Chapter 3

Rewriting History/Writing Her Story: Subversive Temporal Games

Putting forward, his concept of Dasein, the entity in its Being, which we know as human life, Martin Heidegger characterizes an individual in terms of temporality and belongingness. Since the time of Plato, there has been the quest for ‘being,’ the essence behind appearance, that which is not affected by the flux of time. But Heidegger, in Being and Time, argues that being is itself temporal. According to him, we do not ‘live in time,’ but we ‘live time.’ The two are inseparable. Man’s rootedness in the concrete temporal world, fuses the two. Looking at ‘Being,’ as something objective, ‘uproots man.’ David Steines remarks that “Reification, Alienation, One-dimensionality, are the now fashionable tags for this unhoused and kaleidoscopic condition” (Heidegger 78). It is only inside the “horizon of time,” that meaning can be ascribed. “Temporality makes up the primordial meaning of Dasein’s being in the world” (qtd. in Heidegger 99). Dasein exists through speaking about its
way of dealing with the world and also how it understands itself. This act of enunciation is a self-interpretation of the present.

The present as time exists as a consequence of the events that take place in it. A ‘now’ point in time can be arbitrarily fixed with respect to two different time points—earlier and later. Thus time is an unfurling whose stages stand in a relation of earlier and later to one another and it is encountered in change. Kant traces the changing world views of peoples through the centuries, to the differing conceptions of time and space. The Greeks, for example, considered time cyclical, while the Hebrews gave precedence to the future and subscribed to a linear conception of time.

Mikhail Bakhtin agreed with Kant’s notion of time/space, as forms of “cognition,” but he did not regard them as “transcendental.” He considered them “forms of the most immediate reality” (“Chronotope” 85). He coined the term ‘Chronotope’ (time/space) and used it as a “unit for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented” (“Chronotope” 278). No thought, according to him, is possible without spatio-temporal expression. Time is the fourth dimension of space and it is the chronotope that gives meaning to a narrative:

Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible, the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes
blood to flow in their veins... the chronotope functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, merges as a centre for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. ("Chronotope" 250)

The chronotope of literature is thus constituted by a fusion of the spatial and temporal axes. Both are inseparable and the differences in chronotopes result from the different ways in which people are represented in literature. Space, according to Bakhtin, is the social context and time is the historical time. It is the social context that helps in the making of an individual, and this individual embodies time.

Heidegger considers history, the principal embodiment of temporality. But history, according to him, is merely a catalogue of facts. Dasein is “not an isolated unit, its ontological structure includes a with-being with others, a community” (Being 108). History is, in Heideggerian terms, the “dynamic embedding of individual fate in communal destiny” (Being 109). The individual as well as society undergo change and temporality is the marker of this change.

As a register and chronicle of change, temporality suggests a putting in process, the co-existence of an initial and a final element – a beginning and an end. While never being either, change dynamizes the temporal moment and
demands the simultaneous occurrence of both beginning and end along with the presence of a directionality. However, this directionality, instead of pointing to a conclusive end, reveals its own endeavour to thrust every point into a situation of constant flux. Without any question of an evolutionary culmination in a stasis or 'being,' the existence of the text gets characterized as a process of 'becoming' in which all structures of containment are displaced continuously. So temporality becomes a never-ending process that resists closure. It colours itself as a symptom and trace of textuality, which is a manifestation of language that inscribes this temporality. Thus temporality constitutes the mapping of the text's processes of becoming, its constantly negotiated identity.

History, often conceived of as a chronological account of past events, implies an organized and systematized frame. Such a frame, however, demands an organizing principle which can be provided by the 'present,' the 'now.' There is, according to Riceour, "neither past nor future, in physical time as long as some instant is not determined as 'now,' 'today,' and hence as present" (Time and Narrative 3:108). But this present is in constant flux and looking back from the vantage point of this mutant and effervescent present, the fixity and rigidity of the historical past is questioned. Heidegger also points out how past events are altered and are given meaning by what happens
now’ and what will happen in future. “The past is rendered either significant or empty by what is yet to be” (qtd. in Steiner 107). The temporal designations of history are thus blown apart. It can be seen that the “past did indeed exist prior to its entextualization into either fiction or history” and that “both genres unavoidably construct as they textualize that past” (Hutcheon 1988a, 93). History, whether as a chronology of a nation or as personal history, often forms the “epicentre of the eruptions of contemporary fictional activity” (Hutcheon 1988a, 94).

The past is often approached through its “traces” in the present, as Derrida says. History, in his view, implies a new logic of “repetition” and “alteration” since it is difficult to see how there could be a narrative of history without it (Positions 57). Thus in this discontinuity that is history, “contradictions displace totalities; discontinuities, gaps and ruptures are favoured in opposition to continuity, development, evolution; the particular and the local take on the value once held by the universal and the transcendent” (Hutcheon 1988a, 97). In this history of contradictions, the ‘excentric,’ dispersed narrative of the colonized gets a chance to be asserted.

Nietzsche in “The Use and Abuse of History,” remarks that history should “bring the past to the bar of judgment, interrogate it remorselessly” (20-21). The past, according to him, can only be explained by “what is most
powerful in the present” ("Use and Abuse" 40). Hence as a reading of the past in the context of the present, the unity and linearity of history are challenged and its autonomy is destroyed. In recent years, historical fixity and authority have come under scrutiny. The attempts made by feminists to include the story of the excentric (women) in history, also become part of this disruptive process.

In Atwood’s fiction, the past events in the characters’ lives become crucial in their development and transformation. However, the past is approached from the context of an entirely different present and the unreliable narrators and the narrative style make the authenticity of the past, dubious. At some significant points in their lives, usually a powerful present, memories of the past come back as displaced fragments. Sometimes even narrators like Offred and Elaine are not confident of their ability to know the past as a continuum, with certainty. Elaine in Cat’s Eye comments:

Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space....

You don’t look back along time, but down through it like water.

Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. [But] nothing goes away (3).

This inconsistency problematizes Elaine’s inscription of her subjectivity into history. As Tony in The Robber Bride thinks, “historians are the
quintessential voyeurs, noses pressed to Time’s glass window. They can never actually be there on the battlefield, they can never join in those moments of supreme exaltation, or of supreme grief either. Their re-creations are at the best just patchy waxworks” (123). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the frequent assertion that it is a “reconstruction,” “establishes, differentiates and then disperses stable narrative voices that use memory to try to make sense of the past. It both installs and then subverts traditional concepts of subjectivity” (Hutcheon 1988a, 118). The novel invokes the parabolic past, a past that is revered, glorified and idealized – the biblical Gilead of Jacob, Rachel, Leah and their handmaids (Genesis: 30-32). Atwood’s Gileadeans, in an attempt to construct a society based on the moral system and values of this mythological past, actually undermine it. These values, often conceived as perfect and ideal can only remain symbolic. Pragmatic presentation renders them ineffective and unworkable, in the present situation.

At the outset of *The Handmaid’s Tale* we feel that it is Offred’s story narrated by the heroine herself. But our judgements are questioned by the text itself which destroys the order it creates. In the “Historical Notes,” (The *Handmaid’s Tale* 281 ) Professor Piexoto announces that the text is only a reconstruction based on hypothesis. For the readers it is first a reconstruction of the biblical Gilead by the U.S Gileadeans and then of this by the historians.
The personages of the past no longer exist and the ‘truth’ remains unknown. It is a mere construction of the future or rather the present in a still farther future which is already the past for the academicians who manipulate the story using their own implements and strategies. Thus the novel “metafictionally reveals what it does and scrupulously shows how texts of history are made and remade” (Bergmann 872). As Pieixoto points out, “... the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it, but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come, and try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clear light of our own day” (Handmaid’s Tale 293).

Depicting the pre-Gilead and the Gilead eras, The Handmaid’s Tale reveals the changes that have been effected by the imposition of strict regulations by the theocratic fascist state on the once free individuals. In the palimpsest of history, evidences of the past are whitewashed and given new colours. Gymnasiums, playfields and university buildings remain as vestiges of the past, but they no longer serve the purposes they once used to serve. Anything that evokes memories of the past is rubbed off. Besides proper names, the names of shops have been effaced and are given signs instead to prevent them from tempting the handmaids. In their “reduced circumstances” even thinking has to be rationed. However, rescue comes to Offred in the
form of fantasies, dreams and recollections. Night, a time of relative freedom, is used by her fruitfully when she implements her strategies of resistance. Discontinuous memories of the past surround her and she nostalgically recollects her carefree days in the company of her husband Luke and their daughter. The freedom that they then had now seems almost “weightless.” The past with the same values, the same emotions, the same freedom, is hard to be revivified. Though Offred conjures them up now and then on the screen of her mind “they are mirages only, they don’t last” (Handmaid’s Tale 97).

Still the analeptic accounts of the past reveal the rebel in her. These recollections satisfy her and she is able to find some ‘time’ for herself in a place where private possession of even time is illegal.

As a reading or historical reconstruction of a recorded narrative, the novel explores the various permutations of temporal dynamism by playing with them. The Genetteean time of order operates in the text on the level of the Gileadean time, the time that Offred spends at the Commander’s house. Reflections about a past time constitute the anachronies. By reinstating memories of a pre-Gileadean era, Offred breaks open the regularized time of Gilead and brings into it the element of life, Gilead as it were, by prohibiting reading tries to erase the traces of reading that it actually is. Offred frames this reading within another reading of her own, and by constantly admitting
that it is a “reconstruction” that lacks an order, she exposes the nonfinality and inconclusiveness of such a reading. “It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that…” (Handmaid’s Tale 126). The temporary and unstable time frame that Offred creates is once again demolished and reconstructed by the historians who try to “arrange the blocks of speech” (284), in the disordered audio tapes, according to their own peculiar principles of configuration. It is this reading of the historians that the readers of the novel try to unscramble through an interaction with the various temporal levels that the novel envisages. Thus by distributing the temporal momentum among the various levels of the biblical Gilead, the modern Gilead the pre-Gileadean time and the time of historical reconstruction, the text starts playing games with time. These games constitute the subversive measures the text practises against orders of domination. The novel thus becomes a series of textual overturnings that dispute and thwart the privilege of ordered time by constantly opposing it with a personalized and disruptive temporal frame. The fixity and stability of the historical past is burst open by the multiple framing that the text constitutes and the different contexts that it incorporates.
Through an insertion of her own time, Offred subverts the supposed regularity of Gilead. This is evident even from the fact that each alternate section is titled ‘Night,’ which is her period of activity. Jill Lebihan writes:

Fantasy and memory are consequently the very strategies which the narrator uses as part of her resistance of contemporaneity, erupting through the Gilead period in the regular ‘Night’ episodes that haunt the novel with the narrator’s consciously reconstructed, or her unconscious/dream worked personal history. (“Feminist(?) Futures(?))” 101)

Night is often a time of relative freedom for her and the alternate sections show the intermittent fracturing of Gilead’s central skeletal system.

Night’s dark corridors of activity signal the power of darkness and the limitations of the “menacing and beseeching” gaze of authority (Handmaid’s Tale 112). This time of concealment and intrigue, the ‘other’ time where the Eyes cannot penetrate, is posited as a powerful threat to the authority of Gilead. Lebihan notes:

It is the ‘Night’ episodes of the novel, significantly, in which [the] stories from the past emerge. In the daylight, under the scrutiny of the Eyes, the narrator’s recollection of the past puts her at risk. ‘Night’ becomes a definite, positive location from which to
articulate resistance to the status quo, provided by the structural organization of the novel, interspersed as it is with these sequences which challenge the narrative of the present. ("Feminist (?) Futures(?)" 101).

The bright images of a bygone era are silhouetted against the darkness of the night. It is the time when names that are banned are mouthed and lipread, when games are played and forbidden activities are engaged in. The novel which begins in the semi-darkness of the bed chamber culminates in Offred's final escape in the black van at night. As the says, "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will... I lie, then inside the room... and step sideways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it. But the night is my time out" (Handmaid's Tale 35). This personal time is dramatized in her discontinuous and disordered memories of an erased past.

The inactivity, the repose, that night implies is here replaced by activity. Night is the time when Offred is fully active, being the only time when she can escape the regulations of the ordered system of which she has become a part. The world of recollections and rememberances is posited against the world of Gilead which is a world of constraints and controls. There are in this world vestiges of the past that still remain as reminders of a bygone time. Speaking about Historical time, Ricoeur calls these vestiges,
“traces,” marks that a human being or animal has left in the place that it has passed. As Offred says, “that old gravestones are still there, weathered, eroding, ... winged hourglasses to remind us of the passing of mortal time...” (Handmaid’s Tale 30). Certain small things like the dish-towels too have failed to change in Gilead and exist as reminders of the past. For Offred this gives a strong feeling that “in some ways things haven’t changed that much” (Handmaid’s Tale 46) and keeps the wick of life burning in her.

Besides these analeptic accounts, Offred imagines and fantasizes a bright future that will be devoid of the ills of the present. She thinks of a time when she will receive a message from Luke. She gives a proleptic account of the contents of the message: “Any day now there may be a message from him. It will come in the most unexpected way, from the least likely person ... the message will say that I must have patience: sooner or later he will get me out, we will find her, wherever they have put her” (Handmaid’s Tale 99). She hopes for and ponders over the possibility of a time when the three of them will once again be united. Thus remembering the past becomes Offred’s strategy of mentally recruiting a bleak future. As Hayden White remarks, “a specifically historical enquiry is born less of the necessity to establish that certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events
might mean for a given group, society or culture’s conceptions of its present tasks & future prospects” (Historical Pluralism 487).

The abrupt and frequent transitions from the present to the past and vice versa, make the temporal arrangement in the novel, complex and unchronological. Freud speaks of the importance of the relation of a phantasy to time:

We may say that it hovers, as it were, between three times the three moments of life which our ideation invokes. Mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subjects major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience in which the wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfillment of the wish... Thus past, present and future are strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that run through them. (Art and Literature 135)

This desire, an attempt to fulfil this desire, and the realization, that it is difficult, are always there in Offred. Walking through the museum–like and desolated streets of Gilead she recalls a past when the same streets housed doctors, professors and lawyers. The pleasure of walking through these streets with Luke on Sundays, talking about buying a house there though they
knew it was beyond their affordable limits, comes back to her. But in spite of the strong desire and longing for such happy times, she knows that “such freedom now seems almost weightless” (*Handmaid’s Tale* 23). She believes that only perspective can save her from the troubles of the moment.

It is this perspective that Offred tries to achieve by the constant shift in temporal positions. Going back to the past, she tries to escape the present. Lebihan writes:

> The tale telling functions as a reassurance of the existence of the past, that things were different once. The need to juxtapose past and present is a desire for perspective... The shift in time-scales in the novel is part of its emphasis on avoiding the danger of accepting the present moment as usual when at another point of time, its standard would have been rejected as appalling or horrific ("Feminist(?) Futures(?)" 101).

For some, the past is an escape from the present. Tony in *The Robber Bride* explains that the reason for being a historian, “is that you can successfully avoid the present, most of the time” (32).

The mingling of the past and the present constitutes an act of subversion, a revolt against the regimentation that Gileadean patriarchy advocates. The text tries to construct a personalized history and an
individualized self, against the powerful depersonalization that Gilead
advocates, but at the same time it questions this subjectivity and individuality.
Offred’s time constitutes the ‘other’ text, the subdued one which she wants
the readers to unravel during the process of reading beneath the lines. Though
contained within the framework of a masculinist discourse and reading
practice, Offred’s narrative traces the operation of a female in time and space.
Focusing on typically female spaces out of the immediate reach of masculine
fields, the text’s temporal and topological description of dystopia amounts to
a female history and geography that wedge into the patriarchal determination
of an ordered and continuous system and overturns its ideological stances.

A similar rewriting of female history is seen in *Bodily Harm* which
records the changes that Rennie undergoes as a journalist. Like *The
Handmaid’s Tale*, this novel also presents a multi-layered temporal structure.
The opening line of the novel speaks of a specific present time and place as
Rennie says, “this is how I got here.” The story is told in first and third
persons. Like in most of the other novels, memory plays a major role in this
novel too. Remembering a past that she wishes to forget, Rennie, re-members
it and reveals its ambivalence. She speaks of her immediate past in Toronto
and also of a still earlier one in Grisworld where she had spent her childhood.
Recollections of the past often break up the temporal continuity of the novel.
As Rennie herself remarks in the novel, “there’s the past, the present, the future; none of them will do” (282). Time itself is deconstructed in the text. If the opening sentence is in present tense, the final line indicates a future prospect. “This is what will happen” (Bodily Harm 293). Many critics read this as a clear indication of Rennie’s safe return to Canada.

Play with time is very frequent in the novel and at many times it works to confuse the reader as in the statement, “she will never be rescued. She has already been rescued” (Bodily Harm 301). While in college Rennie had believed that “there was a real story, not several and not almost real” (64). But when she comes to the island, she is informed by Paul, “in this place you get at least three versions of everything, and if you are lucky one of them is true” (Bodily Harm 150). The surface simplicity of the novel is highly deceptive and the depths reveal the intricate patterns of a complex structure.

As Sharon R. Wilson remarks:

Like characters in all the novels... Rennie often views existence and herself like a film strip, one frozen, “collectible” moment at a time, although finally she is capable of moving out of a frame and beginning to live, rather than “snapshot,” a reality which merges past-present-future. Like the first-and third-person split narration of earlier novels, Bodily Harm’s retrospective “double” voice not only
features shifts between past and present but employs a future tense which is a step beyond Joan Foster's decision to write about the future. ("Life-Tourist" 137)

Superficially the novel exhibits an ordered development of incidents. Starting with the attack on Rennie by the rope man, moving on to her holiday flight to the island, her revolution culminating in her arrest and her final release. The reflections of the past provide insights into Rennie's character and her relationship with Jake and Daniel. The dreams of her grandmother and also of the rope man disrupt the temporal order of the narrative but they "reinforce and augment Rennie's awareness and behaviour" (Epstein 88). Fragments from the past are interspersed in between incidents of the present, sometimes the two acting as foils. After narrating Rennie's sexual intimacy with Paul, the narrative goes back to Jake. "Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked to hold her so she couldn't move" (Bodily Harm 207). Often the present events and characters merge with those of the past. As Lorna Irvine remarks, "segments of alternating stories are condensed and displaced so that the operation, the grandmothers, the sexually violent men, the doctors, the brutal beating of Lora, all have the resonance of recurrence rather than singularity. As a result the texture of the novel is peculiarly dense" ("Here and Now" 87). Slipping in and out of sleep, Rennie's dreams often "condense" and
“displace” her fears and anxieties. “It’s dawn, this time she’s really awake, the mosquito netting hangs around her in the warm air like mist. She sees where she is, she’s here, by herself, she’s stranded in the future. She doesn’t know how to get back” (Bodily Harm 116). These conflations of waking and sleeping, “of dreaming and experiencing, of sensory condensation and displacement disguise absolutely, both time and space” (Irvine 93). “There’s a line between being asleep and being wake which Rennie is finding harder and harder to cross” (Bodily Harm 172). This difficulty disturbs the chronology of the plot and points to the plight of a woman who has “stopped thinking in years” (Bodily Harm 10).

Though a “sweet Canadian” Rennie is at first mistaken in the island for an American agent, a part of the Americans who keep dictates in power through foreign aid and CIA manipulations. Like Canada, the Caribbean island is also under the threat of being consumed by foreign powers. The disease that is spread inside Rennie and the happenings in the island make her realize that “nobody is exempt from anything” (Bodily Harm 290). Like the characters in the other novels, Rennie also is a sum of her past from which she desires to, but finds difficult to escape. She regards Grisworld as a “backdrop” and as something she “defines herself against” (18). As a child she was taught “to be quiet, what not to say and how to look at things without
touching them” (54). It is her life in Griswold that has taught her to look at surfaces because here “surfaces determined whether or not people took you seriously” (Bodily Harm 26). Rennie herself refuses to be taken seriously, emphasizing that she likes to write only trivial articles. Towards the end, she has, however, come a long way from such plans when she decides to step into the field of serious political writing.

The temporal incongruities, that The Handmaid’s Tale, and Bodily Harm exhibit, are shared by Atwood’s other novels. Life Before Man with its third person narrative in three different points of view, contests the apparent linearity in the temporal development that it exhibits. Like a diary, it records events starting from October 29, 1976 to August 18, 1978. But the subjective inner time of memory causes interruptions or flashbacks and works to provide on etiology for the character’s mindsets. The separate points of view of three characters, one a male, problematize the traditional view of subjectivity. The three subjects become the products of readings. Though there is the presence of a single narrator, this centre is constantly contested and “the search for unity is constantly frustrated” (Hutcheon 1988a, 162) by the frequent shift from one point of view to another. These are rendered as a series of brief sections and each section narrates an incident and records a particular “chunk of time” (Life Before Man 308). Even the title of the novel points to a time
before man and the Royal Ontario Museum becomes a symbol of this prehistoric past while being the space where all the characters meet in the present. As Gayle Greene remarks, "actions are produced by ‘childhood imprintings’ that are produced by family histories, that are produced by history and behind history the past stretches back millennia, to prehistory and beyond, to the vast stellar spaces" ("Can Anything Be Saved?" 69).

Lesje’s interest in prehistoric animals seems to be a kind of escapism but that becomes an insufficient escape from the present. "Either she’s lost faith or she is too tired, at any rate she can no longer concentrate... beside the urgent difficulties of her own life (living with the husband of one of her own colleagues), science seems fraudulent and unread" (Craig 16). The cause of her trauma can be found in her individual as well as collective past, torn between two different histories, the hatred of her grandmothers because of anti-Semitism and Balkan politics. If Offred could nostalgically recollect her pre-Gileadean life, Lesje could only "critically revisit" it (Hutcheon 1988a, 40). Roberta Rubenstein describes the characters as “fossilized, mounted specimens”, like “museum exhibits,” traces of an undesirable past (Boundaries of the Self 101). Lesje sees man as a “mere dot” in the process of evolution (Life Before Man 308). The survival of man is not something inevitable because “the dinosaurs didn’t survive and it wasn’t the end of the
world” (*Life Before Man* 27). She believes that “everything that’s gone before has left its bones for you and you’ll have yours in turn” (157). So this “bone business” (194) is a way for her to bring alive a bygone era, to redeem its glory. She dreams of discovering a new kind of dinosaur which she can name “Aliceosaurus” (194), in a new “Lesjeland,” “tropical, rich and crawling with wondrous life forms” (*Life Before Man* 92). Her settled life with William is shaken when Nate makes his advances. But his inability to free himself from his home and children, creates a feeling of unbelongingness in Lesje. “It was the anger and the other thing, much worse, the fear of being nothing” (*Life Before Man* 293). To tide over the present crisis, when she flushes her birth control pills, she can stop the future by going for an abortion. However under the present circumstances she does not consider that option as viable. Instead of “regressing” she sets in motion a forward movement.

The long stretch of time in the novel, according to Greene, widens the scope of the novel and gives a sense of the range and power of the human imagination. “As Elizabeth sits and Nate runs and Lesje goes about her daily activities, their minds move through time, through various pasts and possible futures, evoking a universe of potential” (Greene 71). Maybe through an open-ended text Atwood is hinting at the vast storehouse of possible alternatives, of roads not travelled in the past as well as in the future. Just as
Pieixoto and the other academicians construct history according to their own whims and fancies, Lesje creates life out of the dead bones. She imagines a more interesting future like Offred who dreams of a future life, out of the confines of Gilead.

In the opening section of Life Before Man we find Elizabeth gazing into the crack in the ceiling. "Nothing will happen, nothing will open, the crack will not widen and split and nothing will come through it" (Bodily Harm 12). But in the course of the novel, many things happen and the crack in her relationship with Nate widens and finally splits, pulling her into the "black vacuum" on the other side. However she steers herself out of the smoke that is now the past for her and steps into a new future. Earlier, her present trauma had made her foresee a bleak future for her. She feels that her children will reciprocate the hatred and anger she feels toward Aunt Muriel. Her past has made her an embittered person and she will have to pay the price for it, being the mother of two girls.

Mummy. A dried corpse in a gilded case. Mum, silent, Mama, short for mammary gland. A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed. If you didn't want trees sucking at your sweet flowing breast why did you have children? Already they are preparing for flight, betrayal, they will leave her, she will become their background.
They will discuss her as they lie in bed with their lovers, they will use her as an explanation for everything they find idiosyncratic or painful about themselves... Her shoulders will sag, she will have difficulty with shopping bags, she will become My Mother, pronounced with a sigh. *(Life Before Man 250)*

The past, according to her, “yawns around, a cavern filled with menacing echoes” (89). Like Lesje, she is aware of the transience of life. “Every second is a pulsebeat, countdown” (251). Though at times she tries to drive into herself that she is not a “sum” of the past, the past hangs heavily on her. It is only after the funeral of Aunt Muriel that Elizabeth feels “the horrified relief of someone who has stopped just in time to watch an opponent topple in slow motion over the edge” (301). The final section presents a reawakened Elizabeth who is moved by the Chinese art exhibition curated by her. “China does not exist. Nevertheless, she longs to be there” (317). In the beginning of the novel, she was confused and undecided as to how she should live. But the short span of the present, punctuated by the longer past, has put her in motion, with an imagination and vision for a still longer future.

Nate meanwhile feels that he is a “tin man, his heart filled with saw dust” *(Life Before Man 246)*. He is not very happy about his life with Elizabeth. “Living with Elizabeth involves a maze of legalities, no easier to
understand because some of them are unspoken. Like an unwary pedestrian, he only realizes he’s violated one of these when the bumper hits him, the whistle blows, the big hand descends. Ignorance of the law is no excuse” (Life Before Man 163). This is in sharp contrast to their earlier life when he found Elizabeth “sitting like a Madonna in a shrine, shedding a quiet light” (49). Now she has, according to him, changed a lot. She has “rearranged time and space” to avoid meeting him (100). So Nate finds Lesje more approachable and more than anything she is “without rules” (163).

However, Like Lesje or Elizabeth, Nate too has an unpleasant past though he comes to realize it only late, towards the end of the novel. His mother, who was actively engaged in politics, reveals to him that she chose the field out of despair. After his father’s death, she had contemplated suicide, but politics provided her an alternative. This changed perspective of the past shakes him up and he has a new vision of future time. “It’s not only the revelation, but the unexpected similarity to himself that appalls him. He has thought her incapable of such despair” (Life Before Man 287). Now he imagines his daughters demanding things and blaming him for rejecting them. “They will criticize his clothes, his job, his turn of phrase. They’ll leave home to live with surly, scrupulous young men; they’ll marry dentists and go in for white rugs and hanging sculptures made of wool. Either way they will
judge him” (287). He feels himself in “mid-air, hurled into a future he could not yet imagine” (163). He is finally drawn into politics, something he has spent much effort to avoid indulging in and becoming, “his mother’s son.” However, he refuses to be defined. “He’s not shut, time carries him on, other things may happen” (*Life before Man* 305). This hope will keep him going.

Greene remarks:

The novel concerns the movement of life through time and addresses the subject of change, the possibility of creating something new against the weight of the past... Against all odds, in spite of the causality to which events are chained, people nevertheless change; and the word nevertheless recurs, to suggest the improbably, illogical, miraculous nature of change. ("Can Anything Be Saved?" 72)

Even though the past hangs like an albatross on the present, the Atwood women attempt to tide ever the crises by deconstructing and reconstructing their lives.

Elaine in *Cat’s Eye* recollects the past as she wants to forget it. While in a conventional sense, she seems to be “exploring the truth of her past, she is in a true sense, creating or writing a past as she chooses now to see it, rather than as it might have once existed” (Ingersoll 19). As a bundle of memories,
she compresses temporal sequences to construct a selfhood. Memory rearranges her past and writes her story. Chinmoy Banerjee remarks that the narrative is a “temporal braid, the alternating weave of two lines of narrative in different times” (“Time Hiding Art” 515). At the age of fifty Elaine relives her past while at the same time talking about her present. As the novel itself emphasizes: “If you can bend space, you can bend time also, and if you know enough and could move faster than light you could travel backwards in time and exist in two places at once” (*Cat's Eye* 3). Atwood says:

> Part of fiction writing is a celebration of the physical world we know—and when you are writing about the past, it’s a physical world that’s vanished. So the impulse is partly elegiac. And partly it’s an attempt to stop or bring back time (Conversations 234).

Elaine re/members her past self as she looks at it like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another” (*Cat's Eye* 3). The retrospective begins with her eighth birthday when she was forced to encounter middle class femininity. Having had to settle down in Toronto, she is introduced to the separate male and female realms at school where she finds separate entrances for boys and girls. Ridiculed by her peers and isolated from her family, Elaine starts searching for ways to escape and discovers something she finds interesting. “There’s a way out of places you want to leave, but
can't. Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it's later. Time has gone on without you" (Cat's Eye 171). Just as Offred's memories and dreams take her out of time, Elaine's dreams too help her to escape from time.

While reconstructing the past, Elaine deconstructs it. Instead of romanticizing her earlier life in the company of nature, she feels guilty for not being prepared to face the world. The recollection leads to a review of her relationship with people who played significant roles during the first fifty years of her life. The attempts made by her friends' families to socialize her form a major part of the text. The Smeaths made it a point to take her to church every Sunday. But in spite of being a professed Christian, Mrs. Smeath's attitude towards Elaine who was a heathen pains her a lot and deeply affects her. Hence it is not surprising that "the individual who functions as Elaine's Muse is Mrs. Smeath. This variety of the Bad Mother ... generates a whole series of paintings through which Elaine vents her anger, hatred and malice" (Ingersoll 22). The relationship with Cordelia, "the secret sharer" has also made dark imprints on Elaine's memory album. Cordelia haunts her throughout her life and her presence is something that Elaine cannot get rid of. When Elaine attempts suicide after the failure of her marriage, she hears voices beckoning her, "come on, do it" the same words
which Cordelia had used while tormenting her. The present anxieties and inconsistencies are supported by the past brutalities, a “rising of memory to consciousness” (Banerjee 514). The past is extended on to the space of the present to enhance its importance in the creation of the protagonist’s selfhood.

However, though Elaine expects Cordelia to appear at the gallery in the end, she does not. But Elaine has “already exorcized much of the guilt, hatred and anger generated in her relationships with Mrs. Smeath and Cordelia through her art, conveniently brought together so that the artist like her audience can read this retrospective as a testimony to the transformative power of art” (Ingersoll 23). Thus, it can be seen that from the early chapters where Elaine struggled to overcome the influences of Cordelia, the novel moves towards a change in Elaine’s attitude to life as a whole. The retrospective becomes the medium whereby Elaine attains a sense of self. Her art freezes memory and forces experience into frames, thereby stopping the “drip-drop of time” and mummifying the past in the spatial frame of the present.

By intermingling different temporal frames and multiple points of view, Atwood’s narrative technique as a whole contributes to the problematizing of the notion of subjectivity. First and third person voices in Elizabeth’s narrative exhibit two different facets of the woman. In one she is
very much in control and in the other, she is helpless. Since the point of view in
the novel as a whole is split, no single perspective clearly defines the characters. As Rubenstein in “Escape Artists and Split Personalities” remarks, “the reader, like a museum curator painstakingly assembling the shards of a vase, must construct each image from the characters’ own testimonies and the more detached narrative voice” (100). Atwood’s play with
time denies any fixed, concrete temporal structure to the novels and becomes inclusive, plural and multiple. Besides it is also a subversive strategy.

Thus the past for Lesje, Elizabeth or Elaine, is not a golden age to be recuperated. For them, going back to the past is “always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic return” (Hutcheon 1988a, 4). The past is remembered even if they want to forget it. Herein lies the contradiction. While the past is brought back on the one hand, on the other, it is used to subvert the linearity of history as well as to undermine the present. The Historical Notes that conclude *The Handmaid’s Tale* points to these incongruities that a present reading of the past can bring about.

The story of the long extinct Gilead is constructed by the historians from the “thirty odd tapes” that Offred has left as “traces.” Since in Gilead women have succumbed to an authoritarian patriarchal regime, “given Atwood’s conflation of feminism and nationalism, Canada in some analogous
gesture, has succumbed to its totalizing southern neighbour” (Tomc 83). The Historical Notes hint at Canada’s refusal to harbour female refugees escaping north for fear of “antagonizing its powerful neighbour” (The Handmaid’s Tale 315). As Pieixoto tells us, an escape from Gilead means an escape from the North American continent altogether not an escape to the northern wilderness. According to Tomc, such “dour predictions” must have stemmed from the 1980s history of Canada. “Written at a moment when Canadians had just elected an unabashedly American friendly Prime Minister, The Handmaid’s Tale predicts a future in which the iconic move of crossing the border into Canada will no longer represent the escape from American persecution” as it had during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (“Feminism and Nationalism” 83). By 2195, Canada has almost ceased to exist as a geo-political entity and the conference is held at the university of Dany, Nunavit.

The Historical Notes, thus in a way, reinforce and reestablish Atwood’s analogical coding of male/female and empire/colony. “The prediction of Canada’s dissolution as well as Atwood’s reference to Canada’s unsavory participation in Gileadean fascism, only reinforce her call for national autonomy, precisely by painting so bleak a picture of the price of Canada’s compliance” (Tomc 84). As a nationalist and a feminist, Atwood
warns of the dire consequences that the exploited victim has to face in a system like that of Gilead whether an American one or a male one. The novel by “trying to make [an] individual experience the source of public history as well, subverts both [the] traditional inscription of male subjectivity and at the same time, the traditional notion of history as non-contradictory continuity” (Hutcheon 1988a, 162). By juxtaposing her story (Offred’s) and public history, Atwood points to the fact that women or any other marginal entity cannot for long be kept out of the confines of history. Omar Khayyam in Salman Rushdie’s Shame calls himself “a creature of the edge: a peripheral man” (24). He is cut off from his paternal roots and finds himself an alien. He likens his state to that of women. He begins his tale in an almost excessively “masculine tone.” But gradually “the women seem to have taken over, they marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies, obliging me to … see my ‘male’ plot refracted, so to speak through the prisms of its reverse and ‘female’ side” (Shame 173). Thus novels like The Handmaid’s Tale and Shame, in several ways question the continuity of history while posing a challenge to the strongly centralized discourses of patriarchy.

Like these novels, Bodily Harm hints at the inscription of the subaltern into history. Though Rennie had not desired to involve herself in the island’s
politics, without herself knowing it she becomes a part of it and gets out of it with a new vision and a changed perspective of things. Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” writes:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies--for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement.... They have wandered around in circles confined to the narrow room in which they have been given a deadly brainwashing. (877)

It is this brainwashing or indoctrination that has kept woman confined and Atwood in a way, suggests that it has clearly interfered with both Canada’s history and literature. Viewed from this perspective, the novel appears to be an “intricate analysis of female history (with underlying allusions to Canada) and a recording of the dismemberment of the female body. Rennie’s divided consciousness, like the split space and time of the narrative seems to represent disrupted female history, dismembered national history, as well as a confused sense of self (Irvine 97).

Compared to novels like The Handmaid’s Tale and Bodily Harm the political tone of Life Before Man is less pronounced and direct references to
Canadian politics are few. According to Sharon Rose Wilson, the Canada of *Life Before Man* is an “encircled museum, filled with fossilizing dinosaurs” (*Fairytales Sexual Politics* 188). But even though there is not much action in the novel, very intense internal changes can be noticed in the characters, denying the prospect of their immediate fossilizing. The only character in the novel who is a little bit interested in the nation’s politics is Nate though he too at first only watches from a distance on television.

Twelve years before Canadian studies scholars discuss the immense cataclysmic change approaching a Canada mired in issues of national rights, all types of international trade realignment, ethnic discrimination, the marooning of arts and culture, and mounting difficulties of crime, environmental degradation and health deterioration, Nate passively watches his country fall apart. (Wilson 185)

But finally he realizes his responsibility towards himself and his society and hence starts moving towards the future. This is signalled by a change in the narration from present to future tense. “By rejecting a prescribed role and acting-- establishing a relationship with Lesje without abandoning his children and committing himself to causes even if they may be futile,” he does change a lot (Greene 194). Shedding away his indifference
towards the affairs of the nation, he forces himself to play an active role in the development of the nation.

Atwood’s portrayal of characters like Nate points out the fact that her politics is not purely gender specific though her main focus is on women. To get rid of imperialist power structures men as well as women have to contribute. Thus all these novels while posing a challenge to the strongly centralized discourses of patriarchy also undermine all kinds of imperialism. By doing so, they provide the time and space for the entry of the margins into the central discourses of power. Though most of her novels explore the issues of female survival, in a wider context this concern becomes to a large extent political and ideological.