Chapter 1

Introduction

Well known internationally as a novelist, poet, critic and short story writer, Margaret Atwood is one of the leading literary figures in contemporary Canadian culture. Born in Ottawa in 1939, she spent her early childhood in northern Quebec where her father was a forest entomologist. She has travelled extensively and lived in several other places including Toronto and Ontario. Her years in the Quebecian wilderness influenced her writing which makes considerable metaphorical use of the place, its flora and its fauna. As an active participant in Canadian politics, its feminist movement and as the President of the Canadian branch of PEN, Atwood has tried to present Canadian national issues in her work. She has campaigned actively for the freedom of literary political prisoners and her writings are often expressions of her political leanings.
Atwood’s concern for contemporary issues has rendered her a political writer. In the Introduction to Second Words, she writes: “I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do. I began to describe the world around me”(15). Atwood’s politics is determined by her sympathy for the powerless, for those in the fringes of the hierarchical power structures of society. The individual novels are different expositions of the ways in which freedom is negotiated in these distinct domains of power. Atwood herself says: “I think there are political elements in just about everything I’ve ever written- if by political you mean who’s got the power and how did they get it and how do they maintain it and who is it power over and what it is the power to do?”(qtd. in Van Gelder 90).

This political stance as represented in her writing, gets manifested in the fundamental oppositions of feminism against patriarchal power and nationalism against colonial subjugation. As a woman, Atwood is concerned about her universally marginalized gender, reeling under the pressures of a patriarchal power structure. As a Canadian she is also pained by the colonial interests of the US coming to dominate her less powerful country.

Being relatively a young nation, Canada has been struggling to free itself from the vestiges of colonial experience and to create an identity of its own. As a distinct nation, Canada exists as a “confederation of regions, a
kind of empire between three oceans and an unnatural border that is larger than most empires found in history" (Wiebe 21). The French speaking people of Quebec form a quarter of its population while people who have 'come from different parts of the world constitute an ethnic multiplicity. Thus different geographical as well as psychological units constitute the federation. However when the U.S tried for a homogeneous society making everyone an American citizen, the English and French speaking people in the British colonies of Canada "could have no such homogeneous sense of nationalism/citizenship. They were isolated islands in a vast wilderness, they could barely understand each other and the business of living on the more difficult northern frontier demanded all their energies for a long time" (Wiebe 22). Thus while Canada with a group of nations within itself struggled to maintain an identity of its own, it had also to grapple with the problem of American interference. Canada overwhelmingly feels the presence of its southern neighbour USA as a military and economic superpower with unabashed neo-imperialistic tendencies. This American domination has come to affect all aspects of Canadian life, imparting a colonial mindset to Canada and its culture. The people are, as George Woodcock says, "daily conscious of living between a powerful and politically dangerous neighbour to the south and a bleak wilderness to the north" (qtd in Magid 327). However, as a nonassertive
nation with few policies to put forward in the international arena, Canada has been growing up quite unnoticed. Canadian artists, including writers who were not very much noticed beyond their borders, have endeavoured to forge a national consciousness and a distinct identity for their country.

The major problems encountered by Canadians are reflected in their literature. Being an emergent and immigrant literature, Canadian literature has shared the movements of British and American literary history over the past century and has been shaped to a great extent by those influences. In this situation the question of an authentic Canadian voice has troubled many Canadian writers. Robert Kroetsch remarks: "The Canadian writer's particular predicament is that he works in a language, within a literature, that appears to be authentically his own and not a borrowing. But...there is in the Canadian word a concealed other experience, sometimes British, sometimes American" ("Unhiding the Hidden" 43). So Canadian writers have always had to grapple with the problem of creating and sustaining a separate Canadian identity. Dennis Lee writes: "The colonial writer does not have words of his own. Is it not possible that he projects his own condition of voicelessness into whatever he creates? that he articulates his own powerlessness, in the face of alien words, by seeking out fresh ... victims?... perhaps the colonial imagination is driven to recreate, again and again, the
experience of writing in colonial space” (“Cadence” 162-163). This problem is common to all writers struggling to exist in a colonized nation. A similar sentiment is expressed by Raja Rao in his Foreword to Kanthapura. He observes:

“The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought – movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. English is the language of our intellectual make up but not of our emotional make up”(2).

Atwood declares in her seminal critical work Survival:

Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it, and I’m not talking about the fact that you may not have... explored... This Great Land.... I am talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost. What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. (18)

Through her writing Atwood attempts to provide this map, a geography of the Canadian physical as well as mental space. The
geographical space of Canada symbolically becomes the mental territory that
the Canadian mind inhabits. Being a woman, Atwood feels more at one with
the female state of mind and the map of Canada highlights its female
geography without ignoring the male. In other words, in Atwood's work,
writing the female body reflects the writing of the geography of her nation.
Analogically, reinforcing each other, each becomes the other, often making it
difficult to demarcate the two. The survival of women and the survival of
Canada amid hostile conditions become equally important for Atwood. She
draws on the obvious allegory of woman as nation and connects the two in a
mutually illuminating trope which problematizes the relationship. Feminism,
which emerged as a liberating force for women and nationalism that voices
the suppressed feelings of a subdued country, become the twin concerns for
Atwood. As Catherine.R.Stimpson in "Atwood Woman" states, "women's
collective repudiation [of the victim's role] is feminism; a colony's is
nationalism"(766), Atwood's political stance combines and discusses both
these denominations under the rubric of freedom. In a still larger context, all
forms of authority that curb and constrain the submissive 'other' are
questioned and challenged by Atwood.

The survivalist and submissive tendencies of the country that have
blossomed out of its being subordinate to the U.S and having massive
stretches of wilderness are traced out in *Survival*. The work, which sparked off a controversy, is described by Atwood herself as a “cross between a personal statement and a political manifesto”(13). The myth that unites the nation as a whole, like the American Dream, is Survival. Being marginalized to the US and having had to face hostile environmental conditions, survival becomes one of the greatest challenges that Canada had to face. The history of Canada is to a great extent, an account of the gradual realization of its own independence and a repudiation of the colonial mentality that had characterized the country for many years. David Staines says rightly: “The word survival in itself implies a discontinuous series of crises, each to be met on its own terms, each having to face the imminent threat of not surviving”(*Canadian Imagination* 24). The Canadian state of mind is thus closely related to the fact that the country has been victimized.

Atwood, in *Survival*, lists the four basic victim positions that show the transformation of the victim to the victor. In the first one, according to her, the fact that one is a victim is denied or the victimization is internalized to such an extent that the victim is unaware of it. This position is taken by those in a particular victim group who are a little better off than the other. They are afraid to recognize they are victims for fear of losing the few privileges they enjoy. In the second group, the fact that one is a victim is
acknowledged but it is seen as an act of fate, "the Will of God, the dictates of Biology (in the case of women, for instance), the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the Unconscious, or any other large general powerful idea"(37). In this position the victim cannot be blamed and he is not expected to do anything, for rebellion entails fight with destiny. In yet another class of victims, victimization is acknowledged and repudiated through defiance or rebellion. Here the cause of oppression is identified and energy can be channelled into constructive action. Finally, there is a situation where one becomes a creative non-victim, and frees oneself from the dialectics of power struggle.

In an oppressed society, in so far as the victim is connected to the society, unless the entire society's position is changed it is difficult to be an ex-victim. Atwood says that experience is never linear. One cannot be in one position in its pure form for very long and you may have a foot as it were in more than one position at once (39). The positions are "the same whether you are a victimized country, a victimized minority group or a victimized individual"(36). So while it applies to the Canadian as an individual or women as a group, it also applies to Canada as a nation.

A nation can be conceived as an integrated community, an aggregation, a palette holding a range of pigments and sustained by a
balanced mixing of different shades. Once all these shades fade and get obscured by a dominating Centre, the space of the nation becomes a palladium for the interests of that particular group. This group tends to subjugate the others and to push them to the margins thereby asserting authority as citizens and symbolically signifying nation itself. In the patriarchal system where “all language is the language of [Man] the dominant order,” he becomes synonymous with the nation (Showalter 346). Luce Irigaray speaks of the “logic of sameness” in western thought whereby two genders (male and female) are collapsed into a single male norm. Here “man is made the measure of all things” and woman is made the object of his surveillance (“Speculum of the Other Woman” 22). Under the scrutiny of the male, “the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer” (Bartky 68). Surveillance thus becomes the prerogative of Man.

The idea of surveillance, as a machinery for exercising power, is dealt with by Michael Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish*. During the seventeenth century certain measures were taken to save a town affected by plague. A “spatial partitioning” (195) divided the town into different quarters each under an authority which always kept it under surveillance. Individuals were prohibited from moving about in this “segmented, immobile, frozen
space”(195). The “gaze” was “alert everywhere” and those who moved about were punished with death.

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located...all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (197)

The whole idea is based on Bentham’s architectural figure of the Panopticon – a central tower with wide windows overlooking the peripheric building which is divided into cells with two windows. From the tower the supervisor is able to observe the prisoners’ shadows in the cells through the effect of “backlighting.” This device “arranges spatial unities” which allow the supervisor to “see constantly and recognize immediately”(200). Reversing the functions of a dungeon - ‘to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide’ - the Panopticon works on the principle that “full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap”(200). This set up, according to Foucault, helps “to induce in the
inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (201). The prisoner does not see but he is seen and the feeling that he is visible helps in sustaining power and authority over him. “The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (201). This is what happens in the hierarchy of patriarchal set up where man sees but women are seen.

In the periphery of this androcentric Panopticon of power women exist as secondary citizens, as objects to be watched, as the subordinate group in the margins muted in the loud clamour of power. Bartky notes: “In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: They stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement” (Femininity 72). The woman lives as the patriarchal Other and remains unrepresented in the male meaning system. This system that exercises absolute authority, attempts to centralize power, thereby “arresting and grounding the play of substitutions” (Derrida 1981: 25).

However in a hierarchical power structure which can be conceived as a concentric circle, centripetally holding the borders, there will always be antonymic forces attempting a dissemination of this central power. Mikhail
Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* speaks of the centripetal/centrifugal tension that counters totalization: “Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces...carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward”(272). This dyad manifests itself in language and ideology as centre and margin. The Male centre tries to close itself inside while pushing the ‘other’ out of the space of the nation. So the language of the Nation becomes the language of the Male who writes himself into the centre. This male centred narrative of the nation ignores and excludes the marginalized narratives that counter it. Thus it encounters the textual problem of closure that classical narratology speaks of.

In classical narratology the narrative is considered a closed structure. Gerard Genette speaks of a triple layered model – story, narrative and narrating – where narrative constitutes the vortex in which the other two levels dissolve. Thus he centralizes the concept of narrative and subordinates story and narrating to its hegemonic power. All the elements of the narrative are contained within the chronological matrix of the “first narrative” (*Narrative Discourse* 49). The discrepancies between the temporal order of the story and the narrative, termed as anachronies, are “embeddings” made on to this “first narrative” which acts as the supervising
code of signification. These grafted anachronies become subservient to the all encompassing centre in whose relation they are considered and create a totality, an ordered wholeness for the text.

In Genette’s view all the myriad discursive practices are contained within the text and are thus conscious, visible and strictly over board. The exuberant and excessive play of figural content is effectively stopped by the tyranny of succession and conclusive organization. By pressing the text into a unified whole sustained by the centripetal force of the narrative, the unconscious of the text, its discontents are repressed. The Genettean narrative model fails to thwart this suppression and the very process of ‘becoming’ is obstructed, resulting in a closed, static text.

The issues of repression and closure that Genettean narratology advocates are taken up and dissected by Paul Ricoeur. He collates narratology’s inherent textualism with phenomenology, thus introducing the much needed element of life into the structure. In his Time and Narrative he attempts the study of the different temporal levels that result from the division of narrative into ‘utterance’ and ‘statement’ in ways similar to the Genettean distinction between narrating and narrative. In Ricoeur’s view narrating implies a “presentification” of what is narrated (2: 66). But what is narrated is not “given in flesh and blood in the narrative but is simply rendered or
restored” (2: 78). Life cannot be narrated. It can only be lived and experienced. Thus a narrative speaks about something that is a “life process.” So besides the temporal levels proposed by Genette, Ricoeur adds another one, the lived time. While Genette’s proposal is essentially textual Ricoeur’s analysis considers time as experienced by the reader. A dynamic relationship is created between the different temporal levels by the reader who interacts with these levels. Reading thus indicates a subjective reorganization or rearrangement of incidents in the text and the fictive experience of time is the reader’s time which he/she gathers from an indulgence in the text. This playful time breaks the monotonous finality of the text and deflates it.

Thus the text’s strategies of thwarting and displacing the structures of containment act as a symptom and trace of the dynamic relationship between a closed structure and its discontents. Such an approach contests the traditional notion of “authority of objects... whose pedagogical value often relies on their representation as holistic concepts located within an evolutionary narrative of historical continuity” (Nation and Narration 3). The nation’s existence as a “system of cultural signification, as the representation of social life” also imposes on it the idea of an “impossible unity” as a symbolic force (Nation and Narration 3). The dynamics of marginalization
challenges the reading of the narrative of the nation as a closed text centered around the all powerful dominant Male.

If lived time is the time of the reader and it thwarts closed temporality, reading bursts open the continuity of history, which becomes a subjective analysis of events. So history as the recorded narrative of the nation is constantly deconstructed ruling out the possibility of a holistic static entity. “The nation is no longer a rigid thing, but a process of becoming whose nature is governed by the conditions under which people [especially those in the margins] struggle to maintain themselves” (Bauer 57). The nation becomes the ambivalent space of “play,” of churning out of countering strategies by those in the fringes. The less privileged tend to make use of every opportunity to assert their selves against that of the centre in order to create a “condition of belonging” (Nation and Narration 45). This opposition to the domination effects the creation of mindscapes that can penetrate the “transgressive” and “interruptive” boundaries of the nation. The circumference becomes the locus for this struggle. “The frontier does not merely close the nation in on itself, but also, immediately, opens it to an outside..... Frontiers are articulations, boundaries are constitutively crossed or transgressed” (Nation and Narration 121). The latent and suppressed potentials of the subaltern are motivated to vacate the silent spaces in the
margins and to enter the forbidden territory thereby inscribing themselves and rewriting the narrative of the nation.

Women's attempts as the subordinate group, to write themselves, take up a wider dimension and becomes concurrent with the writing of the nation. Narrating thus becomes a feminist project of empowering and constructing women, the "giving of a voice and a history to those who have been deprived of the consciousness of both" (Spivak 6). Traditional Western discourse confirms masculine power and denies any representation for woman as presence. She is a "man minus certain attributes"("Speculum" 28). Lacan's privileging of the 'phallus' and Derrida's logocentrism put forth a unitary notion of truth, an all-pervasive and oppressive phallocentrism. Derrida explains the literary process by identifying the pen with the penis and the hymen with the page. Irigaray and Cixous deconstruct this patriarchal logic and try to represent women's sexual identity in positive terms, by putting forth the concept of 'écriture féminine,' "the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text"(Showalter 335). In "Sorties" Cixous relates the working of binary oppositions. The hierarchization of man/woman, is coupled with activity/passivity. Woman is always on the side of passivity. Literature is "commanded by the philosophical" and the "philosophical constructs itself starting with the abasement of women."
Subordination of the feminine to the masculine order appears to be the condition for the functioning of the machine”(“Sorties” 289). For Lacan the totalizing order of culture is the language system and it is the language of the Father.

Tradition identifies the author as male and the female as his passive creation, an object that lacks autonomy. As a means of resistance Irigaray and Cixous offer the feminine practice of writing that challenges unitary meaning and asserts that nothing is simply one thing. Ecriture feminine should break down the monolithic order of the male text and emphasize multiplicity and plurality. This does not, however, mean the replacement of one order by another. As Irigaray says in “This Sex Which is not One”:

What is important is to disconcert the staging of representation according to exclusively masculine parameters, that is, according to a phallocratic order. It is not a matter of toppling that order so as to replace it…but of disrupting it and modifying it, starting from an outside that is exempt in part, from phallocratic law (68).

Atwood collates this writing of the woman’s body with the writing of the Canadian nation.
However despite the initial violence of the feminist movement that envisaged the birth of an awakened and independent female, feminisms of a later age have consistently exhibited a tendency to mellow. Atwood apparently espouses the latterday gospel of trust and mutuality between the sexes. While on the one hand she attacks patriarchal power structures on the other she undermines radical feminism. The idea of creating a "women-only enclave" is, according to her, foolish (Handmaid's Tale 161). Instead of destroying one tyrannic order and replacing it with another, there should be an inclusive order that incorporates the exempted outlines and creates a harmonious sense of interdependence. Atwood's feminist concerns and her concern for Canada as a nation are tempered by such an attitude. Writing the female geography becomes for Atwood a covert strategy for mapping the historical, physical and political geography of her nation. This study attempts to analyze the strategies by which Atwood achieves such a collocation of dualities.

The harmonious coexistence of dualities is what Atwood attempts to attain and this becomes the major theme in her collection of poems The Circle Game which earned her Governor General's award, Canada's highest literary honour in 1966. Inspired by E.A.Poe she began to write poetry while she was in high school. At the age of 22 her first collection of poems, Double
Persephone was published. However it was The Circle Game that established her reputation as an accomplished poet. Here she deals with contradictions suggesting conflicts between surfaces and depths. The chaos beneath an ordered and neat surface often scares us forcing us to insist upon still life and daily normal order. This confines our vision and distorts life. In order to “crack the protecting egg shell,” to break the circle we must dive deep in search of “an other sense” (Circle Game 44). This voyage of self discovery, an incorporation of the duality within the self, is recorded in The Journals of Susanna Moodie which was published in 1970 and is considered to be the best of Atwood’s poetic collections. Mrs. Moodie’s split personality represents the typical Canadian immigrant’s schizophrenia, the conflict within a nation divided and exploited by Americans. In the afterword to the collection Atwood writes: “If the national mental illness of the United States is megalomania, that of Canada is paranoid schizophrenia.” (qtd in ‘The Art of Fiction’ 72). Published in the same year the collection Procedures for Underground voices the memories of the protagonist as she looks at old photographs. In the title poem she speaks as a Persephone who has gone underground and accumulated “wisdom and great power” but returns to live in isolation from her companions. The exploration of dualities especially the tension between art and life continues in the 1978 collection Two-Headed
Poems. The juxtaposition of surface tranquility and real terror is also seen throughout the collection entitled True Stories published in 1981. As Barbara Hill Regney comments, “for Atwood the genteel and the complacent are merely surfaces for the disguise of the horrible” (Madness 109).

The examination of power structures where one group dominates and controls the others has been dealt with by Atwood in her earlier collections especially Power Politics (1971). These poems have a political touch dealing with the issues of power, tyranny, torture and violence. As part of this power politics she highlights “sexual politics,” the politics of sexual relationships in the patriarchal power structure which constricts and confines women. Oppression in all its forms physical as well as psychological becomes the subject in all these poems. The protagonist enters a new kind of relationship without false promises hopes and evasions in the collection You Are Happy (1974). The central figure is Atwood’s fully realized female – maker, poet, lover and prophet – a circe with the power to change all men into animals. The female protagonist moves independently in a search of self-awareness in the collection entitled Selected Poems (1976). By paying attention to the women in the man/woman relationship, Atwood manages to reverse the power positions. Unlike the early collections where the authoritative,
determinant male ego is central, in this collection the woman’s position is highlighted.

Thus if Atwood’s poems are inter-related through theme and image and create a structural whole her fiction which includes a number of short stories and nine novels also share many of the themes with her poetry. George Woodcock speaks of the “capillary links between her poetry, her fiction and criticism” (qtd in Grace 79).

Problems of identity and perception recur as the central themes in the short story collections like Dancing Girls (1977) and Bluebeard’s Egg (1983). The quest for selfhood is the major theme in her first novel The Edible Woman (1969) which records the traumatic journey of self-discovery of Marian McAlpin the narrator protagonist, a researcher at Seymour Surveys. A lonely and isolated person, she finds relief in the company of her boyfriend Peter. But she is shocked and angered when she gradually realizes that she was for him only a “stage-prop, silent but solid, a two dimensional outline,” (The Edible Woman 240) an other, lacking a self apart from the more powerful self of the male. She reaches a state of self-consciousness beyond the territory of victimization and rebels against her destiny in a technologically mechanized modern consumer society. She bakes a cake in
the shape of a woman, supposed to be her own surrogate self, consumes it and asserts the awakening of a more powerful self.

This theme of the quest for self is carried forward in *Surfacing* (1972). Here the unnamed narrator returns to her native place in search of her father who has reportedly disappeared. Thinking of her parents as “living in some other time... closed safe behind a wall as translucent as Jell-O, mammoths frozen in a glacier” (*Surfacing* 11), she cuts herself off from her family, her home and her past. Like the dying birches that symbolize a diseased nation, the narrator’s body is also amputated by imperialist, sexist powers. Her art teacher who forces her to undergo an abortion and who convinces her that women cannot be great artists, splits her like the American power that splits Canada. But as in *The Edible Woman*, here also victimization leads to drowning and the surfacing of a reborn self. Like her chopped up and consumed country, the narrator finally recuperates and rescues herself. Her anaesthetized senses recover feeling and she is able to unite herself with the land and the living. She is fit to live in the present with a new vision and power. She has sex with Joe in the moonlit forest in an attempt to reestablish her lost contact with nature and to revive her dead child. She who began in alienation “seeks integration into a community where... she can develop more
fully” (Christ 317). She dives deep into the lake and surfaces with a deeper understanding of things.

The search for an independent self leads Joan Forster in *Lady Oracle* (1976) to the fabrication of false identities. An unwanted “accident” child for her parents and morbidly dominated by her mother she feels herself victimized. Much to the disgust of her mother Joan is obese, not confining physically to society’s concept of the ‘feminine.’ Her mother’s continuous reproaching creates a wide gap in their relationship, which they are unable to bridge. Joan asserts her power and presence by battling with her mother and going against her wishes. Deprived of a happy and carefree childhood Joan feels lonely and isolated. The death of her aunt who leaves behind a small fortune for her on condition that she reduces her weight, forces Joan to do the same and then leave home for England. There she starts writing “junk” novels under the influence of Paul with whom she stays as his mistress. It is during this time that she meets Arthur a nationalist. From him she conceals her “wrong past” and constructs a new one and continues writing clandestinely. But Joan’s reluctance to be an obedient and submissive wife gradually separates them. She escapes to Italy after fabricating her suicide. In the end she decides to make a new beginning, to face reality rather than
escape from it. She returns to Toronto in order to save her friends who are accused of murdering her.

Like Joan, Elizabeth and Lesje in *Life Before Man* are also troubled by unhappy childhoods. As in *Power Politics*, *You Are Happy* and the other novels, in this novel, sexual politics again becomes an important theme. But here the main adversaries are female and the patriarchal institutions of marriage and family, are questioned. Elizabeth’s only sister was killed and her mother disappeared forcing her to live with her cruel aunt. She marries Nate to feel secure but soon loses that security as he leaves with her colleague Lesje. Elizabeth’s lover commits suicide and both Lesje and Nate have to get out of the relationships that society has tagged on to them. Meanwhile Lesje’s childhood had witnessed the fight for her possession between her Ukrainian Christian and Lithuanian Jewish grandmothers each of whom thought, “she should scrape half her chromosomes” (*Life Before Man* 61). Like Marian who turns to Peter she finds comfort in the company of William. However just as Atwood brings in Duncan at a critical point she introduces Nate as a foil to William. Lesje and Nate come closer but Nate finds it difficult to leave his children behind. Finally when he learns of his mother’s attempted suicide in despair after his father’s death he fears the same for Elizabeth and takes the children to her. As in many of Atwood’s other works, social isolation,
fragmentation and final transformation occur to the characters in *Life Before Man* also. Elizabeth, Nate, Lesje, Muriel all experience alienation and internal division before evolving out of their bleak worlds.

If the narrator in *Surfacing* goes in search of her roots Elaine Risley in *Cat’s Eye* engages in an artistic retrospection of her past life. She returns to Toronto for an exhibition of her work at Sub-versions, a feminist gallery. While in the other novels it is the protagonists’ relationships with the opposite sex that is highlighted, in *Cat’s Eye* it is that with Elaine’s girlfriends that proves detrimental to her. The past is mostly seen through the central image of the novel, the cat’s eye marble through which Elaine looks at the age of eight and sees herself as an artist. Elaine who had spent her early childhood moving from place to place with her entomologist father feels culturally alienated when she comes to settle down in Toronto. She sees herself economically and socially inferior to her friends Cordelia, Grace and Carol. In her desire for recognition and acceptance she willingly acquiesces with their demands and suffers the harassment they infer on her. Later her friends and their mothers become the subject for her art. When Cordelia moves to another school Elaine becomes assertive and aggressive and possesses the power that had been Cordelia’s. She overcomes the earlier failures, recovers
from an unsuccessful marriage and a failed suicide attempt while Cordelia disappears.

Stimpson has noted that Atwood in her writings “has explored the process through which the powerless come to resist their masters, creating alternative identities and arrive at self-mastery” (Atwood Woman 766). The crisis in power in her writing sometimes takes the form of a cannibalistic ritual as in Edible Woman and The Robber Bride. The narrators in the latter novel try to put an end to the threatening diabolic power of another woman Zenia who entices and ‘eats away’ their husbands. Intertextualizing the fairy tale of the robber bridegroom the novel creates a parallel in the robber bride and depicts the physical and psychological struggle of the three women to save their masculinist power centres from her bewitching influence.

The more political novels of Atwood clearly reflect the struggle of the colonized nationalities to free themselves from the vestiges of colonial power. This struggle is often divulged through the depiction of an authoritarian state that oppresses its citizens especially women. Bodily Harm is a political satire in the Caribbean Island and presents a disturbing vision of a state on the threshold of revolution. To escape the “void” that surrounded her, Rennie flies to the island and becomes involved in its political battle. Victimized by the eccentricities of her lover Jake, a packager of advertisements, and
abandoned by him after her mastectomy, Rennie falls in love with her doctor Daniel. But this relationship too is unfulfilling and her lost energies are revived only after her physical relationship with Paul on the island. She feels that she can still be touched. However she is imprisoned for her involvement in the island’s politics. The ill treatment of her cellmate Lora reawakens her. Although she is released on condition that she doesn’t write about the revolution she feels that she has a moral obligation to save others. Putting an end to her dealings with surfaces she mentally prepares herself to encounter depths.

Atwood’s twin concerns in the politics of power get converged in The Handmaid’s Tale with its dystopian vision of an appalling future presented from the point of view of a woman. It draws on the biblical story of Jacob, Rachel, Leah and their handmaids and presents a vision of malevolence and despotism effected through the institutionalization of the biblical precedent. The United States has been taken over by puritans and turned into the Republic of Gilead, an authoritarian society where power rests in the hands of a small elite, the Commanders. The state having reached the brink of sterility women are mainly made use of as ‘breeders’ to make up the demographic deficit. Reducing their identity to mere patronymic they are transferred from one Commander’s house to another as duty demands. In their “reduced
circumstances” even thinking has to be rationed (104). Rescue comes to Offred the narrator, in the form of fantasies and recollections. Night, a time of relative freedom is used by her to implement her strategies of resistance. Discontinuous memories of the past surround her and she nostalgically recollects her earlier carefree days in the company of her husband Luke and their daughter. These memories sustain her and in the end she escapes from Gilead.

Atwood’s most recent work *Alias Grace* (1997) is the novelistic rendering of a notorious nineteenth century Canadian murder case. After stabbing her employer, Grace Marks a sixteen year old servant girl escapes to the U.S with McDermott an accused fellow servant. They are caught very soon, brought to Toronto, tried and convicted. McDermott is sentenced to death and Grace is imprisoned for life. While she is in prison she is removed to a mental asylum where she has to endure a “regime of cold baths and straight waist coats.” A young doctor Simon Jordon engaged by a group of reformists comes to her rescue. After a terrible life in the prison she is pardoned and released. She goes to New York and settles down with Jamie Walsh an old fellow servant who had once stood witness against her.

The victim’s search for the self becomes a common thread that runs through the whole fabric of Atwood’s fiction. But given Atwood’s political
leanings the individual’s quest becomes the quest of Canada as a whole. Her spirit of feminism has extended to incorporate her spirit of nationalism, the concern for her victimized country. Critical opinion on Atwood’s work has tended to emphasize her political and social preferences. Her early reviewers include Michael Ondaatje and A W Purdy. Her works are being examined in terms of feminist, nationalist, post modernist and post feminist paradigms. Many critics have spoken about her portrayal of physical and psychological violence in relationships between men and women, observing her as a visionary interpreter of feminist thought. The female protagonist’s search for identity, often symbolizing the Canadian quest for individuality, becomes the centre of focus for many interpreters. Critics like Barbara Hill Rigney and Carol P Christ have discussed the theme of discovering the self through descent and return especially in Surfacing. Christ has also analyzed Atwood’s focus on nature and power in the novel. Margaret Laurence too expressed her personal sentiments regarding the novel: “Occasionally, very very rarely, I come across a novel which will continue to inhabit my head, a novel so striking that I become evangelical about it” (Critical Essays 45). David Lucking has examined the quest for selfhood in Bodily Harm while Sandra Tomc discusses the feminist and the nationalist aspects of The Handmaid’s Tale.
Atwood’s use of mythology, folk and fairy tales has been examined by reviewers like Marilyn Patton and Sharon R Wilson. Wilson challenges feminist assumptions that fairy tales limit gender roles. She discloses how the genius of Atwood perceives the fairy tale to be a means of transforming the constrictive images that tradition has placed upon sexual identity. Eli Mandel and Susan J Rosowki have commented on Atwood’s use of the Gothic. Many other critics have praised Atwood’s insight about the nature of suffering whether it be the suffering of women in the hands of men or of the Canadians in the hands of the Americans. Sherill E Grace explores Atwood’s “quest for a peaceable kingdom” opining that the Canadian psyche finds the city an uncongenial metaphor or landscape. The “semantic codes expressing urban/rural” hiatus stand for a “holistic vision of man-within-environment” (194). Many studies treat Atwood and her work in the Canadian context. George Woodcock has spoken at length on Atwood’s attempts to represent the confused Canadian psyche while at the same time explaining ways to get rid of boundaries. Judith McCombs traces Atwood’s development as a political writer and examines her treatment of the English/French Canadian relationship. McCombs’ collection of essays on Atwood has also provided an illuminating overview of the history of Atwood criticism.
The present study centered around the novels of Atwood attempts to explore how she combines the dual task of liberating women as well as Canada. While quest for selfhood becomes a common theme, the process of realizing ones victimization and responding to it so as to bring about a positive change differs from one protagonist to the other. The analysis examines how Atwood’s heroines achieve this by altering the boundaries of time and space and disrupting an ordered whole. The Atwood woman’s journey from the peripheral zones of the Male Nation to the centre becomes the subject of this thesis. Being an adjunct to the male centre, women gradually realize the extent of their victimization and try to become part of the Nation, to make themselves visible and heard in the patriarchal culture. By undermining the stereotype notion of Man as Nation and Woman as the muted Other, Atwood upholds the cause of women and highlights their transition. At the same time she does not advocate a toppling of the existing order and substituting it with another centre. She stresses differences and through decentralization, she believes in a harmonious and creative co-existence of dualities. Seen in the light of the Canadian Nation Atwood’s stand seems to highlight the preference for a mosaic structure where all the different geographical and psychological units retain their distinctive qualities while being part of their Confederation.
The thesis examines the problem of identity while challenging the concept of totality or wholeness. The co-existence of differences denies the privileging of a single centre. However the Freudian and Lacanian identification of the ‘Subject’ as Male establishes the centrality of the phallus and reduces woman to ‘No thing’. So while being autonomous subjects on the one hand, on the other women internalize the cultural myths associated with femininity and consider themselves victims of a more dominant power centre. The dilemma of creating an independent identity in the midst of this chaos becomes the focus of discussion in the thesis. It explores how Joan in Lady Oracle emerges from her self created world of deception and accumulates the courage to accept reality. The chapter also looks into the fragmented lives of other Atwood heroines like Marian who come to realize that marriage and giving birth can constrain and confine women. Paradoxically giving birth becomes a proof of ‘femininity’ for the handmaids in Gilead while the carnival square of the birth room becomes the site for silent rebellion and resistance. For the narrator in Surfacing also pregnancy becomes crucial in her repudiation of the victim’s role and her reintegration with nature. Language as the basis of subjectivity becomes significant in the growth of the protagonists. It is her confusion with words that makes Elaine a painter and the restrictions imposed on language in Gilead have a
dehumanizing effect. The efforts made by Atwood women like Offred also point to a resurgence of the spirit of nationalism that lies subdued in the margins. It is the subjects that make up the nation and the individual woman’s struggle becomes the struggle of the ‘nations’ with in the nation, thus refuting the concept of a single, unified whole. The quest reaches a stage when the protagonists realize that peaceful co-existence of differences is what is desirable. It is this self-realization that is crucial in the transformation of the subject.

In creating ‘subjects’, in pushing the marginalized to the centre history too plays its part. History is examined as temporality, a register and chronicle of change. The fixity and continuity of the historical past is questioned once it is approached from the constantly changing ‘present’. Into this discontinuity that favours gaps and ruptures the narrative of the eccentric is inserted. Memory in many of the novels becomes a historical strategy of birthing the past and as a narrative strategy it counters existing narratives. Interspersing dream sequences and episodes from the past disrupt the chronological order and unity of the text and deconstructs it. Memory makes writing, her story which questions the truth of a monolithic history. The Handmaid’s Tale with its ‘Historical Notes’ and its various temporal levels represent Atwood’s play with temporality. Cat’s Eye that denies the linearity
of time emphasizing that it is a dimension becomes successful in undermining
the rigidity and wholeness tagged to history. Similarly the narrative style of
Life Before Man and Bodily Harm also challenges textual unity. By conflating
the history of private individuals like Offred and Rennie with the history of
their society Atwood suggests how the woman’s history can be the history of
the nation. Further the struggle of the women symbolizes the struggle of
Canada to overcome the historical precedence of submissively admitting the
political and cultural supremacy of its more powerful neighbour.

Mapping the woman’s space also maps the nation’s geography. The
urban becomes a metonym for the metropolis of male power. The destruction
of the wilderness especially in Surfacing points to the American technological
advancement that is aggressive and unfriendly as far as nature is concerned.
In the masculinist power structure it is the man who looks and women are
objects to be looked at. Looking is the way in which space is visualized. The
recurring images of the mirror and the camera in her novels point to Atwood’s
emphasis of this domination. “Mirrored in the eyes” of their male power
centres, the women struggle themselves out of their voyeuristic frames to
rectify the distorted images that are often printed. From being a blank page to
be inscribed upon by the man, the woman tries to inscribe, to write herself
into the historical space. Rennie writes about the political upheavals in the
Caribbean islands while Offred narrates her Gileadean experience. In a way, by writing themselves they draw the geography of the historical space that is the nation and these spaces become extensions of the Canadian national space. The restrictive frames are broken up, thereby altering boundaries and creating alter/nations.

Power relationships between individuals groups or nations also is taken up for discussion, in this analysis. As one interested in the society and its people Atwood examines how power operates at different levels. In novels like *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* Atwood points to the relationship between women whether it is that of mother/daughter or that among peers. Dealings between man and woman figure prominently in novels like *Surfacing* and *Edible Woman* though Atwood never shows a radical mentality of eliminating man and creating a separate space for women. She often speaks of a complementary, creative and harmonious co-existence between the sexes. Her sexual politics does not talk of overthrowing one centre and establishing another. The more political novels like *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale* depict the universal manifestations of power – violence, torture, tyranny and totalitarianism.

Summarily, the Atwood women's quest for selfhood is symbolic of the nation's search for a separate identity. In this quest, existing structures of
domination are dismantled. This paves the way for those in the margins to find a place in the centre. Disruption of historical continuity and geographical fixity, lead to an alteration of traditional discourses of authority. Power, in Atwood, is transitional and the abuser and the abused change places. She does not advocate the destruction of one order and the creation of a similar one. Rather she puts forth the idea of “harmony among animal, mineral, and vegetable worlds and peace within the human one” (Wilson 294). While exploring how a woman in a patriarchal culture is created and is trying to create herself, Atwood also advocates a balanced system of human and non-human, where differences exist and unity is maintained in diversity.