainly has
not helped them to lead a complete life. To strive for dignity in the patriarchal society, a
woman should identify her femininity, mustering up her courage.

Atwood attempts to instill pride, confidence and dignity in women through her
novels. In the course of the protagonists’ interaction with the world around them -
nature, men and women - their experiences are enriched and their enlightenment is
sharpened. Atwood’s feminist approach is a championing of self identity which is salvation. A woman with self identity can always be a ‘whole woman’ – independent and empowered. This survivalist approach to life offers a fresh perspective to women’s problems. Most of the novels of Margaret Atwood are replete with the theme of victimization and survival, the part of cultural life of Canada and actively engage with problems that are not just national concerns but are also the social, political and traditional issues that will determine the survival of their country.

Margaret Atwood is clearly concerned with the alignment of power that exerts physical, political, economical and social control over woman to fragment her. In her novels she proves, the things that man do, woman can do better. Women are neither deficient physically nor intellectually. They hold the reins of power firmly in their hands. In her feminist novels progress of her protagonist is not very smooth yet they triumph ultimately through many tactical retreats. It becomes increasingly clear that man’s powerful status has been destabilized and he is loosing out in the game of power as he is finding himself incapable of dwarfin, maiming, victimizing, and threatening women for his personal gain. Her novels concentrate on woman’s realization of power control and self-awareness.

As a novelist, Margaret Atwood discovers the anomalies of Canadian civilization in which women are not allowed to make any strategy of grabbing the male space. Her novels represent and reflect an important development in the post-sixties Canadian writing. The quest for identity, traditionally and by implication was with reference to the male in terms of the knight out male-questers. Traditionally, the woman’s quests were perceived in terms of marriage and ‘happy ever afterwards’ ends: not self-actualization or
individuation but self-effacement and socialization. In her fiction, Atwood attempts to fictionalize the progress of the women protagonists’ quest for distinctive feminine identity.

Joan Foster in Lady Oracle takes recourse to extra-marital affairs. The novel shows how this dramatic choice affects her life. The consequences of her affairs are painful and she realizes that she has made a mistake in taking a short route to pleasure. Joan fails in her relationships with men and she regards all men as killers. Later she realizes that, like all men she too is capable of living her life as she wants. She catches a few glimpses of her authentic self. Ultimately she emerges as a serious writer and offers an equal and better relationship between man and woman.

Cat’s Eye shows the inner life and sensibility of women. The emotional and intellectual development of the protagonist Elaine Risley suggests both the limitations and the possibilities of life. For women, the experience is a paradigm for human experience, and the sensibility for the human sensibility. As an artist Elaine realizes the position of women painter in patriarchal society. Through her paintings she wishes a society, which does not disfigure and disqualify women from excellence.

Renata Wilford in Bodily Harm is proud of her liberated and independent existence. But once she steps into the Caribbean Island she becomes aware of the still traditional male attitude. She undergoes a major transformation. She rejects her submissive role as a woman. At the end of the novel she is prepared to speak out the truth about all exploited people and women. As a freelance journalist she uses pen as a ‘weapon’. She challenges the male dominated society and hopes for a better and healthy relationship between man and woman. Thus Rennie’s writing as exposure of bodily harm
conducts a journey of the imagination, and leads to a more aware, more compassionate politically committed view of life.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Margaret Atwood does not depict only men as the oppressors. Women, too, in the novel are presented as equally ruthless and dominating and are castigated for their complicity in the processes of victimization of fellow-woman. The novel proves that even women are not exempted from perpetrating crimes similar to those of men. Margaret Atwood’s de-construction of patriarchal structures of power and dominion, therefore, is not gender specific but a comprehensive criticism of all power structure that inferiorize and de-humanize individuals, especially women. Offred, rebels against her society seem abortive, her covert rebellion against Gileadian ideology is praiseworthy.

The protagonists in Atwood’s novels learn through their experiences, imitating male attitudes, which do not lead them towards a complete and dignified life. They are forced to rethink and re-evaluate their decisions and choices. They realize that they have long been exploited and they feel that it is time to become human and men could do the same. They refuse to be victim and merely survive giving into the jungle rule of strong and powerful men. Her protagonists learn lessons from their lives and take truer control of their images of self and their future directions. They come to realize that women themselves have got to have faith in their own powers. Then alone can they achieve something. The fact that they can now refuse victimization implies that till now they have lived as a victim in the male dominated world, which threatens the freedom of women. They confront all the adversities with courage and fortitude. They no longer perceive themselves as a victim and attain the feminist consciousness – consciousness of
women’s own power and potential. They are involved in a grim struggle to attain freedom and full human status after millennia of deprivation and oppression. Margaret Atwood proves that everybody possesses the talent and the strength to revitalize the life and reject society’s well-trodden paths that suppress the human spirit. She does not desire a matriarchal society to replace the patriarchal. She claims human equality and human freedom of choice for women, and proposes androgynous vision.

Through her protagonists, Margaret Atwood has revealed not only the stereotyped perception of women and the traditional society’s expectations from them but she has also shown the changing man-woman relationships. She has tried to show how women are trying to redefine themselves. She also tries to establish the fact that the two sexes are complementary and neither is complete without the other. In *Second Words*, Atwood suggests the following strategy for women’s liberation:

1. Ignore your victimization, and sing songs like “I Enjoy Being A Girl”.
2. 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 upon a point.
3. Recognize the source of oppression; express anger; suggest ways for change. (145).

In other words, Margaret Atwood teaches women to know the glory of their lives and realize the confidence and dignity in women. She advocates human rights of women and wants to create a favourable atmosphere to develop the personality of women according to their interests.

Atwood uses and abuses the convention of both language and narrative in her fiction in an attempt to question any naïve critical notion about modernist formalism and
about realist transparency. Her fiction subjects both language and its various discourses to ‘psychoanalysis’, in order to reveal the structures, which shape it, and to show the ways it can be used to victimize women. Yet, throughout her exploration of language and discourse, she suggests that language is available either to entrap or to liberate women. Margaret Atwood created a language, which does not fragment and debase women. She has rejected the univocal statement or any concept of meaning or truth as single and determinate. She has explained that we must learn what is not said is often more important than what is said.

Atwood expresses the transformative power and a force of subjugation through powerful images and symbols. She has used journey metaphor, both as a quest for identity and unknown territories. She has also explored the various modes of gaining control over lives, as she has shown that the past must be regained. She dismissed the sexist assumptions hidden in language, which prevent women from taking hold of words, and from writing themselves into new, powerful identities. Her texts show the historical and cultural nature of ‘natural’ phenomena and subject them to control by analyzing their hidden assumptions. Her novels often look like portrayals of a search for alternative roles of a more viable kind for both men and women seeking to escape the preferred, conventional, socially approved roles.

Atwood has used mythology and folk tale in her writing to reveal the constraining effects of cultural heritage and social values. She used Greek and Latin mythology along with fairy tale and folklore element as images, characters or situations. By using mirror images, she reveals that art is not a mirror or representation of nature, but a reflection of process of writing, reading and interpretation. Atwood’s narrative strategies draw
systematically for structured unity upon familiar literary conventions, regenerated by theoretical gestures towards feminism, colonialism, theories of the gaze, the camera, the victim, psychoanalytic metaphors and images. Her novels constitute a powerful exploration of the labour involved in such psychic regeneration. Her heroines are depicted struggling to divest themselves of the social myths, which cripple their personal power. Her novels analyse the myth of men as free, and have detailed the victimization of men which a patriarchal social system institutionalizes.

Parody plays an important role in many women fiction, as it seeks a feminine literary space while still acknowledging however grudgingly the power of male space in which it can not avoid, to some extent, operating. This enforced complicity does not diminish the impact of its protest, but it does set up the conditions within which it will exist. The representation of women in the so-called ‘universal’ conventions are still being parodied and contested.

As an ironic form of intertextuality, parody is one of the most popular feminist modes of writing. It is one of the ways of investigating the position of women within tradition, as a way of discovering possible positions outside that tradition. Atwood, Laurence, Audrey Thomas have actually wrought major changes on the novel genre, on its traditional forms as well as its themes. Through intertextuality and parody, the women writers have particularized and situated the ‘universals’ of liberal humanism, not by the rejection of male literary and cultural discursive forms but by foregrounding its power and dominance by ironic and parodic challenges to its pretensions.

Atwood attacks romantic fiction which is one of patriarchy’s primary tools for indoctrinating women into the religion of beauty and promising them the happy ending of
inclusion into society if only they learn to be beautiful, slim, and tender with an estate and if they learn to market themselves properly. These are some of the stock images of women in romantic fiction. Atwood parodies these images with a view to deconstruct the male notions of women. In the words of Nageswara Rao,

In postmodern criticism, the literary text’s self-reflexivity has led to a general breakdown of the conventional boundaries between the arts. Women’s writing in particular has led the way in the new exploration of borders and boundaries and in inventing new morality and alternative ways of writing. (113)

Atwood seeks a language which should be multilingual, like birdsong, and be made up of liquid syntax of earliest language. Rajat Mahapatra opines that “her fiction depends on osmosis between the novelist’s speaking mouth and the audience’s listening ears, the two broad categories for which language provides the link” (155). She uses all meaningful interaction between human beings in groups, in nature, and in art. She sinks into the language of the unconscious, of emotions, of nature, and language of art – which cannot be translated to verbal language.

For Canadian novelists, oral language is better than written language. It bates the gap between the signifier and the signified and try to reach the audience with immediacy when the story can concretely establish the feelings communicated to the audience. Distanced in time, transferred to the mental level the experience is removed from immediacy. It is almost transferred into a forgotten territory. The reader can’t depend on the abstract words which are insubstantial in themselves. So, the Canadian novelists abandon signifiers, names, figures, because they don’t want to miss the meaning for words. They look for a certainty of the substantial stories against the abstract order
inherent in mere words and misnomers. Atwood, while concentrating on the tale, avoids names, places and time. Time is often personal, biological, and relational. Atwood’s ‘now’ links the narrator with the narrated as fiction reaches reality by approximating truth. Readers belong to a now which forms the most important aspect of the narrator’s language dimension. Her voice is reified when it is believed and materialized.

Atwood also reconsiders in her fiction the relation between language and body. In her fiction, the words operate as bodies and bodies operate as words. When the woman screams in pain she gives expression to her feelings inside time. But child-birth for the mother is an intense bodily experience, indescribable in mere words. Atwood considers the question why should the mind distress itself to find a language to describe such experiences. According to Rajat Mahapatra,

> Atwood believes that discursive speech is the enemy of passion and constitutes a distortion of the natural process. She sees language as the act of the instant (human Universe), not the act of thought about the instant (Universe of discourse). (160)

On the whole, thematically as well as structurally Atwood firmly staunches the idea that the women can lead a meaningful survival, only when they have their own authentic self. The concept of alienation accommodates the basic premises of radical, liberal, psychoanalytic feminism, and even archetypal critical theory. According to Coomi S. Vevaina, in Atwood’s novels,

> Jung’s concepts of the unconscious layers of the inner psyche, dichotomous outer thinking and sexist notions on gender-linked archetypes are merged, and ‘Unconsciousness-raising’ is considered vital to the growth of an individual. (2)
Atwood emphasizes the need for personal myths to overcome feelings of alienation and despair. She repudiates the fragmentation and alienation afflicting the society and feels that the quest for spiritual survival is a necessary antidote to it. The protagonists in her novels struggle to overcome alienation and achieve personal and social integration.

Atwood implies that the spiritual survival depends on rejecting the myths created for consumers and re-discovering the world of myth. According to Atwood, alienation from self and others is caused by estrangement from one’s own past, the problems caused by language and by thinking in terms of static dualities. Atwood’s protagonists are not only aware of the primary reality, but also of the primal material of the universe itself. They don’t renounce the world but rather draw deeply into it, pull through its surfaces and into the true and essential dimensions.

Atwood’s protagonists have undergone the heroic quest, as explained by Joseph Campbell:

The world of myth can be apprehended not by the conscious but by the unconscious parts of the psyche. The inconvenient or resisted psychological powers that we have not thought or dared to integrate into our lives remain unsuspected and then appear as the dangerous messengers. They are dangerous, as they threaten the fabric of security. They are fiendishly fascination, as they carry keys to open the whole realm of the desired and feared adventure of the discovery of self. (8)

After the quest for identity, Atwood’s protagonists are relieved from the alienation.

Coomi S. Vevaina segregates the process of moving from alienation to self identity into three:

1. Alienated State of Ego-Self Separation
2. Partially Individuated State of Ego-Self Union

3. Individuated State of Ego-Self Union

Joan Foster and Offred remain locked in their alienated states and belong to the first category. Renata Wilford Struggles to move from psychic anarchy and alienation to a state of spiritual wholeness, and comes to the second category. Elaine Risley belongs to the third category, as she achieves the union of her ego and self.

According to the psychologists, the human self is androgynous. Thus, a negative attitude towards men implies a rebellion against the contra sexual part of one’s own inner or true self. By sentimentalizing women’s bodies and envisioning a women’s culture, which will be all loving, nurturing and in harmony with nature, Radical Feminists will be creating new gender stereotypes which will prove to be as damaging as the old ones of mother, wife, sister, virgin, whore, goddess, witch and bitch. According to Coral Ann Howells,

Being caught in the victor-victim dichotomy, the protagonists of Atwood are not innocent, victimized one-dimensional human beings. Like the Aunts in The Handmaid’s Tale women are often shown to be collaborators in cultural myths shared by both women and men. (56)

She dislikes seeing either men or women as examples of gender and believes that if women have problems so do men as they are not members of a separate species.

Atwood is of the opinion that in modern technological Canadian society, men are psychologically more amputated than women as they have lost some kind of connection with their bodies. Though society regards passive, helpless men as aberrations, the fact remains that they are not wimps but entirely normal human beings. Atwood feels that women have to take the concerns of men as seriously as they expect men to take theirs.
She also insists in *Second Words* that women “should not manipulate men and hanker after power but attempt to understand them” (429). Because, a mechanical reversal of power positions transforming women from victim to victor positions leaves both the sexes trapped in static systems of dichotomies, which Atwood refers to as ‘violent dualities’.

Atwood is not interested in portraying ideal women but women as they really are with all their strengths and limitations. She dislikes the development of one-dimensional Feminist Criticism. Feminism offers the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledging the shadows as well as the lights. Atwood explains in “Paradoxes and Dilemmas” that her protagonists are not Relegated to the shadow-lands of either/or. They proclaim if anything, their right to be fully human, to nurture without being Earth Mothers, to curse without being witches, to suffer without being Little Nell the lovable victim, to copulate without being the Scarlet Woman. (273)

The movement towards Self-knowledge commences when the protagonists reject the polarities, peel back the social onion-skins and intuit the archetypal nature of their essential selves. After prying open the clamshells of alienating pride and propriety, they are encouraged to unify the warring aspects of their inner and social selves, see themselves as strong yet fallible, acknowledge the essential humanity of others, show regard for all things, experience a healing sense of peace which follows understanding. In Joy Kogawa’s words, such soul-searching broadens their consciousness and they grow to realize that,

within the reality of their universal inadequacy, uncertainty and blindness lies a limitless capacity to reach out to one another, to hold one another, a
limitless energy, a limitless empowerment which is available and accessible directly in their finite limited condition. (21)

Atwood’s ‘new woman’ is not only aware of her colonized status but is also in search of her roots – the real image, whose concept was lost amidst the constrictions of the male dominated society. The protagonists in Atwood’s novels challenge the traditional notions of ‘Angel in the house’ and ‘sexually voracious’ image. On the whole, it is the protest against uselessness accompanied by distaste for the frivolity of upper class social life. They detested the idea of being reduced to the drawing room decorative piece and to doll up for the social gatherings where they were recognized only as an appendage to their more dominating spouses. They struggle to break away from the stranglehold of tradition and reshape themselves in a more humanistic mould, emphasizing thereby the need for a thorough re-examination in depth of marriage and man-woman relationship, for a better understanding and sharing of mutual love and respect.

Atwood’s protagonists have been successful in identifying their problems, and solutions to them. They are slowly but surely acquiring the capability to face their lives, to break the customs, which so far crippled them. They refuse to be victims, but in the process of refusal and to build a healthy relationship with men, they still have to face indignities and be compliant.

A realistic approach to sex differences is an attempt to identify those differences and to find out how they are best expressed in the social and political milieu. The traditional forms of masculinity, which valorize self-centred, unemotional, competitive, aggressive and sexually promiscuous behaviour, require serious re-
evaluation for enhancing the well-being of both men and women. Atwood, as a pro
feminist claims the feminism, which is not anti-male, but is transcending the gender;
celebrating the immanence of women; identifying the ‘self’ in isolation; and living the
life through existentialism. Thereby Atwood proves herself a radical essentialist, who
celebrates the difference and uniqueness of women in the second wave feminism. The
third wave feminism or post-feminism begins, in which the issue of gender difference
falls away to the deconstruction of gender itself, and suggests the continuation of feminist
discourse.