Chapter 5

The Politics of Power: Working of Dualities in Atwood

Every individual confronts power in one way or the other. Since our society is hierarchized, our everyday operations are carried out in such a way that power is kept in its place. The superiority and control that the dominant group project, create in the oppressed group a feeling of subservience and they resort to silence and evasion. As Margo Adair and Sharon Howell say in "The Subjective side of power," "to raise the question of power is to threaten the freedom of those who have it" (221). So the system works in such a way that the dominant group’s exercise of power is accepted submissively by the less powerful. Terry Eagleton remarks that "discourses, sign-systems and signifying practices of all kinds, from film and television to fiction and the languages of natural science, produces effects, shape forms of consciousness and unconsciousness, which are closely related to the maintenance or transformation of our existing systems of power" (Literary Theory 210). In Foucault’s terms rigid control, whether it is in the school, army, prison, hospital or anywhere, is maintained through constant surveillance. The
structure of the Panopticon, as seen in Chapter I ensures the functioning of a disciplinary society. According to Foucault, the effects of the Panopticon is found throughout our power hungry society: "Prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons" (Discipline and Punish 228). Discipline in Foucault's terms, produces "subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies" (138). He argues that there has been a change in the exercise of power during the transition from traditional to modern societies. He calls this a "reversal of the political axis of individualization" (Discipline and Punish 44). The individual monarch was the supreme authority in the older totalitarian systems. Power was out of reach for the 'subjects,' and brutal methods were employed to see that power was enforced properly. However, in contemporary societies, power "circulates through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions" (Power/knowledge 151). It is an invasion of the mind rather than the body. Foucault believes that even the subjectivity of the subject is constituted by the operation of power. There is the constant fear that he is being watched from the tower and this forces the inmate to check himself. He internalizes the disciplinary mechanism and this effects the production of isolated and self-policing subjects. According to Foucault, any discourse exists in relation to
power and he analyses how power infiltrates quotidian life. But wherever, there is an over exercise of power, there will be resistance also.

By defining a powerful male self, contemporary cultural practices isolate the less powerful and the underprivileged. This includes women and nature. Dominating and oppressive, it is man who defines and determines woman’s world. As Atwood says in Circle Game, “like a country’s boundary, she is transfixed by your eyes’/cold blue thumbtacks” (40). This false sense of masculine autonomy marginalizes the ‘others.’ The realization that it is the men who wield power, makes women submit themselves passively to their domineering control. As we have seen earlier, the plight of women and the plight of nature are analogically connected by ecofeminists. Judith Plant observes that the “very essence of ecofeminism is its challenge to the pressured necessity of power relationship. It is about changing from a morality based on ‘power over’ to one based on reciprocity and responsibility” (Ecofeminism 19). Only by decentralizing power and distributing it can the present male-oriented societies open up and incorporate the ignored groups.

Bartky notes:

The disciplinary techniques through which the ‘docile bodies’ of women are constructed, aim at a regulation which is
perpetual and exhaustive – a regulation of the body’s size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures, and general comportment in space and the appearance of each of its visible parts. (*Feminity* 80)

Women are conscious of the fact that they are under the gaze and surveillance of the man and that their bodies are designed to “please or to excite” (Bartky 80). Thus, “a state of conscious and permanent visibility is induced” in women and this assures “the automatic functioning of power” (*Discipline and Punish* 201). Women submit themselves as obedient subjects of patriarchy. Bartky writes:

The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle, or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self-committed to a relentless self-surveillance. *Femininity* 80.

Atwood characters like Anna in *Surfacing* adhere to this notion of ‘victim complex.’ It is her feeling of inferiority that forces her to pay so much attention to her make-up which David insists. On the other hand, there are
characters like Joan who, instead of “monitoring” her food habits to reduce her body, eats without any check, thus creating a sort of resistance to the denigrating power.

Ynestra King argues,

the systematic denigration of working-class people and people of color, women, and animals are all connected to the basic dualism that lies at the root of western civilization. But this mindset of hierarchy originates within human society, its material roots in the domination of human by human, particularly women by men. “Healing” 115

Thus the man/woman dyad is seen as the basic opposition that constitutes the hierarchical system. The epigraph to Atwood’s Bodily Harm says, ‘A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman’s presence defines what can and cannot be done to her” (3). From the beginning of the novel, Jake has power over Rennie and she passively accepts his management of herself and her world. He redoes her apartment and destroys her plants that do not reflect modern concepts of décor. Even her clothes are chosen by Jake. But as time passes he abandons her and this also Rennie takes quite unemotionally. After the mastectomy she chooses Daniel who also had some power over her as the only man who had seen her
“inside.” But he refuses to sleep with her. Once on the Caribbean Rennie comes under the protection of Paul and she is almost “self-effacing with him, grateful for his acceptance of her body mutilated by the mastectomy” (Rigney 111). In the poem ‘Murder in the Dark,’ Atwood says that men are powerful because they have the “last word” (52). In fact ‘the word’ is theirs. Through her experience in the prison Rennie understands how powerful men are and so becomes scared of them. Rigney comments that “only in the light of such a recognition can Rennie free herself of their power and come to terms with her own male-identified tendency to reject other women because she sees her own weaknesses mirrored in theirs (Sexual Politics 112). This forces Rennie to accept her cellmate Lora. Through Rennie Atwood portrays a woman who, going after “invisibility” and “neutrality,” allowed herself to drift passively and willingly accept subjugation. However in the Caribbean Island, “massive involvement” becomes unavoidable. In the game of power, “man must conquer-other men, nature, women-and any process, or thing, that does not follow the rule will be ignored, excluded, annihilated” (Violent Diality 54). Atwood conveys the violence of sexual politics in her collection of poems titled Power Politics. She writes,

“You attempt merely power you accomplish merely suffering” (32).
In this collection Atwood explores the nature of power and shows how our daily activities are affected by power struggles.

*Life Before Man* examines power politics in the relationship between individuals, without direct reference to gender specific problems. According to Frank Davey, “Atwood’s male versus female dichotomy ... is a metaphor rather than a literal distinction between men and women” (90). The male for Atwood becomes a metaphor for all the dehumanizing and despotic attitudinal and behavioural patterns that can as well issue from a woman as from a man. This happens in the novel where Elizabeth treated her lover Chris, the “way men treat women” (145). She is bored of Nate because she “doesn’t like boxes whose contents she can guess”("Life Before Man" 213). Nate regards himself as a “lump of putty, helplessly molded by the relentless demands and flinty disapproval’s of women he can’t help being involved with” (*Life Before Man* 41). It is Elizabeth’s man-like behaviour that leads to Chris’ suicide and also to the failure of her marriage with Nate. This metaphoric portrayal of patriarchal control is extended to include Nate’s mother who smothers and subjugates him. Similar is the case of Elizabeth, who has a troubled relationship with her mother. Elizabeth’s mother was an alcoholic and succumbed to the injuries she got from a fire ignited by her own cigarette. Once a stepmother, her mother’s sister, comes into Elizabeth’s life, her life
becomes more difficult. She sees her aunt as a witch. Unable to withstand her cruelties, Elizabeth’s sister became insane and later got drowned in a bathtub. Elizabeth always believed that her aunt was responsible for her death. The powerful aunt “worked at developing those parts of Elizabeth that most resembled Auntie Muriel and suppressing or punishing the other parts” (*Life Before Man* 137). Elizabeth finds it difficult to separate herself from her aunt’s malevolent power. “Because Auntie Muriel once had all power over her, she will always have some. Elizabeth is an adult in much of her life, but when she’s with Auntie Muriel she is still part child. Part prisoner, part orphan, part cripple, part insane. Auntie Muriel the implacable wardress” (*Life Before Man* 123). Atwood herself, in an interview, has said that it was Elizabeth’s hatred against her aunt that drove her. “When the powerful negative mother-figure dies, she is left without anything to push against. She has a great feeling of evaporation.... Auntie Muriel has really been part of her. That was a thing that she was locked into” (369). Lesje also is alienated from both her Ukranian and Jewish parentage because of her warring grandmothers. In their search for separate identities, the influence of their mothers, thus become crucial for the protagonists’ growth. Joan’s mother is a “three-headed monster” who wanted her daughter to fit in the mould of her own desires. The ambiguous power that her mother had over her, however
becomes the source of Joan’s desire to rebel against conventions. It also spurs her creative unconscious. Finally recognizing her mother as her “reflection”, she integrates good and bad. According to Rubenstein, “Atwood dramatizes the truth that it is not by accepting and integrating a negative attachment that one can grow through and beyond its suffocating power” (“Escape Artists” 91). Thus, each of the characters finally acquires an increased self-awareness.

Nate’s discovery of his mother’s unhappy past and her admission of her frailty enables him to keep going. Auntie Muriel’s revelation of her past victimization makes Elizabeth alter her perception of her aunt.

Gender biased power equations that are portrayed in The Edible Woman or Lady Oracle are given a new dimension in Cat’s Eye. If Marian sees herself “small and oval” in Peter’s eyes, Elaine sees herself “a great deal smaller than life-size,” in Cordelia’s sunglasses (Cat’s Eye 303). Gradually Elaine possesses the power that had been Cordelia’s. Thus it need not always be the man who is evil. Every individual is in one way or the other, a manifestation of both evil and good. A similar situation is presented in Toni Morison’s The Bluest Eye where blacks are the villains. The novel shows how black people can be grotesque when they try to appropriate white culture. Like the Canadians with the American attitude in Surfacing, the blacks in the novel embrace the values of the American culture. Pecola longs for blue eyes
like that of white children, so that she can receive love and acceptance from whites as well as blacks. Belonging to an underprivileged class as well as caste, she has a feeling of inferiority. At school, black boys tease her. Pecola’s mother who works as a maid in a white family, lavishes love and affection on the white children. But her daughter receives only slaps and brutality from her. According to Terus Otten, the whiteness that Morrison “castigates represents the dehumanizing cultural values of society given over to profit, possession, and dominance. It is a whiteness worn by blacks as well as whites” (“The Crime of Innocence” 96).

However, Atwood does not confine herself to any one area where power is exercised. She has examined different patterns of domination; of men over women, of United States over Canada and of culture over nature. She explains how economic, cultural, psychological and political abuse, reinforce and double back on each other. She also explores the process through which the powerless come to resist their masters, creating alternative spaces and thereby arriving at self-mastery.

Atwood is angry and contemptuous of the torturer. In a lecture titled ‘Canadian – American Relations’, Atwood writes:

The world is rapidly abandoning is rapidly abandoning the Nineteenth century division into capitalist and socialist. The
new camps are those countries that perform or tolerate political repression, torture and mass murder and those that do not. Terrorism of the hijacking and assassination variety is now international, so is the kind practiced by governments against their own citizens. The most important field of study at the moment is.... human aggression.

In novels like Bodily Harm and The Handmaid’s Tale, she shows how political aggression is made effective through the aggression on women. It has been explained earlier how surveillance works in maintaining totalitarian and centralized power structures. It is such a system of surveillance that keeps Gilead going and it is worked out through the espionage network of the Eyes.

Ordering and regulation, effected within finite boundaries, bind mutability in the institutions and in turn retard temporal movement and spatial extension. “To study ideology is”, according to Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, “to study not ideas, but the material practices of certain (religious, educational, familial, legal, etc.) ideological state apparatuses and the processes by which subjects become constituted in ideology” (79). W.Y. Elliott observes that ideologies insure their survival through the creation of institutions. “So ideologies exist in all systems (free and totalitarian) as institutions” (Elliott 133). In a dictatorship they become very rigid.
The logic of power, when unchecked by moral criticism or built-in political balances, is ruthless. It creates a single center, a one-party elite, a terror, an all-pervasive and controlling espionage system, and periodic purges. The ideology is the system. It makes the institutions work to fit it.... (Elliott 133). Once it becomes conscious and the realization dawns on the citizens, ideology begins to be thwarted.

Surveillance, defined in terms of the opposition seeing/being seen, works as a major strategy in sustaining the circumspection that marks utopia. It binds the utopian space together, confining it within the purview of the centre's visibility. It forms the basis for instilling fear in the citizens and thus maintaining the power of authority. The panopticon erected by the regime sees everything clearly, but it is not seen. Mitchell speaks of the way in which space as an ideologeme is redeemed from immobility: “it must be pushed into motion, temporalized, internalized, fitted up or brought to life by time and consciousness” (93). These peripheral spaces avoid surveillance and stay away from the system's immediate circle of visibility. This evasion creates the possibility of undermining the effectiveness of such a system and renders it susceptible for dissolution.

Gilead in Handmaid's Tale displays the finiteness and methodical existence that govern the utopian ideology. Surveillance that maintains this
rhythm is worked out through the espionage network of the Eyes. The State tries to make the handmaids invisible by keeping away their true identities, but it also sees to it that these ‘invisible’ handmaids are always visible to the omniscient and omnipresent Eyes. Offred tries to invert such a situation. While trying to get away from the visible range of the Eyes, she also tries to make herself visible. Avoiding surveillance, she indicates the possibility of evading the fear inculcating mechanisms of Gilead. Small enclosed spaces like her own room, the Commander’s room, Nick’s room and the washroom become, for Offred, the sites of escape from surveillance within the bounds of Gilead. Her memories and recollections constitute the internal spaces that prevent her from being seen. Chris Ferns argues thus:

The privacy of her mind is something that remains inviolable. For all the elaboration of the State’s surveillance mechanisms, it cannot prevent her from committing treason within her mind—thoughtcrime, to use Orwell’s terminology—remembering with affection those whom the State has sought to destroy, judging the system and its representatives and finding them wanting.

(377)

Remembering becomes the radical act of rewriting into the empty spaces of the erasure, of recruiting and remembering the underground, the resistance.
Quarantined and manacled in a nightmarish state where people are “conditioned to obedience, [where] freedom is eliminated, and individuality crushed; where past is systematically destroyed” (Hillegas 3) and where “modesty is invisibility” (Handmaid’s Tale 28), night becomes the time when Offred retires to her secret havens – the physical spaces as well as the dark and internal spaces of the self. The gymnasium forms one of the major spaces of “the Night,” where the handmaids make silent and passive attempts to uncover the hidden vestiges of a bygone era. In the darkness of the bedchamber where they are not seen to each other, they learn to mouth and lipread, avoiding the watchful eyes of the Aunts. This act revivifies and restores a lost past. Jill LeBihan writes:

For the narrator in Gilead, the significances consist in the blackness of the ‘Night’ sequences which are as contrasts to the present white spaces in which she is supposed to invisibly subsist. By giving prominence to recollection of the subjective experience of the past, particularly as a private, illicit act, the narrator has found a way of providing Gilead with edge features. (101)

The white spaces are pictured in opposition to the black print and as essential to read it. As Offred herself says, “there can be no light without shadow; or
rather, no shadow unless there is also light" (*Handmaid's Tale* 99). She tries to avoid the light and occupy the shadowed spaces. The white spaces at the edges of a page, while being visible are in a sense invisible as readers are often conditioned to focus on the print rather than the white space. “The consciousness has not been taught to focus on the white page against which the black letters are defined and it is the print which is given the privileged attention as the unusual ...” (LeBihan 102).

In Gilead, Offred is forced to occupy the white space of invisibility and live “as usual.” By reinscribing herself on to the centre of the page through the dark, ‘other’ spaces that mark her private and individual consciousness, she questions and subverts the power of the black print, of the Word. This becomes Offred’s way of attenuating the force of the sanctioned and privileged Word, or, in other words, her way of toppling the textual hierarchies in an effort to wedge her subjectivity into the rarefied space of an authoritative reading. Sandra Toc remarks: “By stating at the start of the novel that she intends to last, Offred proposes to live outside of Gilead’s amorphous discursive borders in a space of the self which its doctrines have yet to chart” (75). Her ability to dream and recollect helps her in making inroads into this private space, thereby altering the map of disciplinary life that is drawn by Gilead. She often superimposes the space of memories on to
the physical space that she occupies. On to the frame of the present, she 
aranges scenes from the past. This is why she needs perspective, an “illusion 
of depth created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface” 
(Handmaid’s Tale 135).

Offred’s room in the Commander’s house becomes both her prison, her 
place of confinement and the place of her liberation. (Confinement, we have 
seen, is liberation in dystopia). In the “too-warm air of [her] room,” “behind 
the white curtains, between the sheets,” she tries to go out of the canopy of 
visibility. This room, to which she refers to as one she can claim as her own 
(Handmaid’s Tale 47), is where she gets transposed mainly into other quite 
different worlds. She divides the room into different sections and explores 
one section each day. Thus she comes across the scratched Latin message on 
the floor of the cupboard, “nolite te bastardes carborundorum” which is 
translated as “don’t let the bastards grind you.” Even though she could not at 
first comprehend it, she had the feeling that since it was a violation of the 
strict laws of Gilead, it must convey some message:

It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think 
I’m communing with her, this unknown woman .... It pleases 
me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least
one other person.... Sometimes I repeat the words to myself.

They give me a small joy. *Handmaid’s Tale 49*

The message inscribes in itself, the history of an ‘unknown woman,’ the previous occupant of her room, which has resisted the erasure attempted by Gilead and indicates, for Offred, the possibility of resistance. Andreaino remarks:

Before she knows what it means and where her predecessor learned it, the graffito becomes her scripture, a countertext to the Commander’s. She recites it to herself when she is supposed to be praying just after the Commander has read from the Bible in preparation for the Ceremony. And she keeps returning to it, touching it as though it were Braille, calling it a “command” to cross the Commander. (92).

While the message, as Chris Ferns says, is a mere “furtive joke to the Commander,” for Offred it becomes the space where “a woman whose death has put her beyond the reach of the state’s authority,” has attempted to make “a gesture of defiance” (379). The preservation of this “coded inscription” transforms the whole space of her room into a palimpsest where traces from various ages collate.
Further in an effort to evade the degenerate visibility of Gilead’s surveillance system, Offred carnivalizes herself as a spectacle when she dresses herself up in a parodic costume on her journey to the Jezebel’s. Mitchell observes how William Blake’s argument that ‘time is a man, space is a woman,’ “registers the popular prejudice that places women in an ahistorical or prehistorical condition, a static space of passivity and visual display” (93). The handmaids in Gilead are displayed as objects of the voyeuristic gaze of the Eyes. Offred records:

We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume Ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation. *Handmaid’s Tale* 199

This neatly ordered and packaged painting of Gilead that lacks “variation” is thwarted by Offred with her violent use of colours – the fragmentary, clumsy painting and make up she uses for the night at Jezebel’s. The disguise, she is forced to put on in order to enter the underground world, takes her closer to a distant past and shields her from visibility’s range.

Games, we have seen, act as a subversive factor that threaten the state’s regulated life pattern and provides the space for the marginalized to
exert their suppressed potential. The cruel games in Gilead, though part of the fear inducing mechanism and supposed to be “dignified,” create an ambivalent space that collates fear and festivity and thus cripple the designs of the state. The syncopated arenas of Prayvaganzas, Salvagings and Particicutions threaten the basic ideological existence of Gilead.

Salvagings are held in the football stadium as a dreadful ‘entertainment,’ and this space becomes for the handmaids the arena for realizing their own capabilities. “The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all” (Handmaid’s Tale 259). As Offred walks to the place she recollects an earlier time when the same paths were used by students. The buildings are apparently the same but now the “blinds on most of the windows are drawn down” as they belong to the Eyes (Handmaids Tale 256). The space on the stage where commencement ceremonies were once held with pomp and splendour, is now occupied by three wooden posts, erected to hang criminals. The handmaids are destined to occupy a place where they can be constantly surveyed. Offred tries to avoid the spying eyes and fantasies the sexual act with Nick, “in the dark, in the light reflected off the white walls” (Handmaid’s Tale 257), thereby violating and frustrating the seriousness that the Gileadean authority associates with it.
Rubenstein speaks of the word ‘salvaging’ as an ironical resonance of ‘salvage,’ salvation’ and ‘savaging’ (104). The word reflects the portmanteau character of the space it creates. While Gilead attacks the criminals fiercely, in a savage like manner, Offred savages the very system of Gilead. Though the state looks upon it as a way of salvation, attained by “eliminating [its] political enemies” (Handmaid’s Tale 289), it marks quite contrary effects. The handmaids too attain momentary salvation but in a savage manner. As Lorraine M. York remarks:

Events such as the bloody “salvagings,” the ritual slaughter and dimemberment of wrong doers, serve the dual purpose of ridding Gilead of troublemakers and of providing a cathartic outlet for the handmaid’s feelings of rage against the male power structure. Nevertheless, such attempts to forage a mass culture are bound to fail, Atwood suggests, because of the radical possibilities of subversion contained within these rituals and their assumptions.... The regime’s project... is thus defeated.... (13)

This defeat creates the space for the ‘other’ to surface, and the barbaric salvation loosens the grip of the oppressor on the oppressed in its attempt to make it tight and rigid.
Salvagings are sometimes followed by Participicutions “as a special treat” (Banerjee 77), an event in which everyone participates in the state sponsored execution of criminals. There are participating Janines who execute the policies of the state and represent its ideological fulfillment. But on the other hand, there are also Ofglenes who by doing what the state wants them to do and exaggerating it, help in undermining it. Ofglen kicks the rapist viciously and finishes him off quickly. When Offred asks for an explanation, she whispers, “Don’t be stupid. He wasn’t a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours. I knocked him out. Put him out of his misery” (Handmaid’s Tale 263). While in the eyes of the state Ofglen appears as a strict follower of its rules she unnoticeably creates a space of her own where she becomes part of Mayday, the underground resistance. Ultimately, however, this resistance is thwarted by the state which uncovers her devious motives and comes for her. But she hangs herself and attains salvation from the savage instincts of the regime. Chinmoy Banerjee observes:

The participatory execution is stripped of its horror and distanced as a game when it is called “Participation”... our ability to imagine the terror is undercut by our awareness of verbal play. Atwood’s dystopia places side by side two possible
modes of imagining the negative: the extension into horror and the reduction into absurdity. The horror, on the one hand, seems both excessive and unmotivated, and the play, on the other hand, seems comfortable and clever. "Criticism as Commodity" 78

The simultaneous presence of this "horror" and "absurdity" creates a dubiousness, an ambiguity that marks all the game spaces and thus questions the very foundations of utopia.

‘Prayvaganza’ incorporates in itself a space of prayer and of extravaganza, the pious atmosphere of prayer coupled with the excitement of a festival, “a show or a circus” (Handmaid’s Tale 201). This show is held in a well-guarded area where the guardians always have their guns ready “for whatever dangerous or subversive acts they think” the handmaids may commit (Handmaid’s Tale 200). But inspite of this protection against visibility, if becomes the venue for illegal actions. “This is one of the places where we can exchange news more freely, pass it from one to the next. It’s hard for them to single out anyone of us or hear what’s being said” (Handmaid’s Tale 201). Through the pious chanting of prayer, infiltrates the subversive whispers of the handmaids who are kept off from the others by a “scarlet rope” in order to prevent “contamination” (Handmaid’s Tale 201).
As the ceremony drones on with all piety Offred recollects how Moira used to whisper “obscenities about those in power” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 208). This had a “naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling” (*Handmaid’s Tale*) air about it inverting the hegemony of the Gileadean Word. Offred remembers the inscription on the washroom cubicle; ‘Aunt Lydia sucks,’ “It was like a flag waved from a hilltop in rebellion. The mere idea of Aunt Lydia doing such a thing was in itself heartening” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 209). Andriano refers to this as “a semaphore scrabbling to counteract Aunt Lydia’s words” (91).

Lorraine M. York speaks of the way in which ‘uniform’ in Atwood acts as an organ of power. In *Bodily Harm*, the first thing that Rennie sees as she lands on the island is “an array of uniform: one immigration officer and two soldiers” (“Habits” 8). The powers of the government and the army are hinted at. In *Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred and the others are wrapped in “army-issue blankets, old ones that still said US” (*Handmaid Tale* 3). In the novel, we find each class having a separate uniform that indicates their status in the hierarchy of power. However, the same uniforms can at times act as subversive weapons. Moria in *The Handmaid’s Tale* attacks an Aunt, takes of her uniform and dons it. In that brown outfit she could just walk “right through.” (229). Thus the females in Atwood, according to York, can “step beyond this uniform mystique once they have not only rejected the uniform
but also actively transgressed it, turned it inside-out”as Moira does (“Habits” 17). Thus even though Atwood asserts the ways in which power is exercised, she also explains how the same strategies work to overthrow the hierarchies. According to Chris Ferns, Moira’s escape after overpowering Aunt Elizabeth not only signals “a personal bid for freedom, but also exposes the limitations of authority” (“Values of Dystopia” 379). The more power the state attempts to wield, the more unstable its foundation becomes.

In the political space of *Handmaid’s Tale*, power exists at different levels and its manifestations are varied. In *Cat’s Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, Atwood hints at the power equation that can exist among peers. Though Elaine, Cordelia, Grace and Carol were equals, Cordelia could exercise physical as well as emotional power over Elaine. And it is this power that decides Elaine’s life too. Similarly, Tony feels the superiority of Zenia even when they were in school. She even thinks that it is a great privilege to be excluded from Zenia’s bad books, “Zenia’s contempt was a work of art. It was so nearly absolute; it was a great privilege to find yourself excluded from it” (135). Though Tony was not comfortable in a crowd, the presence of Zenia makes it all the more difficult. “In the presence of Zenia she feels more than small and absurd: she feels non-existent” (142). The title of the novel is taken from the robber bridegroom’s fairy tale where the malevolent groom
kidnaps maidens, takes them to his house, cuts them and eats them. In the novel the evil one is a woman who “insinuates herself into other women’s lives and carries off their husbands and boyfriends” (Shapiro 81). Zenia is a powerful woman who can manipulate the other women as well as men. In an interview to Lauri Miller, Atwood remarks that, “its so wonderful that women don’t just have to be good and victims all the time because if you make women nice all the time that’s the equivalent to making them powerless all the time” (“Villainess” 31). Zenia’s power over Tony transforms her and she is “redesigned”. She even gets rid of her mother’s ashes because Zenia thinks its “bad luck” to keep them. As Cordelia is to Elaine, so is Zenia to Tony. She is her “best friend”, Her only friend” (Robber Bride 180). Lack of support systems helps Cordelia and Zenia to tighten their hold on their weaker friends. Tony feels that Zenia’s power is such that “when she’s in the room, who can look at anything else?” (Robber Bride 182). However Zenia’s friendship is a sort of protection for Tony and when Zenia leaves she is again treated as an inferior by the others. “Tony without Zenia is no longer viewed with trepidation, and can be treated as a diminutive...” (Robber Bride 199).

If Zenia had power over Tony, she also had power over West. Once Zenia abandons him, Tony is sure that he will perish. “He will dwindle and fade, as in ballads. He will pine and wane. Then he will blow off his head”
(Robber Bride 200). But Tony was however, successful in bringing him back to his earlier self. As they enjoy their life together, Zenia steps in again like a bolt from the blue. She once again shows her power over West. “In no time at all – actually in about two weeks – Zenia has reclaimed West, in the same way she might reclaim any piece of property belonging to her... she simply tucks West under her arm and walks off with him” (Robber Bride 206). With the same pace, she finally ditches him and creeps into the life of Karen and Billy. Like an enchantress, she draws Billy away from Karen. As Roz thinks she is the “Robber Bride, lurking in her mansion in the dark forest, preying upon the innocent, enticing youths to their doom in her evil cauldron” (Robber Bride 331).

If as individuals one can exercise power over another, groups can also be powerful or powerless. The case of the black women in America have been dealt with by writers like Morrison and Walker. Having being subjects to the dual evils of racism and sexism they are doubly powerless. As Yerda Lorna remarks,

Belonging as they do to two groups which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society – Blacks and women – they have been doubly invisible. Their records lie
buried, unread, infrequently noticed and even more seldom interpreted. *Black Women* xvii – xviii.

If race and gender can create problems for women, class also can be a constraint. *Alias Grace* presents the difficulties encountered by the working class. It is her circumstances that force Grace to work as a maid in Kinnear’s household.

Another area of interest for Atwood is the power of and over nature. The diseased landscape of *Surfacing* stands testimony to man’s destruction of nature. Sharon Wilson speaks of a similar landscape in *Bodily Harm*, Rennie’s body diseased by cancer. In both cases, the killer viruses are more powerful so as to suppress the landscape. Wilson remarks:

> In *Bodily Harm* we can no longer fail to see that the cancer is already within the narrator and that she is the wasteland she seeks to escape, first by living on its surface and then by taking a more literal “vacation.” As the narrator’s aborted fetus and sliced-apart body in *Surfacing* symbolize personal, national, and societal dismemberment, Rennie’s cancer and mastectomy, evidence of a “break in” on multiple levels, suggest similar, more explicitly global themes: the cell image symbolizes cancer of the female and world body and represents “all women, all
victims and oppressors, all human beings, all." Thus the invaded
cells of the body also suggest cancer of the earth. Because of the
godess's stature as the mother of all, the womb of the earth, these
diseased cells also suggest a colonized Mother Nature,
prefiguring the demonic, fallen world of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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Thus the colonized body, the silenced Mother Earth, all become victims in the
hierarchical power game. Frozen and amputated, they at first, dance to the
tune of others. Gradually they transform themselves thereby shaking the
power equations that destroy them.