Eco-feminism in the Selected Novels of Margaret Atwood

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CERTIFICATE

It is certified that:

I. The thesis titled ‘Eco-feminism in the Selected Novels of Margaret Atwood’ embodies the work of the candidate Ms. Sonia Khajuria and is worthy of consideration for the award of Ph.D. Degree.

II. The candidate worked under my supervision for the period required under the statutes of the University of Jammu, Jammu.

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Dated: Prof. Sucheta Pathania (Supervisor)
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(Sonia Khajuria)
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To live, that is to say, with thoughtfulness and with attentiveness, an attunement to both words and world, and so to acknowledge that although we make sense of things by way of words, we do not live apart from the world. For culture and environment are held together in a complex and delicate web. (Bate, The Song of the Earth, 23)
CHAPTER - I

Introduction

“Why do men feel threatened by women?” I asked a male friend of mine . . . “I mean”, I said, “men are bigger, most of the time, they can run faster, strangle better, and they have on the average a lot more money and power.” “They’re afraid women will laugh at them”, he said. “Undercut their worldview.” Then I asked some women . . . “Why do women feel threatened by men?” “They’re afraid of being killed,” they said. (Atwood, Second Words 413)

Margaret [Eleanor] Atwood is one of the most revered writers of Canadian Literature. Her works have created a dignified place for Canadian Literature at the international level. She rightfully earns the credit for falsifying “the beliefs that Canada had no literature, that it was incapable of producing literature” (Kaur 11).

As a prolific writer, poet and critic, she has an uncanny ability to make her readers rise up from the deep slumber of certainty by her experimentalism, and her wit to challenge the status quo. Coomi S. Vevaina and Coral Ann Howells have rightly observed in Margaret Atwood-The Shape Shifter that:

There are hundreds of possibilities for changing shape in Atwood’s writings: violent bodily transformations, gradual
changes over time in personal relations, shifts in perceptions of national identity and in social mythologies, as well as transfigured landscapes and evolutionary and climatic change with its casualties and survivors. Atwood’s fictive world is one of continual metamorphosis. (Foreword)

Atwood’s work cannot be bracketed in one literary tradition, Nathalie Cooke has rightly pointed out that “Atwood’s work is located at the intersection of three distinct, though related, literary traditions: feminist, Canadian nationalist, and post-modern” (19).

Atwood emerged as a prolific writer in those confusing times when Canada was witnessing a new wave of feminism coupled with disillusionment of American imperialism. Her first two novels *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing* clearly reflect the psyche of Canadians, especially women, who refused to be an American colony. Since the time of free trade agreement Atwood has been very vocal in her stand against the cultural and economic imperialism of America. During a debate in 1987, she spoke against the free trade agreement. Protagonists of both the novels echo the agonies of women in the world of “Americanised” Canadian men. In Atwoodian sense “Americanised” means a person having capitalistic attitude towards humanity and nature.

Atwood has been fearlessly raising difficult questions and criticising the indifferent attitude of men towards women, and environment. In her own
words “Women are human beings, they are equal human beings, I happen to believe that and I will fight to eliminate inequalities as I have done . . . you know women are equal human beings. That also means they are equally fallible” (qtd. in Meese 183).

Margaret [Eleanor] Atwood was born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Canada. She is second of three children of Carl and Margaret Killam Atwood. She has an older brother Harold and a younger sister Ruth. Her father was an entomologist; and as a result she spent her childhood with her family in the wilderness of northern Quebec. Atwood and her brother didn’t have the privilege of formal school education in the early years but were taught by their mother at home. Atwood learnt to read early as there was no other source of entertainment in the wilderness, moreover, she was not a healthy child, so she often found solace in reading. Her childhood love affair with nature began early when she was six months old. From the age of six her parents introduced her to the woods.

The end of World War II in 1945 opened a new world for her. The Atwood family moved to Toronto in the year 1946 but they continued visiting northern bushes in summers. No doubt, since childhood she was close to nature, and her pro-environment approach is visible in her works, and is also instrumental in her becoming an environmentalist; Atwood and her husband Grame Gibson are patrons of the ‘Friends of the Earth’, and she is also the honorary President of conservation charity ‘Birds’ Life’.
Though Atwood couldn’t attend school before she was eleven, yet she had started showing her interest in writing at the age of five. She admitted “Reading and writing are connected . . . I learnt to read very early so I could read comics, which I then started to draw” (An Interview, Guardian). She wrote her first play at the age of seven, which was not well received by her first audience i.e. her brother and his friends. She was mocked at by her brother and that was her first taste of criticism. She decided to stop writing plays and shifted her focus to novels. Meanwhile, she developed a passion for painting also, but she realised that writing was her real passion. Atwood became a poet at the age of sixteen, as she wrote:

I wrote a poem in my head and then I wrote it down, and after that writing was the only thing I wanted to do . . . It wasn’t the result but the experience that had hooked me: it was the electricity. My transition from not being a writer to being one was instantaneous. (Atwood, Negotiating 14)

Unfortunately, Atwood was born in the time when people were living under the shadow of World War II, which broke out two and half months before her birth. There was no indigenous Canadian Literature; most of the Canadians in those days “had only three hard cover books in the house. The Bible, the works of Shakespeare and FitzGerald’s The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam” (Atwood, Negotiating 6).
In the Canada of 1950s, Canadians were insensitive towards their indigenous writings, and even the local publishing houses did not support local talent “The colonial mentality was still in force . . . if you were a Canadian writer you were assumed by your country folk to be not only inferior, but pitiable, pathetic, and pretentious” (Atwood, Negotiating 67). In an interview published in *Guardian*, she confessed:

> When I started in Canada it was very hard to be a writer. Very few Canadian writers were published, even in Canada. If you wrote a novel you were told that there weren’t enough readers in Canada, you must get a publisher in Britain, or the US. Then-catch-22-you were told your work was too Canadian.  

*(Guardian)*

It was not common for women to take up writing as a career in Canada of those times, which was a cultural backwater. When Atwood started publishing in the campus literary magazines, she used initials to avoid her identity, she was afraid because she was a woman “I didn’t want anyone important to know I was a girl” (Atwood, Negotiating 21). The atmosphere was suffocating for women in all respects. In *Second Words*, Atwood writes:

> Most writers old enough to have a career of any length behind them grew up when it was still assumed that a woman’s place was in the home and nowhere else, and that anyone who took time off for an individual selfish activity like writing was
either neurotic or wicked or both, derelict in her duties to a man, child, aged relatives or whoever else was supposed to justify her existence on earth. (191)

Women writers were underpaid and often had to bear personal attacks by jealous male writers:

“The motivation is envy and competitiveness, but the form is often sexual put-down. “You may be a good writer,” one older man said to a young woman writer, who had just had a publishing success, ‘but I wouldn’t want to fuck you’.”

(Atwood, Second Words 202)

In the 1960s, as an undergraduate student at Victoria College, Toronto, Atwood witnessed a renewed interest in Canadian literature and culture. She was deeply influenced by Jay Macpherson, Northrop Frye, and E.J Pratt. She started writing poems, parodies, and reviews for the college newspaper while attending and giving readings at the local coffee houses. After she graduated from Victoria College in 1961, her first book, a collection of poems called Double Persephone was published, and it was awarded the E.J. Pratt medal for poetry. For further studies she went to Harvard, USA, on Woodrow Wilson Fellowship grant, and in the year 1962, she finished her Master of Arts. She even enrolled herself for Ph.D. as she believed that an academic path would provide her a dignified and financially secure career, which was otherwise impossible if she had decided to make a living as a
writer in Canada. Soon, she overcame this notion and moved back to Toronto, leaving her doctoral dissertation incomplete.

In Toronto, she worked in a market research company. Her experience in the company was responsible for the birth of Marian, the protagonist of her first published novel *The Edible Woman*. Since her debut in the literary field, Atwood has received many international honours and awards, including the prestigious Canadian literary prize – The Governor General’s award. She is also the recipient of honorary degree from Trent University (Litt. D). After winning the Governor General’s award at twenty seven for the *Circle Game*, she has published constantly and widened her field encompassing major genres of writing – poetry, fiction, and criticism. So far, she has published thirteen novels, more than thirty-five volumes of poetry, seven short story collections, nine books of literary criticism, seven children’s books and also edited five books. Being a versatile personality she also ventured into writing three television scripts, one radio script, and a political cartoon strip for Canadian Magazine *This Magazine* under the pseudonym “Bart Gerrard”. A hidden painter in her also made its presence obvious when she illustrated one of her children’s books *Up in the Tree* using an alias. Her latest book in non-fiction category *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011) is a collection of lectures, reviews and short stories that reflect her personal involvement with science fiction as a genre.
Though awards are not new to Atwood, yet it is worthwhile to mention that till today, at the age of seventy, she is still being recognised for her work, social activism and environmentalism. She has also been awarded the Crystal Award, World Economic Forum, Davos-Klosters Switzerland, 2010, and Nelly Sachs, Dortmund Germany, 2010. She is one of the most celebrated Canadian writers whose reviews and critical articles have appeared in *Canadian literature, Maclean’s, Saturday Night, This Magazine, New York Times Book Review, The Globe and Mail, The National Post, The Toronto Star, The Nation, Books In Canada, The Washington Post, The Harvard Educational Review*, and many others (Atwood, “Margaret Atwood”). Her popularity as a writer can also be judged by the fact that her work has been translated into more than twenty-two languages. Three of her novels, *Surfacing, The Handmaid’s Tale and The Robber Bride* have also been adapted as movies.

Her concern for the environment is clearly visible in her adoption of the “longpen” project, which allows writers to do virtual transatlantic book signings. This is an effort to cut down on environmental damage caused by air travel pollution.

Her first novel *The Edible Woman* celebrates the spirit of those women who refuse to be treated as a product for consumption by the consumer society. Her second novel *Surfacing* has been regarded as “a remarkably misunderstandable book” (Schaeffer qtd. in Wortley 17). It is the
story of a nameless narrator who undertakes a successful psychological journey to an island in search of her missing father. While searching for her father, she unravels a deep connection between nature and women. In *Lady Oracle* Atwood seems to convey that even those who often fail and are unable to ascend, continue to survive with a tremendous zest for life. In *Life before Man* she presents a bleak view of relationships.

*Bodily Harm* discloses the evils of the actual world of political atrocities and a woman’s lonely fight against breast cancer. *The Handmaid’s Tale* depicts the aftermath of an environmental crisis in a futuristic society. It exposes the manipulation of power by men to control women and nature. This book was awarded Governor General’s Award, the Los Angeles Time Prize, The Arthur Clarke Award for Science Fiction and the Commonwealth Literary Prize, and was also short listed for the Booker Prize. Her *Cat’s Eye* is a story of a female painter who struggles hard to construct an identity while trying to regain her lost childhood memories. This novel was a finalist for the 1988 Governor General’s Award. In *The Robber Bride*, “Atwood is concerned not only with female romance fantasies and male fantasies about the feminine, but also with the ways such fantasizing affects women’s concepts of themselves and their relations with other women” (Kudchedkar 133). *Alice Grace* is known to be based on factual events related to the famous 1843 murder story of Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper Nancy Montgomery in Canada. Its protagonist seems to be the reflection of Grace
Marks who was sentenced to life imprisonment after being convicted for the murder. *Blind Assassin* was awarded the Booker Prize in 2000 and the Hamett prize in 2001. It was also named as the best novel of 2000 by *Time Magazine*. It is a story of two sisters surrounded by betrayals in relationships.

*Oryx and Crake* can be called a post-apocalyptic science fiction. It highlights the adverse effect of technology which supports extreme commercialization of life at the cost of man’s relationship with nature. *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood is inspired by the story of Penelope, the faithful wife of Odysseus. The novel delves into a moment of casual brutality and reveals all that the act contains: a practice of sexual violence and general prejudice that society has not outgrown. Atwood’s latest novel, *The year of The Flood*, can be called a sequel to *Oryx and Crake*, but according to Atwood “It’s not a sequel, nor a prequel, but a ‘simultan-uel’ ” (An interview, *Independent*). Like all dystopia, *The Year of The Flood* is a satire on present day life. The publication ceremony of the novel showed Atwood’s pro-environment approach, the *Independent* published that the novel’s “publication is marked by a series of ‘musical’ book readings at which Atwood will read from the book’s ‘green hymns’, and is accompanied by local musicians and environmentally-friendly props made from re-usable Sainsbury’s bags and bric-a-brac reclaimed from rubbish dumps” (*Independent*). *The Year of The Flood* takes us to an indeterminate locale in
the future in which two young female characters find themselves caught in the great ‘waterless’ flood, a plague that is devastating the population. This can be called a masterwork of environmental awareness.

Among Canadian writers Atwood has the honour of attracting maximum critical attention from various parts of the world. In 1972, Atwood published her most influential and controversial book *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. It was reported in *The Toronto Star* that even before the release of the book “staggering first printing of 20,000, with college-course outlines snapping it up sight unseen” (Ghan 101).

Literature, Atwood believes, acts as a mirror to the reader, in her own words “Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind” (Atwood, *Survival* 18-19). Northrop Frye argues in his book *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* that Canadians suffer from acute identity crises with a difference, for they are less confused by the existential question “who am I?” than by “where is here?” (220). Atwood explains in *Survival*:

“Who am I?” is a question appropriate in countries where the environment, the “here” is already well defined, so well defined in fact that it may threaten to overwhelm the individual. In societies where everyone and everything has its place, a person may have to struggle to separate himself from social background, in order to keep from being just a function
of the structure. “Where is here”? is a different kind of question. It is what a man asks when he finds himself in unknown territory, and it implies several other questions. Where is the place in relation to other places? How do I find my way around it? (17)

Atwood’s writings have always advocated Canadian Nationalism, environmentalism, anti-war and human rights movements, and the power play between men and women. Atwood “has shown an endless talent for surprising her readers with her ongoing experimentalism and her radical challenges to contemporary social myths and fashionable ideologies” (Vevaina, and Howells, eds. Foreword).

If we go through the history of Canada we find that the status of Canadian women was not very different from that of the natives until the twentieth century. Canadian wilderness also bore the brunt of being a colony before Canada was colonised.

Before Canada was colonised, the economic rivalry existed between French and English. Both the countries ravished Canada’s natural resources. Unlike other colonised nations Canada was paying allegiance to several other countries. It was colonised by France and England together. By the late seventeenth century North America began to be a new place of collision between the two colonial powers.
In the seven years’ war (1756-1762), in Europe and the battle on the Plains of Abraham in 1759, the French were defeated by the British and as a result the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1763 and the French lost New France (Quebec) to the British.

The war of 1812 united the French speaking and English speaking colonies against an emerging common enemy U.S.A. The war aroused a sense of nationhood as well as loyalty to Britain. It started the process of building up a nation called Canada. With the impending American threat, British and French reached a political compromise. On July 1, 1867, The British North American Act (BNA Act) established the Dominion of Canada accommodating two official languages (English and French) and two religions (Protestantism and Catholicism).

When Canada emerged as a single nation, its indigenous literature was at the cradle stage. It would not be wrong to say that Canadian Literature is “the fruit of the British seed planted in American soil” (Frye 140). The earliest growth of Canadian Literature can be traced to the oral voices of the aboriginals. They would orally pass on their legacies in the form of songs and stories to the next generation. Their songs and stories revolved around their own lives as “Canada has had no heroic issues, no gigantic war or adventurous events” (Dhawan 25). Early Canadian Literature is filled with stories of immigrant life and historical romances. Early Canadian Literature “had only new content, but no form, which is
autonomous and no myth either” (Dhawan 25). Looking deeply into early Canadian Literature we find it in the form of reportage, which gradually matured into romantic narratives.

The term ‘literature in Canada’ poses a problem: ‘Canadian literature is not bounded by citizenship (there were writers before there was a ‘Canada’, and there have been immigrants and long term visitors since for whom Canada has been home). It is not restricted to Canadian settings. Neither does it imply some single nationalist thesis . . . The word ‘Canada’ eludes precise translation: it has variously been taken as the Spanish for ‘nothing here’(a ca nada), the Portuguese for ‘narrow road’, the Montagnais Cree for ‘clean land’, the Mohawk word for ‘castle’(canadaghi) and a word meaning ‘the mouth of the country or ‘hunting land’ or ‘Province’. (New 4, 5)

Canadian literary history starts with the narratives of explorers, missionaries and fur traders in the early seventeenth century” (Hammill 5). John Swanton (1873-1958) and Charles Edenshaw (1839-1920) wrote epics which constituted a form of new world history. Anglicanism greatly influenced the intellectuals in the late nineteenth century, when it supported the idea of natural theology. William Palley (1743-1805) asserted in his teachings that God is in nature and he is the supreme designer and through nature God showcases his designs. His teachings, along with Scots’s Common Sense,
were taught at the University level. University teachers cum writers like William Dawson (author of *Fossil Men and their Modern Representatives*, 1880), and Daniel Wilson (author of *Prehistoric Man*, 1862), were quite influenced by the teachings of William Palley and Scots.

The believers of *Common Sense* acknowledged the distinction between mind and matter, between subject and object, but they did not separate science from theology. Few people feared some problems in accepting that theology and science complement each other “The political corollaries of such a stance involved rejecting urban industrialisation and praising agrarian society, and rejecting American society because it was identified with instability and industrial rest” (New 88). William Kirby wrote an epic *The U.E.: a Tate of Upper Canada* (1859), “portraying United Empire loyalist Canada as an idyllic garden”, he also “opposed laissez-faire doctrine the Spencerian idea that a millionaire was economic proof of natural selection” (New 88).

Grant, Dawson and Wilson tried to find out how Charles Darwin’s “evolution theory” complemented natural theology. Being a theorist Darwin could not convince them that nature was not a supreme designer but “simply demonstrated its own evolving designs” (New 89). In *The Politics of Labor* (1887), and in the *Labor Advocate* (1890), T. Phillips Thompson wrote against Spencerian Social Darwinism as an exploitation of working class by the capitalists. In Quebec, poetry and prose were replete with the romantic
versions of the past. Gradually, by the beginning of twentieth century, there was a visible shift from “Common Sense” dualism towards dialectic of progress. Science and moral philosophy became two separate entities under the patronage of Government Research Programme.

“The mist of romantic euphoria began to be dismissed from Canadian fiction when a new effort at realism appeared in the twenties” (King, Cultural Nationalism 197). By the 1910s, social scene as well as literary scene started altering. Railways emerged as a symbol of national unity as it linked people and it was a period of progressive nationalist expansion.

Charles G. D. Roberts, his younger brother Theodore Goodridge Roberts, Ernest Thompson Seton, Alan Sullivan and Arthur Heming wrote about landscape and animal behaviour. C.G.D Roberts’s Kindred of the Wild (1902) and The Hunters of the Silences (1907) presented animal stories in a sympathetic manner. Another novelist R.J.C Stead, in his novels Neighbours (1922), The Smoking Flax (1924), and Grain (1926) told some realistic stories putting man in the center against the backdrop of the prairies. Wild Geese (1925), by the Norwegian, Martha Ostenso, is another compelling realistic novel revolving around hardships faced by a girl Judith at the hands of her father. Stephen Leacock, the author of Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town (1912), wrote humorous vignettes of provincial life. Another important prose writer of the period was Sara Jeannette Duncan, who in her famous novel The Imperialist (1904), warns Canadians about the challenges
of the American economic expansion. Her writings directly didn’t deal with feminism; she talked about independence and recognition. Stephen Leacock and S.J.Duncan might be considered “the polarities between which the best Canadian writing has often moved” (King, Cultural Nationalism 197).

Nellie McClung (1873-1951), Arthur Stringer (1874-1950), Robert Service (1874-1958), and Lucy Maud Montgomery (1874-1942), are those writers who “provide additional paradigms of the sentimentalizing of East and West. Separately, they tell of commitment and of manipulation, of struggles to match experience with the conventions of romance, or to free experience from them” (New 97).

Anne of Green Gables (1908), a classic children’s novel by L.M. Montgomery tells the story of a red headed orphan girl, how she overcomes the emotional problems of adolescence, and the role of education in a woman’s life. It was so much loved by the people that it was adapted as a television film in 1986. Robert Service became popular with his vernacular style in his poetry. Songs of a Sourdough (1907), The Spell of the Yukon (1907), Ballads of a Cheechako (1909), and Rhymes of a Rolling Stone (1912), are some of his remarkable works reflecting his streak of sentiment. Another important writer Arthur Stringer is remembered for his sentimental novels like The Mud Lark (1932), and his ‘Prairie Trilogy’ of 1915-21. Nellie McClung’s famous novel Sowing Seeds in Danny (1908), sold 100,000 copies. Another novel of hers In Times Like These (1915), can be
called a feminist reading, and two volumes of her autobiography, *Clearing in the West* (1936), and the *Stream Runs Fast* (1945), talks of her experiences with life and specially with politicians.

In the beginning of twentieth century, Canadian writing started showing the signs of existence but internationally it was not visible. The early writings in the first of the twentieth century were marked by the extensive writing of poetry and a few remarkable novels. F.R. Scott and A.J.M. Smith created a place for themselves as poets in Canadian Literature. Novels of Hugh MacLennan, Sinclair Ross and Morley Callaghan changed the course of Canadian fiction.

Frederick Philip Grove carried forward the nineteenth century European nationalism to Canada. His writings shifted the focus from romance to realism showcasing the presence of falsehood in the society. Three of his significant novels are *Settlers of Marsh* (1925), *Our Daily Bread* (1928), and *The Yoke of Life* (1930). Morley Callaghan took Canadian novels to new heights. His novels reflect urban realism. In his novel *The Loved and the Lost* (1951), he has epitomised man’s spiritual dilemma. His famous novel *Barometer Rising* (1941) supports new nationalism. He was not a social reformer like Dorothy Livesay, and Klein. His novels reflected whatever society presented to him. The symbolic allegory of the novel’s plot projects Canada in bondage to serve England during wars, and neglected during peace; and the end of colonialism. The same nationalist
consciousness is found in the novels *Two Solitudes* (1945), *The Precipice* (1948), and *The Watch that Ends in the Night* (1959), by Hugh MacLennan.

In the 1950s, Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler, Mavis Gallant and Sheila Watson gave new meaning to the Canadian novel. There emerged a contrast between romantic and the realistic, as well as between conscious mythology and social mythology. “The romances consolidated social mythology and Robertson Davies’s *Tempest Tost* is a sardonic study of the triumph of a social mythology over the imaginative one symbolised by Shakespeare’s play” (Begum 140), Robertson Davies’s trilogy—*Fifth Business* (1970), *The Manticore* (1972) and *World of Wonders* (1975), made him popular internationally (Literature, “Canadian Literature” Wikipedia). Richler’s popular novels *Cocksure* (1968) and *St. Urbain’s Horseman* (1971), depicts the growing tensions among immigrant communities in urban Canada. In his works Jewishness is the main subject along with the loss of morality in the modern times.


In the 1960s, there was a rapid expansion in all genres of Canadian writing which paralleled political growth in Canada. Maple leaf flag was officially adopted as a national flag and since then there was no looking
back for Canadian writing as it moved “away from the local and parochial” (Walsh 97). Artists all over the Canada began their quest for universal truth of life.

The parochial consciousness became national consciousness which further expanded into an international and universal consciousness. This new consciousness opened new worlds for the writers and they found new themes such as quest, wilderness, identity crises and self-definition.

Today, Canada’s writers are critically acclaimed all over the globe. Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Margaret Lawrence, Mordecai Richler, Alice Munroe, Timothy Findley, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji are some of the Canadian writers who have strong international readership.

The ‘Women’s Liberation Movement’ in 1960s provided many of the women novelists with the courage and motivation to write against the existing discrimination. This women’s movement was a crusade against despotism. This modern feminist movement was an outgrowth of the ‘women’s liberation movement’ of America in late sixties. In 1960s, women in Canada discovered that ‘sisterhood is powerful’, and began forming groups. They launched systematic campaign against economic discrimination, violence and sexual abuse against women. The federal government in 1967 set up the Royal Commission on the status of women and in 1970 Commission made 167 recommendations for greater equality for women.
In literary circles also there were ripples and as a result in 1968, The
Vancouver Women’s Caucus was formed and it started publishing The
Front de-liberation des femmes du Québec, and the Centre des Femmes
edited the first French language periodical Québécoises Deboutte (1971-75).

Nicole Brossard, a poet and a novelist, can be called the promoter of
literary and cultural feminism in Canada. She started a literary magazine
called LA BARRE DU JOUR in 1965 to raise a voice against nationalist
poetry and also published a feminist paper Les têtes de pioche (1976-79),
and won the Governor General’s award for her poetry Méchanique
jongleuse suivi de. Writings of feminist writers such as Kate Millet,
Shulamith Firestone, Gloria Steinem and Germaine Greer widely influenced
and inspired Canadian women. Publications such as Women Unite:An
Anthology of the Women’s Movement (1972), and Margaret Anderson’s
Mother was not a Person (1973) also pushed Canadian women to realise
their own worth.

While the whole world was witnessing the rise of feminism, some
feminists took feminism to another level known as ‘Ecofeminism’. When
feminism and environmentalism, intersected in 1970s ecofeminism emerged
as an examination of “the important connections – historical, experimental,
symbolic, theoretical–between the domination of women and the domination
of nature” (Warren, *Ecological* 19). Ecofeminism can be treated as a social and political movement that blends feminism with environmentalism.


In the ending months of the 1960s, environmental problems took center stage due to rampant air pollution, and water pollution. In the year 1960, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* brought a major shift in people’s attitude towards environment. Carson talked about the harm done to the environment by the use of synthetic pesticide in her book *Silent Spring*. Her writings can be credited with initiating the global environmental movement. *Silent Spring* became a landmark in the field of environmentalism, and American government was forced to ban the use of DDT and other pesticides.

In response to the environmental problems, on April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day was celebrated in the United States of America. Many feminists and women writers all over the globe started realising the strong bond between women and nature. They saw strong similarity between the oppression of women and oppression of nature by men. A new wave or the third wave of feminism emerged as “Ecofeminism”, linking feminism and deep ecology.
The holistic idea of the Earth as a Mother has a long tradition. The mythical Greek goddess GAEA or GE (Gaia or Gê), is considered to be the personification of the earth. Her existence as a divine being can be traced back to the Homeric poems. Gaia is a primeval divinity considered to be one of the primal elements who first emerged at the dawn of creation, along with air, sea and sky. She is considered to be the great mother of all. It is believed that “heavenly gods were descended from her union with ‘Ouranos’ (the sky), the sea-gods from her union with ‘Pontos’ (the sea), the ‘Gigantes’ from her mating with ‘Tartaros’ (the hell-pit) and mortal creatures were sprung or born from her earthy flesh” (GAEA).

In 1970s the Gaia theory was formulated by an environmentalist James Lovelock and co-developed by a microbiologist Lynn Margulis which proposed that “all organisms and their inorganic surroundings on Earth are closely integrated to form a single and self-regulating complex system, maintaining the conditions for life in the planet” (Gaia, “Gaia hypothesis” Wikipedia). Initially it suffered rejection at the hands of many well known scientists for they believed ‘Gaia’ was merely a metaphorical description of earth processes but in recent times scientists are exploring the ancient Gaia principle “mainly in the multidisciplinary fields of ‘Earth system science and biogeochemistry’. It is also being applied increasingly by students of climate change” (Gaia, “Gaia hypothesis” Wikipedia).
In 1974, the term ecofeminism was first used by a French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in her book *Le feminisme ou la mort* (1974) (Eaubonne, “D’ Eaubonne, Francoise” *Wikipedia*), to assert women’s potential to effect environmental change. Like feminism, ecofeminism also has many faces, each face advocating some specific aspects. Karen Warren has rightly pointed out in *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*, that ecofeminism is an umbrella term for a large variety of approaches. One may be a socialist ecofeminist, cultural ecofeminist, radical ecofeminist, ecowomanist etc. One common ideology which binds all these disparate positions together is that there are important connections between “dominations of women, and other human Others, non human nature. The historical pervasiveness of patriarchal domination of women and nature . . . suggest that androcentrism (male-centered thinking) is the root cause of environmental destruction” (22).

In 1974, ecofeminism started showing its signs in India in the form of Chipko movement. This movement depicted the inherent connection between women and woods. “The women’s protest, known as the Chipko movement (“Chipko” in Hindi means “to embrace” or ‘hug’), saved 12,000 square kilometers of watershed” (Warren, *Ecofeminist* 2). It was a small but strong movement started by rural Indian women, who threatened to hug the trees if people tried to cut them. Those illiterate rural women did not understand the western concept of ecofeminism but they understood the
ecological importance of forests in their lives. Vandana Shiva and Jayanta Bandyopadhyay also highlighted the ecological basis of this movement:

The new concern to save and protect forests through Chipko satyagraha did not arise from resentment against further encroachment on the people’s access to forest resources. It arose from the alarming signals of rapid ecological destabilization in the hills. . . . It has now evolved to the demand for ecological rehabilitation. Since the Chipko movement is based upon the perception of forests in their ecological context, it exposes the social and ecological costs of short term growth-oriented forest management. This is clearly seen in the slogan of the Chipko movement which claims that the main products of the forests are not timber or resin, but “soil, water and oxygen”. (qtd. in Warren, Ecofeminist 3)

In 1980s and 1990s, ecofeminism grew with support from women advocating anti-nuclear, anti-war, environmentalism, and lesbianism. The first ecofeminist conference ‘Women and Life on earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s’ held at Amberst, Massachusetts, USA. The conference highlighted the interlink between militarism, feminism, health and ecology. Another ecofeminist conference – ‘Eco Feminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory’ (1987), was hosted by the University of Southern California. This conference was followed by similar conferences which inspired the
publication of some important anthologies in the area of ecofeminism, e.g.: Woman on the Edge of Time, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism, Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth, and Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism, are some of the popular ecofeminist works. Support for ecofeminism was clearly visible in the international arena, ecofeminists' presence was appreciated at the United Nations Conference-Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio De Janerio (1992).

Ecofeminism asserts that oppression in any form is directly or indirectly linked to the dualistic hierarchies present in the patriarchal mindset. To justify their dominance and superiority, dominant patriarchal systems continue to widen the gap between binaries (mind/body, male/female, heaven/earth, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature and white/non white) by creating religious as well as scientific bogeys. Ecofeminists consider women as an integral part of the web of life, and in no way out of it. Karen Warren writes in her book Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature:

What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence, that non human nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminists’ issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of socialisms of domination to nature. (4)
To demolish the power dynamics of patriarchal system, Rosemary Radford Ruether writes in her book *New Woman / New Earth*:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women’s movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society. (204)

Women are adversely affected by the exploitation of earth because they are the most vulnerable in patriarchal society; they suffer the double oppression of poverty, sex, race, education or nation. Vandana Shiva, a physicist and a renowned environmentalist in India, connects the ‘feminine principle’ with mal-development. When traditional agricultural methods are abandoned, natural resources are plundered recklessly, and men move out to cities for better opportunities, it is women who are left alone to work long without sufficient food. Shiva argues in *Staying Alive*:

Mal development militates against this equality in diversity and superimposes the ideologically constructed category of western technological man as a uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures, and genders. . . . Diversity, and unity and harmony in diversity, become epistemologically unattainable
in the context of mal development, which then becomes synonymous with women’s underdevelopment (increasing sexist domination), and nature’s depletion (deepening ecological crisis). . . . (83)

Shiva, in another book, *Ecofeminism: Reconnecting a Divided World* which she co-authored with the German Marxist sociologist, Maria Mies, connects the capitalist-patriarchal economic system with the oppression of women all over the globe.

Since ancient times women have been associated with the land in many civilizations. Anthropological and archaeological studies have also revealed in their findings that women have been associated with nature and men with culture since ancient times. Leonard William King, an archaeologist, has talked about the Enuma Elish (Babylonian creation story), which is the earliest written creation myth that dates back to the third millennium B.C. Marduk, the warrior champion of the gods of the city states, is seen as creating the cosmos by conquering the mother goddess Tiamat, pictured as a snake. Marduk kills her using super weapons, treads her body under foot and then splits it in half, using one half to create the starry firmament of the skies, and the other half the earth below. This story clearly reflects how the patriarchal mindset is eulogised since ages, and how the primordial mother is killed and “Marduk then creates humanity from his blood and bone” (*The Seven* vii).
The Ramayana, the sacred text of Hindus offers a deep understanding of woman nature connection through the character of goddess Sita, which dates back to more than 5000 B.C. It is believed that when king Janak ploughed the fields to please rain gods, his plough was stuck at one place, when he dug up that place he found a baby girl in a mud vessel. He named the girl as Sita, who is also known as ‘bumikanya’ (daughter of the soil). After her marriage to Lord Rama, she became the cause of the downfall of Swarn Lanka, and the death of Ravana, the king of Swaran Lanka (Gold Lanka).

There is an ecofeminist dimension to the Ramayana, goddess Sita is seen as a solitary brave woman symbolising wilderness (Prakriti) or the ‘feminine principle’ over the king of ‘Swaran Lanka’, a city of gold i.e. glittering phallocentric society, signifying the vulgar display of power and riches. In Hindu mythology, the concept of Shakti/Prakriti is a manifestation of the ‘feminine principle’ or the creative force of the cosmos. Nature both conscious and unconscious is an expression of Shakti. In Hinduism, it is believed that the ‘masculine principle’ symbolises mind, logic and rationality, and the ‘feminine principle’ symbolises body, emotions and irrationality, and together they create the life force.

Ecofeminism is not something new to the world. It is an age old wisdom, which unfortunately got trampled under the dominance of patriarchy. If we explore in times we’ll find close affinity between nature
and women in all ancient civilizations. It was only after the emergence of patriarchy around 5,000 years ago, the western ideology of considering women and nature inferior to men came into being. Patriarchy gave rise to ‘dualism’ a belief which divided the whole world into conflicting pairs of concepts: mind/body, spirit/matter, male/female, culture/nature etc. All these concepts are alienated from each other and entangled into complex relationships. Kate Millet argues in *Sexual Politics*:

Patriarchy has God on its side. One of its most effective agents of control is the powerfully expeditious character of its doctrines as to the nature and origin of the female and the attribution to her alone of the dangers and evils it imputes to sexuality. The Greek example is interesting here: when it wishes to extol sexuality, it celebrates fertility through the phallus; when it wishes to denigrate sexuality, it cites Pandora. . . . The Pandora myth is one of two important Western archetypes which condemn the female through her sexuality and explain her position as her well deserved punishment for the primal sin under whose unfortunate consequences the race yet labors. (51-52)

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood characterised dualistic thinking as “an alienated form of differentiation in which power
construes and constructs difference in terms of an inferior and alien realm” (42).

Ecofeminists see patriarchy as the root cause of bracketing women and nature as the ‘Other’. Renowned theorist and licensed psychotherapist Chellis Glendinning believes that our separation from nature goes back to some 20,000 years ago to the time when humans shifted from being a gatherer/hunter culture to domesticating plants and animals (Chellis, “Glendinning Chellis”, Wikipedia).

Ecofeminism advocates a return to the ancient paradigms where women enjoyed powerful status. Gloria Steinem in her book Wonder Woman (1972), tells a story about gynocratic age when women were worshipped and envied by men for their child bearing capacities, and how due to varied factors gynaecocracy gave way to patriarchy, which ultimately led to the demise of reverence associated with women and nature.

The roots of the divine ‘feminine principle’ still exist in many religions. In Hebrew, the Matriarchs, known as the mother, are four important women who are considered as an ancestral ‘mothers’ of the ancient children of the Jews. In Hinduism, the divine mother is known as ‘Shakti’. In Buddhism, ‘White Tara’ is a manifestation of divine feminine principle. The worship of feminine principle dates back to prehistoric times. It is believed that many ancient societies were matriarchal and gender
neutral but later there was a widespread fall in the status of women across the globe.

Rosemary Radford Ruether writes in *New Woman/ New Earth* that in Pre-Hebraic times women’s duties such as childcare, food-gathering, and other household chores were not given any importance, whereas, men’s work like hunting, waging war etc were viewed as more important. She further explains the importance of interdependence, and need to respect every form of life on earth. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* charges the ‘Western patriarchy’ with destroying soil, rivers and vegetation and disconnecting women from taking care of natural resources. She writes:

> It is in managing the integrity of ecological cycles in forestry and agriculture that women’s productivity has been most developed and evolved. Women transfer fertility . . . they transfer animal waste as fertilizer for crops and crop by products to animals as fodder. They work with the forest to bring water to their fields and families. This partnership between women’s and nature’s work ensures the sustainability of sustenance. . . .

The forest is separated from the river, the field is separated from the forest, the animals are separated from the crops. Each is then separately developed and the delicate balance which ensures sustainability and equity is destroyed. The visibility of
dramatic breaks and ruptures is posited as ‘progresses. Marginalised women are either dispensed with or colonized. Needs go unfulfilled, nature is crippled. (45)

Carolyn Merchant in her famous book *The Death of Nature* explains how the organic cosmology that had helped save nature for ages, was trampled by the scientific and cultural revolutions of the 18th Century ‘Enlightenment’. Society’s treatment of the land is necessarily indicative of how it treats woman. In Western culture, the god not only commanded man to rule over woman but also bestowed him with the privilege of inheriting the earth. In Genesis 1:28, man was given divine mandate to “bear fruit and be many and fill the earth and subdue it! Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, and all living things that crawl upon the Earth!” (The Bible), and further “St Thomas . . . pronounced woman to be an ‘imperfect man’, an ‘incidental’ being. This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called ‘a supernumerary bone’ of Adam” (Beauvoir 16).

The Western patriarchal ideology believes that land and woman are created to serve man and it is man’s prerogative to use them according to his needs. Besides The Bible, the great philosophers of ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle disassociate God from Nature. Plato advocated Pythagoras’s ideas in his *Timaeus* where he saw nature as a goddess who was subservient to a male god. Aristotle associated maleness with activity and passivity with
femaleness. He believed that the child was the seed of the father and mother was merely a vessel (Stevenson 30). The emergence of new science in the sixteenth and seventeenth century justified the new scientific order. Francis Bacon’s doctrine of the dominion of the nature exemplified the mechanical philosophy which characterized that period of time. Bacon’s widely acclaimed *New Atlantis* advocated man’s supremacy over nature and asserted the virtues of hierarchy and patriarchy. *New Atlantis* portrays his idea of a mechanistic utopia, where nature is the creator of bad and man is the producer of good:

> For now the earth produces nothing without our labour and our sweat, but deadly and venomous . . . nor are the elements less kind to us: many the seas destroy with raging tempests, and the horrid monsters devour: the air making war against us with thunder, lightning with storms; and with a crowd of pestilential disease, the heavens conspire our ruin. (qtd. in Merchant 186)

The metaphors used to describe nature during the seventeenth century by Bacon and others had definite feminine connotations. Bacon used the word ‘harlot’ when talking about matter (Merchant 171).

The demands of logic or rationality (masculine principle) which supports the patriarchal societies have created a bizarre, mechanistic, binary and hierarchical view of the world. In recent times the ‘nuclear fallout’ (2011), in Japan, which took place after tsunami hit the island country
clearly supports ecofeminists’ viewpoint that nature is supreme, and we all are interlinked in the web of life. Bhopal, in India, witnessed the worst Industrial disaster in the history of mankind, in the year 1984. The Union Carbide Factory was the source of the leakage of a highly toxic and reactive chemical methyl isocyanate (MIC). Since, the gas leaked out from a 30 meter chimney, it was not high enough for people to escape the effects. Within a few hours the streets of Bhopal were littered with human bodies and carcasses of animals. More than four thousand people died, especially in the slum area, which was close to the ‘Carbide Factory’. The worst sufferers in Bhopal were the women and children. The reproductive health of women was badly affected. Three months after the tragedy, a small study showed a high proportion of leucorrhoea, pelvic inflammatory diseases, cervical erosion, excessive menstrual bleedings, and suppression of lactation in women. One of the very harsh social impacts of this tragedy on women has been the refusal of households to wed their sons to a gas affected woman or her daughter. In 1984, the still birth rate, the crude birth rate, the neonatal death rate and the infant mortality rate were all high in severely affected areas (ICMR Bhopal). Bhopal gas tragedy justifies one of the viewpoints of ecofeminists that women become a scapegoat for those who exploit the environment.

Women have not only become scapegoats but are used as signal for polluted areas. Diamond observes in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence*
of Ecofeminism, “It has been argued that in an economy built upon a growing trade in toxic materials, drugs, and radiation, babies are best ‘canaries’ we have – that pregnancy can provide a warning much like the canary did for coal miners” (210).

The mad rush towards so called ‘development’ has put more and more people and animals under its control and pushed the earth to the brink of destruction. All life is connected; “the destinies of the Oak trees and the people of the Earth are wrapped together” (Swimme 22). Ecofeminism puts stress on respecting all forms of life on earth, without forgetting that human beings are the late entrants in the cycle of life. As Susan Griffins speaks in an interview to Lisa Lynch:

We belong to nature. We cannot breathe without nature. So, there are various degrees in which interdependence manifests itself, and one would be in a kind of slime mold that is really considered one organism that spread – can spread for miles underground. The other would be in a forest in which everything there is dependent on everything else to thrive. That was a principle of Darwin’s. . . .

Then you have literally the way human beings are born, or conceived and born. The way we develop in utero is that the woman and her uterus and the organism within the uterus are one in the same way that mitochondria are part of the human
body. You know? They can have independent life, but it is part of the body. So I think that the claim that women should have control over our own bodies is quite literal. You know, the whole idea of being separate from nature I think is tied to this kind of stark individualism that we are living out the consequences of now, the failure to understand that we are economically interdependent all over the world, and communities thrive better. But when you look at an ecological system, everything is dependent on everything else. That kind of label is associated with women and independence and individualism is associated with men. So this construct underlies a huge amount of what we do in the world today. (Lynch 130-31)

Data from the United Nations (2009) on gender equality and women’s empowerment, Schwartz’s (2006) assessment of cultural value orientation and Yale’s Environmental Performance Index (2008) generally support ecofeminist predictions: controlling for gross domestic product, gender empowerment is related to a country’s tendency to exploit the environment, and cultural hegemonic values are predictive of gender inequality and environmental exploitation. However, gender empowerment mediates the relationship between hegemony and environmental health, whereas it is
mutually predictive with hegemony of ecosystem vitality (Bloodhart, and Swim 187).

Women should be included in the policy creations as Susan Griffin writes in her famous book *Woman and Nature: The Roaring inside Her*:

He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. . . . He says he is not a part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature. (3)

The central tenet in ecofeminism advocates that male ownership of land gave rise to the patriarchal ideology, manifesting itself in food export, overgrazing, exploitation of people, and an abusive land ethics, in which animals and land are valued only as economic resources and woman and native are treated inferior (Ecofeminism, “Ecofeminism” *Wikipedia*). Carol J Adams, Marti Kheel and Greta Gaard have continuously favoured veganism as an integral part of ecofeminism.

Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* have given three strands of ecofeminism. One strand elaborates that we all are connected to earth, and social justice has to be achieved in concert with the well being of the earth; another strand in ecofeminism talks about the spiritual connection with the earth; and the third
strand gives importance to sustainable development in relation to the ‘other lives’ on the earth.

Ecofeminist critics, including some ecofeminists themselves, warn of the element of essentialism in some form of ecofeminist thought. Another limitation of ecofeminism is the accusation of having borrowed symbols from other cultures and traditions, and its place within other ecological paradigms, such as with social ecology or deep ecology.

While going through Atwood’s novels, I found close association between hegemonic cultural values, gender equality, and environmental protection. In a time of unprecedented human footprints across the globe disturbing earth’s ecology, many intellectuals and scientists are seeking answers to how cultural value orientations might influence attitudes and behaviours associated with the natural environment. Many a time Atwood has argued that she is not against technology as technology is not good or bad in itself, she believes it is human nature (greed) which is responsible for the destruction in all forms:

Science is finding stuff out about the material world and technology is the tools that we make. The tools . . . would be quite different if we were giant intelligent spiders. Making bigger and better domesticated webs, for instance. Making things that spiders like. In terms of things we make, we make these tools because we are the kind of beings that we are.
I am skeptical about people. The nature of the tool can change how we live – for instance, I am sitting here at 6am in Toronto talking to you over broadband. In earlier eras, I would have written something in cuneiform on wet clay and had it delivered to you on a horseback. The tool is morally neutral. It is not a case of ‘is science telling us the truth, or technology bad?’ I am more skeptical about human nature, who is in charge of those tools? (An interview, Telegraph)

From an ecofeminist perspective Atwood’s novels reflect how genders think and interact with their natural environment. An ecofeminist thought runs in her novels, which argues that women are closer to the earth and they are more conscious of their surroundings than men. Her novels act as a tool to understand how the treatment of both women and the natural environment results from an overarching, patriarchal, and hegemonic value system. Relationships in Atwood’s novels work within a patriarchal domain. Patriarchy is a complex term and Roxanne. J. Fand has defined it as:

[A] process of thinking that works towards the concentration and retention of power regardless of which ideology is current, to the detriment of both men and women kept too long at the margins, as well as the detriment of those isolated at the centre. It is only called patriarchy because it is associated with a very broad masculine hegemony that is by no means
monolithic in the diverse and even conflicting forms it may take. Even in the period of modern revolution the concentration of power in a masculine order has continued precisely because masculine power relative to feminine power, is decentralized at the level of the individual’s self image, where every man is (ideologically at least) the power center of his domestic domain, the king of his castle. (18-19)

Atwood is one of the post-modern Canadian writers who could see the link between the oppression of women and nature. Nature has been an integral part of the Canadian Literature. Throughout the Canadian literary tradition wilderness has been and continues to be the dominant cultural myth, encoding Canadians’ imaginative responses to their landscapes and history as an image of national distinctiveness. Her writings challenge the conventions of literary genres and social dichotomies, providing a rich intertextual layer of cross-cultural allusions – “what Atwood is concerned with is the treatment of woman as normal human being and therefore she must be allowed her imperfections” (Singh, The Novels 17).

Landscapes described in literary works are not only just about nature, they are, “usually about the poet’s attitude towards the external natural universe. That is, landscapes . . . are often interior landscapes; they are maps of a state of mind” (Atwood, Survival 49). In her article “True North”, Margaret Atwood writes that North is always at the back of the mind of
Canadians “The North focuses our anxieties. Turning to face north . . . we enter our own unconsciousness. Always in retrospect the journey to north has the quality of dream” (101).

Atwood’s texts have attracted a large number of academic studies across the globe. She has played a key role in setting in motion many radical ideas in terms of women’s individuality and autonomy, power and politics “through their own strategies of rebellion through tropes of madness, silence, illness and guile” (Basu 180). She writes to make women “critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structures” (Howells, *Private 4*).

Atwood identifies women with nature and men with the technical assault on nature. Nature is very often a victim. Man is depicted as the manipulating oppressor. The environment is a crucial aspect in developing the personality of an individual. Assumptions made about nature, about what is natural or unnatural, prevent society from understanding how constructed notions for gender limit possibilities for individual identity. There is a strong woman-nature connection in her novels where man is portrayed as a hunter. In *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies* (2006), *Surfacing* has been explored as an ecofeminist text, and it also gives common critique of ecofeminism that “there are connections between the oppression of women in the patriarchal society and the exploitation of non-human nature in the anthropocentric world view” (Gersdorf, and Mayer 93). Corinna Thomen in
Representations of Women and Nature in Canadian Women’s Writing writes that “In Surfacing Margaret Atwood’s female protagonist is the first woman character in contemporary Canadian fiction to precipitate a northern venture and to hold the reins of the undertaking” (23).

Her writings scream out to the society to look beyond dualistic conclusions, toward broader definitions for femininity & masculinity. The woman portrayed by Atwood suffer from personal victimization which has deep seated roots in the colonial ideology of domination and destruction. Her novels deal with women who dare to challenge the patriarchal control, and specifically how Canadian identity has come to depend upon the silencing of women and the nature. Her novels have an ecofeminist point of view. Although her fiction is mostly read as feminist texts yet I find her novels close to ecofeminism which takes in account of the victimized status of woman along with nature in the technology-driven patriarchal world.

When her first novel The Edible Woman was published, environmental issues had just started gaining attention worldwide. A new kind of feminism was on anvil which linked feminism with ecology.

Her novels clearly reflect the mind of capitalist societies which are toiling to ‘re-create’ Eden. The ‘Garden of Eden’ is symbolic of western world’s relationship between man and nature, the point at which the serpent and his brethren became forever envisioned as untrustworthy and subordinate. Separation between humanity and nature, a sustained notion in
Christian teachings, is further advanced by humanism and the scientific revolution which reduced nature to basic perfunctory systems and argued “reason is the means to achieving total mastery over nature” (Garrard 62). It represents the break between male and female. The story told as a means of subjugating females, shaming them for having removed humanity from God’s favour. In linking patriarchal mindset to the Earth through gendered spaces, Atwood demonstrates not only the ways in which feminine spaces become dominated, but also natural spaces as well. Her novel *Surfacing* has attracted a lot of attention from ecofeminists. William Ruecket, an ecocritic, states that *Surfacing* shows that there is a “demonstrable relationship between the ways in which men treat and destroy women and the ways in which men treat and destroy nature” (117).

When Atwood started publishing her works, there was a marked influence of the Feminist Movement on Canadian Literature. Iqbal Kaur observes:

> The new feminism, a myth centered poetry, Frye’s criticism and the growing nationalism of the early sixties all helped to shape Atwood’s literary inheritance: together they produced a particular sensibility, a mythic imagination reflected in her treatment of the male-female relationship and Canadian nature.

(21)
Atwood’s writing skills have the capacity to capture her readers’ mindscape, which undergoes a gradual metamorphosis with the reading of the texts. Glimpses of land have been there in the earlier writings of Atwood, in *The Circle Game*, *The Animal in That Country* (1968), *Procedures for Underground* (1970) and in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970).

The characters in her novels struggle to overcome alienation and achieve personal and social integration which means freedom to love, to share, to meet, to touch and to express emotions without fear. Her novels deal with the ecofeminist challenges. Her writing is characterised by the urge to “throw the storyline (of traditional power structures) open to question and to implement disarrangements which demand new judgments and solutions” (Moi 68). Most of the writings about Atwood’s work focus on female subjectivity and its qualities and possibilities in her oeuvre -as her own writing does. In *Margaret Atwood: A Beginner’s Guide*, Pilar Cuder observes “Approaches to Atwood’s fiction have come from such a wide range of stylistic and ideological perspectives that it is hard to systematize or transmit their full wealth” (Cuder 73).

In the field of Feminist Criticism, Rao in her book, *Strategies for Identity* discusses Atwood’s texts from different angles, drawing from various theoretical backgrounds. Rao explores the concept of the protagonists’ identities and selfhoods. Dieter Meindl studies gender and narrative perspective in Atwood’s short stories. He concludes that
“Atwood’s stories display a gender-based rather than a language based conception of reality” (228). Rigney too writes of Atwood’s gender politics, which she sees “trickier than her narrative style” (‘Alias Atwood’ 161).

J. Brooks Bouson’s Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood is an excellent analysis of Atwood’s works. She concentrates on “Atwood’s family and romance dramas, her evolving story of the female self-in-crisis, her novelistic subversion of romantic love ideology, and her ongoing gender and power politics” (Bouson 9). Shannon Hengen, in her book Margaret Atwood’s Power, analyses Atwood’s images of power and mirrors, using psychoanalytic theories of mirror stage and narcissism. Hengen observes that Atwood’s male characters represent negative “regressive narcissism” and female characters more positive “progressive narcissism (Hengen 25, 37, 45).

Rigney observes Surfacing as “an exploration of a world beyond logic” (Madness 93). According to Roberta Rubenstein, Atwood’s protagonists have “dilemmas of symbiosis and separation . . . confusion about ego boundaries and body image” (65). Sharon R. Wilson writes in Margaret Atwood’s Textual Assassinations: Recent Poetry and Fiction that “Atwood is a popular writer . . . she is also a difficult writer whose texts are multilayered, filled with literary, political and historical allusions, and subtle in their use of symbolism, parody, and satire” (Wilson xi). Annis Pratt
examines Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* in her *Archetypal Patterns of Women’s Fiction* and finds it as a novel of “rebirth and transformation”. She further finds that *Surfacing*’s protagonist is in search of “Elixir of Maternity” (135, 157).

In the category of Canadian / Nationalist Criticism, essays in Barbara Godard’s (ed.) *Gynocritics / Gynocritique*, discuss Atwood’s novels and nonfiction in relation to Canadian literature, the “Canlit” scene with a feminist emphasis. Paul Goetsh contextualises Atwood’s Canadian nationalism to Canadian history and compares her nationalism with another Canadian author Hugh MacLennan. Ronald B Hatch explores the thematic of land and ecology in Atwood’s texts.

In the segment of Postcolonial criticism on Atwood, Colin Nicholson observes “constructions of post colonial subjectivity” in Atwood’s early poetry. He argues that Atwood explores the Canadians’ fragile identity and women’s status in this country, which is insecure of itself” (“Living” 11). Howells has talked about Atwood’s “Canadian Signature” many times (Margaret Atwood 20).

In the area of Postmodernism, Rao treats Atwood as a postmodernist writer. Rao finds Atwood’s writings “epistemological and ontological concerns” and “the suspicion of grand narratives and the possibility to write truthful stories of the world are clearly postmodernist and she analyses the
high degree of self consciousness and self – reflexivity” in Atwood’s fiction (xi-xii).

Linda Hutcheon in her book *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*, concentrates on the use of postmodernism and irony by the Canadian writers.

Nathalie Cooke in her book *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion* talks about Atwood’s writing technique which is autobiographical in nature. Reingard M. Nischik, won ‘Best Writer Award’ from Margaret Atwood society, for *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood*. Nischik has systematically explored the relationship between gender and genre in Atwood’s works, analysing each genre individually. Karen F Stein’s *Margaret Atwood Revisited*, lays emphasis on narrators and the narrative strategies in Atwood’s works.

Patricia Waugh believes that the stance of feminine / feminist writing is somewhat that of an outsider to both standard modernism and postmodernism. In the 1960s when Atwood started writing novels postmodernism and feminism were emerging strongly with some common literary goals. Postmodernism and feminism both “embraced the popular, rejecting the elitist and purely formalist celebration of modernism . . . both movements celebrate liminality, the disruption of boundaries, the confounding of traditional markers of ‘difference’ the undermining of the authorial security of the ‘egotistical sublime’” (Waugh 3-4).
One of the important characteristics of Atwood’s novels is the “sense of a double perspective” (Reynolds, and Noakes 19). Katarina Gregersdotter sees Atwood’s narratives as “plural, nonlinear, and her regular use of irony make them ambiguous” (27). The concept of polyphony, which is one of the key terms in Bakhtinian dialogic theory, can be useful in understanding Atwood’s style of showing conflicting views of same event or relationship. Though polyphony or dialogue is often considered as synonym, yet Pearce distinguishes between the two as:

Polyphony is associated with the macrocosmic structure of the text (literally, its ‘many voices’) and ‘dialogue’ to reciprocating mechanisms within the smaller units of exchange, down to the individual word. (Reading, Italics original 46)

In Atwood’s novels usually there is a dialogue between feminist and patriarchal discourse. Because of this polyphony it is difficult for the readers to accept single interpretation of the novel. Atwood has clearly said that her protagonists can be taken as sane or insane, depending upon the reader’s interpretation “you have a choice of thinking the central character is crazy or thinking she is right. Or possibly thinking she is crazy and right” (Atwood qtd. in Gibson 14).

Apart from polyphony, the concept of extra-literary context works with Atwood in the matter of feminism. In her nonfiction writing, talks and
interviews, her dialogue with and interest in feminist discourses is clear. When Atwood seriously contemplated writing in 1960s, many active feminist streams of thinking began as movements in the 1960s and 70s. Feminists raised a number of issues, such as abortion, motherhood, unequal pay, separatism, lesbianism, domestic violence etc.

In Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, inter-textual allusions between her writing and radical feminism is visible. *Bodily Harm* by Atwood criticises violent pornography. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist refuses to speak ‘masculine words’. The similarity between Atwood and postmodern feminism is the importance of the body as a site of pleasure, pain and meaning. Atwood’s protagonists are often surrounded by the dubious feelings of their bodies. Catherine Rainwater writes that in Atwood’s novels, the body is “a war zone” (14). Apart from feminist themes and issues, the concern for nature, love of the Canadian ‘bush’, flora and fauna are important themes which repeat themselves throughout the “Atwoodian Canon” (Stein, *Margaret Atwood*).

Feminism no doubt is accepted in Atwood’s novels as a major factor in women’s lives but it is also questioned. For Atwood, feminism means “human equality and freedom of choice” (Atwood qtd. in Brans 142).

Use of different genres enables Atwood to stretch the boundaries of realist writing. Genres like gothic and science fiction provide her with more space for experimentation than the realist form does. Sometimes her novels
like *Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* are treated as “failed romances”-narratives where the idea of romance is questioned and undermined (Bouson 6). Her texts depict sharp criticism of western patterns of gendered polarity. Stein aptly writes that Atwood’s texts “call into question conventional sex-role stereotypes” (xi).

Atwood’s novels are often two-dimensional: first, there is the retrospective narrator who tells the retrospective story and comments on it and her present life is narrated too. Second, there is the story of the survival of that character, the retrospective narrator’s former self.

In the course of the narrative, narrators reveal their past and present in fragments, and there are nightmares and dreams that reveal the past traumas. The story is built like a puzzle, from which we weave a story along with the narrator (Cuder 2-3). Narrative structure in Atwood’s novels presents a broken sense of narrator’s psyche, and makes the reader emotionally involved. Mycak writes that the selves of the protagonists are divided, “neither integrated nor whole . . . identity is dislocated, alienated, splintered, and split” (9).

The traumatic narration exposes the narrator’s reliability and mental stability. Narrators admit lying about their lives and the happenings in the novel, to the reader.

Atwood’s novels have open endings, which in one way tell the readers to ‘keep hope’. The narrators come to terms with their unstable lives
by narrating and remembering their past. Atwood’s retrospective narrators apply tools of irony, comic, and stream of consciousness to highlight sexual objectification of woman in the western consumer culture. Her novels truly fit into what Sara Mills observes:

Feminist text analysis . . . can develop into a form of consciousness-raising, a ‘making aware’ of that which seems to be self-evidently normal or neutral, a ‘making strange’ of the ordinary, and forcing readers to re-examine the text in the light of a consideration of gender. (39)

Fiona Tolan writes in Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction, “Atwood’s work demonstrably anticipates future movements within feminism. Her work is never presumed to be a sole influence or a direct precipitant of feminist development, but it is identified as a salient and intelligent component of a general cultural discourse” (4). In all her novels the end marks the beginning of ‘self realisation’ for the protagonists, as Atwood writes “I never make Prince Charming endings because I don’t believe in them. But I do believe that people can change. Maybe not completely but some” (Twigg 225).

In this study I have tried to explore the selected novels of Margaret Atwood in conjunction with the development of ecofeminism, and existence of a coherent relationship between her novels and ecofeminist theory. Joshua
Suka argues in “Ecocritical Investigation of Margaret Atwood’s Futuristic Novels”:

Most of Atwood’s novels read like ecological treatises and form perfect resources for the study of the interconnectedness between nature and culture or the human and the non-human. Atwood has so deeply been affected by the horrifying outcome of the capital-intensive industrialism, exhaustion of the basic energy resources, general vulnerability of the non-industrial world and the deep deterioration in the living conditions of the people. Hardly do we find a novel that does not reflect upon nature. (211-212)

This thesis is confined to five of her major novels. Chapter one titled “Introduction” covers Atwood's biography, the intellectual atmosphere of her age, and the detailed analysis of “Ecofeminism” — the critical theory applied in the thesis.

The second chapter is titled “The Edible Woman” and discusses her first novel *The Edible Woman* in which Atwood exposes how men and their most sophisticated ways exploit both women and animals (nature). The novel explores how men silently consume women and nature (animals) to fulfill their endless greed. The title itself screams out the pathetic condition of a woman as an object for pleasure and consumption.
The third chapter titled “Surfacing” explores Atwood’s second novel *Surfacing* as an ecofeminist text. The chapter pursues further the ecofeminist theme of *The Edible Woman*. This novel is a protest against the female objectification, and the arrogant and predatory attitude of men towards women and environment. In the novel, the enemy is well pronounced—the male, economic / technological power structure that exploits women and nature at all levels.

The fourth chapter bearing the title “Lady Oracle” analyses the pretences of women who are unable to overcome the fear of invisible male gaze. The novel deals with the female artist’s fight against the patriarchy where women and nature are only meant to be a commodity. In the novel Atwood takes the victimisation of women and nature at another level.

The fifth chapter titled “Bodily Harm” is an ecofeminist study of *Bodily Harm*, one of Atwood’s most accomplished feminist novels. The novel exposes breast cancer along with pornography as tropes to illustrate the silent contamination and amputation of the self by discursive systems of power. The protagonist’s disease ‘breast cancer’, becomes a symbol of the horrendous condition that the world is in due to environment degradation.

The sixth and the penultimate chapter titled “The Handmaid’s Tale” is a mirror image of Atwood’s strong views on environmental pollution. The novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* attempts to present a futuristic sterile society which might evolve if environmental pollution is not controlled. The plot
revolves around women with viable ovaries, who are required to serve as surrogate mothers for military officers who are impotent. The link between nature and women is quite apparent in the novel.

The seventh chapter, the concluding chapter is drawn by bringing together the arguments developed in different chapters justifying the selected novels of Atwood as ecofeminist texts.
CHAPTER - II

The Edible Woman

[S]ince patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men . . . this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural ‘feminine’ characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men. This . . . has resulted in the general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existents, associated with men on a plane of intellectual and professional equality, a condition that not only has limited their achievement in many fields but also has given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women. (Beauvoir 9)

Simone de-Beauvoir’s words demonstrate the basis for not acknowledging gender as a fixed identity, but as a social construction, influenced by the man-made rules of the culture surrounding a woman. Margaret Atwood’s first novel The Edible Woman is an excellent source of gender questioning and subversion. All the characters in the novel directly or indirectly contribute in exposing gender’s construction, and how women are equated with animals in terms of ‘consumption’.
The novel written in 1965, in the cusp of the women’s movement, was published in 1969, and welcomed by feminists. Atwood has always denied calling her novel a feminist text; rather she calls it ‘Proto-feminist’. Atwood states in *Second Words*:

The Edible Woman appeared finally in 1969, four years after it was written and just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America. Some immediately assumed it was a product of the movement. I myself see the book as proto-feminist rather than feminist: there was no women’s movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I am not gifted with clairvoyance though like many at the time I’d read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir behind locked doors. (370)

The influence of feminist classics by Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir is visible in *The Edible Woman*. Friedan’s depressing account of “generation of educated housewives maniacally arranging the silverware and dressing to welcome their husbands home from work” (Friedan 14), can be linked to the novel’s protagonist Marian’s mixed feelings towards marriage. Marian’s panicky feelings about marriage, pregnancy and children seem to be influenced by Beauvoir’s analysis of women as always the less valuable ‘others’ of men.
In *The Edible Woman*, Atwood has highlighted the role of unequal distribution of power and privilege in the maintenance of systems of domination over both women and nature. Ecofeminist theory and analysis has only been developing since the 1970s, but it surely is a forgotten ancient wisdom, which had been in practice in ancient times. Though *The Edible Woman* was published many years before the term ‘Ecofeminism’ was coined, yet it reflects the central tenet of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a philosophy whose “basic premise is that the ideology which authorises oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of the nature”( Gaard “Living” 1).

Janis Birkeland has explained ecofeminism in the essay “Ecofeminism Linking Theory and Practice”:

Ecofeminism is a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers a political analysis that explores the link between androcentrism and environmental destruction. It is an awareness that begins with the realisation that exploitation of nature is ultimately linked to Western Man’s attitude toward women and cultures. . . . (18)

Knowingly or unknowingly Atwood has created a storyline which exposes the arrogant attitude of men against women and animals. Atwood also believes that in all cultures animals are in the realm of ecosystem as evident
in one of her interviews published in *Independent* in which she acknowledges that:

She set out, not to celebrate Christianity, but to extract the pantheistic elements from early Christian texts and other religions; Jesus features as a proto-environmentalist, and the Buddha turns up too.

Religions in general have to rediscover their roots. In Hinduism and the Koran, animals are described as equals. If you walk into a cathedral and look at the early Christianity, there are vines, animals, creatures, and birds thriving all over the stone work. (*Independent*)

Like ecofeminists, Atwood also seeks to eliminate mind/body and rational/emotional dualism in the novel. Marian, the protagonist, and Peter her fiancé represent the dualism which exist in patriarchy. Adams writes:

Ecofeminism affirms that individuals can change, and in changing we reposition our relationship with the environment. This form of empowerment is precisely what is needed in approaching the issue of where animals stand in our lives. Many connections can be made between our food and environment, our politics and our personal lives. Essentially, the existence of terminal animals is paradigmatic of, as well as
contributing to the inevitability of, a terminal Earth.

(Neith 108)

Being in control is a recurring image in *The Edible Woman*, and to be in control means performing gender appropriately. Marian is aware of this and she is always scared that if she doesn’t perform her gender appropriately, she will be punished. Marian fears it’s up to her to appear as a proper young woman, and perform femininity adequately. Otherwise, she feels, they (Marian and her friend Ainsley) will lose the apartment. The only way they got the apartment was through performing femininity. Her landlady likes her because “she’s decided Ainsley isn’t respectable, whereas I am. It’s probably the way we dress: Ainsley says I choose clothes as though they’re a camouflage or a protective colouration” (7).

Atwood has shown in the novel how Marian’s (the protagonist), and by extension, woman’s fragmented social identity enables the consumption and assimilation of all her parts, intellectual, emotional and physical, into a cultural agenda. Marian shows how this assimilation can be nonetheless averted or retarded through small acts of resistance. Atwood’s adjective ‘edible’ evokes the idea that women are prey to be consumed. Jane Mills highlights how women have long been described as edible:

*The Dictionary of Historical Slang* lists several phrases colloquially popular since the C15th, some still in use, which evoke an image of woman as dead flesh, bloodily carved up,
hacked at, minced by a butcher or cook, and eventually served up for male consumption. A *bit of meat* meant firstly sexual intercourse (from the male standpoint) and later a prostitute. *Fresh meat* was a prostitute new to the trade . . . In the C20th the expression a *cut or slice off the joint* is a UK slang term used by men meaning to have intercourse with a woman.

*(Italics original 155)*

*The Edible Woman* is a story of a young girl named Marian McAlpine who is engaged to her boyfriend Peter and develops an eating disorder called anorexia. She works in a market research firm, writing survey questions and sampling products. She shares her apartment with her friend Ainsley who is desperate to be a single mother. Marian doesn’t like the ideology of Ainsley and she is horrified to hear from her “The thing that ruins families these days is the husband” (42). Ainsley wants to have a baby, because “it fulfils your deepest femininity” (43). Ainsley decides to seduce Marian’s friend Len, after she had heard of his fear of commitment for fatherhood, and interest in young girls.

Marian has another friend also. Her name is Clara, who is now a constantly pregnant housewife. At work, Marian is assigned the task of gathering responses for a survey about a new type of beer. While walking from house to house asking people their opinions, she meets Duncan, an
English under-graduate student who intrigues her with his atypical and eccentric answers.

Marian works to make herself acceptable or ‘appetizing’ to those around her, and being successful, is something labelled ‘respectable’ and ‘sensible’. Her friend Clara even tells her she is “abnormally normal” (265). The comment reassures Marian, who having attained the perfect female normality she was seeking, nonetheless finds herself physically sick, and alienated from her own body. Atwood’s intentions are clear. Marian as a willing member of a mechanized, consumer-oriented society, has allowed herself to absorb the social mythologies that are destructive to her, thereby rendering herself a consumable object, that is, an ‘edible woman’. This reinforces the central idea in Atwood’s Power Politics “You refuse to own/yourself, you permit/others to do it for you” (30). The more Marian fulfils the expectations of others-the more she is ‘normalized’ the more she feels engulfed. In spite of her will to maintain her usual behaviour, her body begins to reject the things she consumes, namely food first meat, then eggs and finally vegetables. The only alternative to this slow dissolution of self is to engage in aggressive consumption – a consumption associated with, and symbolically practiced by men.

At a dinner date with Peter and Len, Ainsley shows up dressed as a virgin school girl – the first stage of her plan to trick Len into impregnating her. Len’s character is portrayed as both a predator and a victim. His
character differs from Peter in his underlined gradual victimisation and regression during the novel. Peter, because of his proximity to Marian, is much less of a victim. Marian thinks that Len and Peter feel brotherhood against women. When they first meet, Len’s first words after formalities make Peter forget his suspicious feelings towards a possible rival “You’ve got to watch these women when they start pursuing you. They’re always after you to marry them. You’ve got to hit and run. Get them before they get you and then get out” (77).

Immediately after this, Len reveals his “brilliantly-polished white teeth” (77), suggesting hunger and hunting. He believes that women use marriage as a trap for men and men should be vigilant enough not to make any commitment in a relationship. Len’s idea about women echoes the feminist object relation theory. According to Benjamin, a complex and complementary struggle is common in relationships “One gives, the other refuses to accept; one pursues, the other loses interest; one criticizes, the other feels annihilated” (65). This power struggle is clear in Len and Ainsley’s relationship.

Len’s character represents a traditional misogynist view in which women are seen in two opposite positions only: the holy mother/Madonna and the whore. Len and Ainsley want each other, but they want different things and try to hide what they want—this bring dramatic conflicts, irony and comedy to the text. Ainsely’s hunger for becoming a single mother
make Marian think about advertisements of hair-dryers and of scientific theories like anthropology. Ainsley’s opinions might also be from a magazine specialized in maternity issues with pseudo-scientific articles teaching people how to live, producing certain identities or ways to behave. Marian suspects Ainsley of lying when she narrates the story of a woman who tried to murder her husband by short-circuiting his electric tooth brush (20). Apart from the comical effect of the anecdote, this element of the story contains deeper meaning, by suggesting the elimination of patriarchal power.

Marian finds herself dissociating from her body as Peter recounts a gory rabbit hunt to Len at dinner. Peter’s hunting story, however begins the process of Marian’s fragmentation, her rising discomfort causes her to start crying. Her disease starts to spill over in the form of a tear:

After a while I notice with mild curiosity that a large drop of something wet had materialized on the table near my hand. I packed it with my finger and smudged it around a little before I realized with horror that it was a tear. I must be crying then! Something inside me started to dash about in dithering mazes of panic, as though I had swallowed a tadpole. I was going to break down and make a scene, I couldn’t. (82)

Marian’s fear of crying suggests that like the rabbit, she must remain camouflaged for survival; she hides under the guise of femininity. She runs
from the restaurant and is chased down by Peter in his car. Unaware of Ainsley’s scheme to trap Len into fatherhood, Peter chides her “Ainsley behaved properly, why couldn’t you?” (96). At the end of that night, Peter proposes marriage to her and when asked to choose a date for the wedding, Marian slips unexpectedly passively “I’d rather have you decide that. I’d rather leave the big decisions up to you.” I was astounded at myself. I’d never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was that I really meant it” (109).

Marian and Duncan have a surprise meeting in a Laundromat; engage in awkward conversation, then share a kiss. Shortly afterwards, Marian’s problems with food begin when she finds herself empathising with a steak that Peter is eating at the restaurant. After this, she is unable to eat meat—anything with “bone or tendon of fibre” (193).

Ainsley’s plot to seduce Len succeeds. When Len later learns that Ainsley is pregnant, he talks to Marian, who confesses that pregnancy was Ainsley’s plan all along. Len reveals his childhood fear of eggs and from that point Marian can no longer face her soft boiled egg in the morning. Shortly thereafter, she is unable to eat vegetables or cake.

Peter decides to throw a party, to which Marian invites “the office virgins” (17) from her work, Duncan and Duncan’s roommates. Peter suggests that Marian should buy herself a new dress for the party. Marian submits to his wishes and buys a daring red dress. Before the party, Ainsley
does Marian’s make up including false eyelashes and a big lipsticked smile. When Duncan arrives, he is unable to recognise Marian in her new look and shows his displeasure. He leaves the party and Marian follows him. They end up going to a sleazy hotel, where they have unsatisfying sex. The next morning, they go out to breakfast and Marian finds that she cannot eat anything. After Duncan leaves, Marian realizes that Peter is metaphorically devouring her. To test him, she bakes a pink cake in the shape of a woman and dares him to eat it. Peter leaves her house, disturbed, and Marian eats the cake herself.

*The Edible Woman* consists of three parts: in the first Marian gets engaged. The second part tells of Marian’s life as an engaged bride-to-be married. In the third and shortest part Marian is single again. The narrative point of view shifts from first to third person, accentuating Marian’s slow detachment from reality. At the conclusion, first person narration returns, consistent with the character’s willingness to take control of her life again. Kathryn VanSpanckeren sees the novel as “an inverted Cinderella story in which the poor working girl flees from the wealthy prince charming; or an inverted sleeping Beauty, who wakes up when the prince is at safe distance” (“Magic” 4).

From an ecofeminist perspective *The Edible Woman* offers many connections “between our food and our environment . . . and our personal lives” (Adams, *Neither* 108). In the novel Atwood has exposed how women
and animals are always valued in terms of their bodies. As Adams rightly points out:

The existence of meat as a mass term contributes to the . . .

“naturalizing of animals as consumable”. The ideology becomes sanctioned as eternal or unalterable, rather than suspect and changeable. To be a pig is to be pork. To be a chicken is to be poultry. (Neither 108)

Marian, inadvertently becomes part of the Canadian wilderness in two ways. At first, she is involved in the commercialization of it, as she is a market researcher; later in the novel she transforms into a hunted rabbit figure, which is a type of madness. Early in the novel, she conducts a survey of Moose beer drinkers for her job, asking men their opinions on an ad that links drinking Moose bear with hunting. Thus the heroine is implicated in marketing a consumerist and thus unmeaningful, even profane, vision of Canadian masculinity, as articulated by the ad:

_Moose, Moose, / From the land of Pine and Spruce, / Tingly, heady, rough and ready. . . . [ . . . ] /Any real man, on a real man’s holiday — hunting, fishing, / or just plain old-fashioned relaxing—needs a beer with a healthy, hearty taste, a deep-down manly flavour. /The first long cool swallow will tell you that Moose Beer is just what you’ve always wanted for a true beer enjoyment. / Put the tang of the wilderness in YOUR life
Accompanying the caption is a picture of a hunter standing alongside a deer he has just killed, yet his hands are bloodless. Marian recognises the advertisement as deceptive, since it provides a clean picture of a brutal act. It reiterates the fact that manliness is associated with killing, control, cleanliness, and efficiency. She perceives a similar absurdity between the brutal act of killing the animal and polite manners that Peter uses when slicing, chewing, and swallowing his steak “How skilfully he did it: no tearing, no ragged edges. And yet it was a violent action” (189). Man’s aggression is disguised through the reshaping of his victim.

Marian’s conscious mind resists the notion of herself as prey, and yet her instincts push her to a self-instilled slaughter. At dinner, Marian notices Peter “watching her more and more . . . he would focus his eyes on her face, concentrating on her as though if he looked hard enough he would be able to see through her flesh and her skull” (188). Peter is able to look at the animal and see the steak that will sit on his plate, and likewise, he observes Marian, not as a soul, but as flesh to be consumed. The tang of the wilderness is both an object of parody and a sinister evocation of men as hunters that becomes all the more sinister to Marian when she finds herself engaged to Peter, who likes to hunt and who makes her subsequently feel like a hunted animal in a meat market:
She watched the capable hands holding, the knife and fork, slicing precisely with an exact adjustment of pressures . . . cutting; and violence in connection with Peter seemed incongruous to her. Like the Moose Beer commercials, which had begun to appear everywhere, in the subway trains, on hoardings, in magazines. Because she had worked on the pre-marketing survey she felt partially responsible for them; not that they were doing any harm. The fisherman wading in the stream, scooping the trout into his net, was too tidy: he looked as though his hair had just been combed, a few strands glued neatly to his forehead to show he was windblown. And the fish also was unreal; it had no slime, no teeth, no smell; it was a clever toy, metal and enamel. The hunter who had killed a deer stood posed and urbane, no twigs in his hair, his hands bloodless. (189-190)

Thus, the novel connects her acquiescence to patriarchy with her role in marketing a masculine Canadian image. Marian begins to object the bloodless quality of the hunt in a modern context. The ad substitutes for an authentic relation to the wilderness in the same way that consumer imagines packaged meat and women bloodlessly. Such images suggest that the female body itself is a “spread” wilderness which invites men to bloodlessly hunt.
Women are victims, but clearly also agents of “objectification”. Carol J. Adams in her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* defines objectification:

Objectification permits an oppressor to view another being as an object. The oppressor then violates this being by object-like treatment: e.g., the rape of women that denies women freedom to say no, or the butchering of animals that converts animals from living breathing things into dead objects. This process allows fragmentation, or brutal dismemberment, and finally consumption. (73)

Marian starts feeling suffocated after accepting the marriage proposal from Peter, she feels like an object that is soon to be owned by man. She realises as long as she gives into Peter’s desires, she will be allowing him to treat her as an object to be possessed. John Berger suggests that “to be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space into the keeping of men” (46). Paradoxically, Marian not only identifies herself with animal– victims, but starts “taking on the characteristics of her oppressors’” (Sweetapple 51). John Berger further proposes that there are two elements to a woman’s identity:

From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the *Surveyor* and *Surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to
survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought for as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (46)

Women’s situation is produced at the level of male dominance, but perhaps it is more subtle than that, Catharine A. Mackinnon states that male power over women is “not a discrete location, but a web of sanctions throughout society which ‘controls the principal means of coercion’ that structure women’s everyday lives” (169). This suggests that male power, founded on social constructions and institutions is far more complex than the institutions themselves. Marian, like many contemporary women, discovers that she is caught between the “half of the individual which wishes to express her individuality, herself” (Mc Mullen 66) and the half that desires marriage and the socio economic privileges that go with it, but “often at the expense of individuality” (66). She senses that social forces threaten to pull her apart and reconfigure her into the form of an object. Thus, in a struggle to maintain her individuality, she employs strategies to prevent her fragmentation. Aligned with the brutal dismemberment of an animal, her fragmentation would enable consumption and hence the fulfilment of oppression.
Marian sees herself, “in relationship with animals. To eat animals is to make of them instruments; this proclaims dominance and power-over. The subordination of animals is not a given but a decision resulting from an ideology that participates in the very dualisms that ecofeminism seeks to eliminate” (Adams, Neither 108).

It is no coincidence that women feel like objects when, in the same way as animals, they are objectified; it is usually only their images that are butchered and disassembled. Upon passing into the space of the slaughter house, animals are no longer beings, but items to be disassembled and eventually packaged, shelved, bought, and consumed. While the objectification of an animal is most evident in the butchering process, women are objectified through more subtle forms of control, power, and coercion. Marian’s identity is constructed through a medium of social control that limits her to the imprisoned cell of her body. Carol J. Adams explains in The Sexual Politics of Meat that “through butchering, animals become absent, referent” (Adams 66). Simply put, animals become absent in order for meat to exist, but “if animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus, a dead body replaces the live animals. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food” (Adams, The 66).

Women’s relationship with their bodies is one that employs strategies that mutilate and objectify. Whether a woman uses girdles, wigs, make-up,
capped teeth, or plastic surgery, she is treating her body as a “defect” that can be “fixed” (Radner 13). Hilary Radner explains that “fixing”:

Depends upon the manipulation of consumer products as technologies that function to reproduce and circulate an image that a woman will claim as herself through a rewriting of body that must be continuously rewritten, kept up and made over.

(23)

In the same way—that woman rewrites herself through the manipulation of her body; animals are re-written when they are converted into meat, ribs, loin, shark etc. Instead of taking command of the image that transforms the woman, she adopts it as what is most feminine about her. Similarly, we take the rewritten version of the animal, such as a cellophane-wrapped pork chop and accept it as what is most edible and real about the animal. Consequently, women and animals become absent referents subsequently erasing their identities and replacing them with what their culture desires of them (feminine cultural constructs/meat).

Woman and animal’s otherness is reinforced by a culture that seeks to disguise their original nature. Again, animal’s transformation into meat and the renaming of its various body parts (rib, loin, shank, etc) obscures its identity as animal. A woman’s continual production of herself in the image of the “more perfect than perfect” is also conceived in terms of parts (breast, butt, thigh, abs etc). Outside of the real woman, images cater to a culture’s
desire, since its two dimensional status does not threaten existing social roles or governing institutions. Once the image is mistaken for the real woman, then her consumption is complete. If a woman desires the body image she sees in a fashion photographs, but knows that she does not have the body to match, then the implementation of disciplinary practices (e.g. the girdle) become necessary and, soon, it is an intrinsic part of her identity.

Marian’s inability to eat is indicative of her resistance towards identity fixing and the social sickness that accompanies it. Her abstinence from meat, vegetables, and then all food, is directly related to her rejection of masculinity, femininity and then all humanity. Marian’s problems with eating start after the engagement, in a fancy restaurant where she dines with Peter. Lupton points out that dining out can be seen as an important means to express oneself. Wealthy people distinguish themselves from the crowd by dining in restaurants and making “right” choices concerning food and wine (Food 98). Marian’s complications and thoughts during dinner suggest that she cannot comply with the act Peter is offering to or forcing on her.

Marian feels ravenously hungry when she gets her rare steak, but eating the meat proves to be difficult. She is absorbed in her thoughts, a chain of associations, during which she watches Peter cut his steak and eat it. Marian’s thoughts go from child rearing to what Peter wants from a wife. She also thinks other examples of “accepted male violence she has encountered during the day: how the Moose Beer commercial which has
been the topic in her work, hides the bloodiness of hunting and fishing, and the newspaper article she had read, where a man shot people in random from an upstairs window. Marian tries to convince herself that Peter “wasn’t himself today” (187). Their discussion might lead to Marian’s understanding that Peter’s words and opinions suggest their incompatibility, but instead it leads to repression of this issue, and the horror is displaced onto the steak, Peter’s current “Victim”:

Watching him operating on the steak like that, carving a straight slice and then dividing it into neat cubes, made her think of the diagram of the planned cow at the front of one of her cookbooks . . . she looked down at her own half eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head . . . like someone waiting for a streetcar . . . most of the time you never thought about it. In the supermarket they had it all pre-packaged in cellophane . . . it was made clean, official. But now it was suddenly there in front of her with no intervening paper, it was flesh and blood, rare, and she had been devouring it. Gorging herself on it. (190-191)

In partially repressed way Marian identifies herself with meat, identifying herself with the beef Peter cuts and devours, as she identifies with the rabbit of his later hunting story. As Peter’s bride, she too is about to be consumed,
“ruled and measured” (190), like the cow. In her thoughts masculinity represents violence. Consumption, as Adams defines it, is:

The fulfilment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity . . . Finally, consumed, it exists only through what it represents. The consumption of the referent reiterates its annihilation as a subject of importance in itself. (The 73)

Marian’s nausea on seeing meat is her instinctive identification with the hunted animal. The hunter / hunted dichotomy is a prevalent metaphor for man-woman relationship in our culture, and it is quite visible in the novel. In The Princess, Tennyson writes “Man is the hunter; woman is his game. / The sleek and shining creature of the chase, / We hunt them for the beauty of their skins; They love us for it and we ride them down” (qtd. in Fiddes 144). The conflation of women and meat suggests that the consumption of both is a sign of male potency. Meat has long been reputed to “inflame the lustful passions” (Fiddes 147). The bodies of animal and women are both ‘dressed’ and ‘adorned’ for their male consumers.

After Peter finishes his dish and Marian is unable to do the same, Peter remarks “A good meal always makes you feel a little more human” (192), showing their incompatibility. Being human is seen analogous to cruelty and brutal exploitation of other mammals. There is no surety that Peter would not think of Marian in same terms too, as he thinks of child beating or animal eating. Using and marrying her makes him a more
powerful human being. Marian tries to convince herself that it is all right to
eat her steak, “Everyone eats cows, it’s natural” (191) but she cannot, the
object identification is too strong. This could be compared to common
heterosexist views of matrimony: everyone does it, it is expected and
natural—these are the common arguments. Peter eats up Marian’s steak too,
“Peter smiled and chewed, pleasantly conscious of his own superior
capacity. . . . She sat twisting . . . watching the last of Peter’s steak
disappear into his mouth” (192), which suggests that he is very hungry and
does not think of the ethics of marriage, child rearing or meat eating.
Ecofeminists believe that “Women’s relational culture of caring and
attentive love” forms the basis for a feminist ethic for the treatment of
animals “we should not kill, eat, torture, and exploit animals because they do
not want to be so treated, and we know that. If we listen, we can hear them”
(Donovan 375).

There are several places, where the narrative suggests, that the
engagement changes Marian’s subjectivity and identity. It appears as a
traumatising event, but with ironic and comic tones. In the morning after the
engagement, Marian thinks “My mind was at first as empty as though
someone had scooped out the inside of my skull like a cantaloupe and left
me only the rind to think with” (99). This image sounds degrading and
amusing, but it also suggests a painful division of the self. Marian’s inner
self, her true self has been taken away and there is only the false outer self left.

In the morning after the proposal, Peter asks her when she wants them to get married and Marian feels that she is no longer what she used to be:

My first impulse was to answer, with the evasive flippancy I’d always used before when he’d asked me serious questions about myself, “What about Groundhog Day?” But instead I heard a soft flannelly voice I barely recognized, saying, “I’d rather have you decide that. I’d rather leave the big decisions up to you.” I was astounded at myself. . . . The funny thing was I really meant it. (109)

The engagement means a change in Marian’s behaviour and freedom. This surprises Marian, she seems to have no mind or desire of her own anymore. It is as if the bridal role would give her no choice, or the choice to be without a voice of her own. Marian is bewildered by her own behaviour, but does not or is unable to change it. On the contrary, she appears to be satisfied with it. Benjamin states that women’s submission springs from women’s fear of being alone and separate from others. Men deny women’s subjectivity, but women also let that happen willingly in hope of being recognised. Benjamin further says, “In submission, even the fulfilment of desire is made to appear as the expression of the other’s will” (79).
After the change in her attitude towards steak, Marian notices that she cannot eat many other products, either step by step; the items that remind Marian of a human body become inedible and abject to her. They seem to be reminders of her own bodily existence and her identity and position as a bride – for instance chicken is also out of the list, because it reminds her too much of “an arm with goose bumps” (193). It appears that food is too similar to herself, to her body: she is an edible like the foodstuffs she detests. In the meat eating scene in the restaurant, Marian’s realisation of the inedibility of an object usually include thoughts of Peter and the marriage. When Marian prepares food for guests – Peter and her friends, the Bates family, she is nervous of the evening, because Peter does not approve of Bates messy family life. When she prepares the food, a carrot starts to possess qualities of a living thing:

She was watching her own hands and the peeler and the curl of crisp orange skin. She became aware of the carrot. It’s a root, she thought, it grows in the ground and sends up leaves. Then they come along and dig it up, may be it even makes a sound, a scream too low for us to hear, but it doesn’t die right away, it keeps on living, right now it’s still alive. . . . She thought she felt it twist in her hands. (227)

Even a carrot is alive and victim of ruthless people, who are insensitive of its feelings and unable to hear its “scream”. This sound echoes Marian’s own
hidden voice and knowledge of her problematic situation as a bride. The rebellious stomach is a persistent voice, but it is not heard by others.

Soon after the engagement, Marian begins to view her smile as a separate entity “I gave him a tender chrome-plated smile; that is, I meant the smile to express tenderness but my mouth felt stiff and bright and somehow expensive” (107). Here, Marian wishes to convey a tender smile, but it evolves into a shiny and expensive commodity. Her own mouth is no longer complying with her impulse, but with the expectations of Peter and the culture he embodies. Atwood’s use of “Chrome-plated”, “bright” and “expensive” is meant to remind us of the language of consumer culture. Marian, in the process of submission to male desire, resembles a product, a consumable object. Humin argues:

In The Edible Woman, Marian escapes the androcentric linear countdown to marriage by progressing, via the mechanism of food, back into childhood. She ‘regresses’ from meat to peanut butter and finally to a semiotic world of liquids and sensuality. Food is Marian’s metamorphic archive of developing [eco] feminism. (154)

In the second part of novel Marian goes from referring to herself in the first person to the third person, “as if to indicate that during this period, Marian has no self, no subjectivity, and thus cannot tell her story” (Lyons 182).
Early on in the novel, Marian’s identification with the victimization of the animal reflects ecofeminist sentiments. This is exemplified most effectively when Peter relays a rabbit-hunting story to Marian’s misogynist friend, Len:

So I let her off and Wham. One shot, right through the heart. The rest of them got away . . . So I whipped out my knife, good knife, German steel, and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place. All over me, what a mess, rabbit guts dangling from the trees, god the trees were red for yards . . . (81)

Peter’s boasting reflects a culture that equates masculine behaviour with the victimization of other beings. His recreational approach to his hunting escapade undermines the severity of the oppressive act itself. In response “Len bared his teeth” (81), expressing his mutual blood lust with Peter. Both men receive pleasure from the blood spillage of another being seemingly, the more grotesque, the more entertaining. However, Peter and Len’s enjoyment cannot be cast off as a simple fascination with gore. Anthropologist Nick Fiddes relates man’s desire for hunting, more specifically meat-eating to “environmental control” (Fiddes 45). For many generations, obtaining meat has been especially enjoyed by those “who like the notion of power over nature that it embodies” (Fiddes 45). The
expression of that power, however, does not end with the capture of the animal. Even more crucial is the treatment of the animal once he or she is in man’s possession. Oftentimes, the meat that is derived from the most suffering carries the highest value.

While Peter constructs an image of brutality in a juvenile fashion, Marian artistically recreates the scene as a symbolic representation of woman and animal’s fused oppression. The blood that covers the “anonymous” tree (82), in Peter’s hunting story is what will later dress Marian in the form of red sequin dress. The brown, green, and blue colours enhanced by the fiery sun, represent the natural elements: earth, water, air and fire. They provide the necessities of life, but human interference is harmful to the environment and its inhabitants. Peter’s hunting story allows her to make connection between the free-roaming creature and the lifeless slab of flesh that sits on her plate. Eating thus becomes both painful and symbolic – painful because she is consuming herself, symbolic because her identity is being assimilated into her culture’s definition of what she should become.

It is Marian’s friendship with Clara; however, that provides one of the most significant contributing factors to her disordered eating. Clara is a friend of Marian’s from school and is now the mother of two, and seven months pregnant. Clara’s life is represented as a chaotic, restrictive and suffocating. When Marian leaves Clara’s house following a visit, she
comments “My skin felt stifled, as though I was enclosed in a layer of moist dough” (39). For Marian, Clara provides a graphic representation of what life, as a wife and mother, will be, one in which her individual identity is lost. These fears are demonstrated in Marian’s descriptions of Clara’s pregnancy as taking over her body. Clara’s pregnant body is referred to as a “boa-constrictor that has swallowed water melon” (30), “a strange vegetable growth, a bulbous tuber” (31).

The less than idyllic representations of maternity are shared by Clara herself. “Never believe what they tell you about maternal instinct,’ she added grimly to us. ‘I don’t see how anyone can love their children till they start to be human beings” (33). Marian’s discomfort with her reproductive potential is heightened when Ainsley decides she is going to have a child and raise it as a single mother. Marian shows the first signs of her disordered eating following the evening surrounded by Clara’s domestic life and Ainsley’s announcement “I got into bed, feeling unsettled” (46). It is significant that Marian has such an extreme reaction to the pregnant body. Pregnant body is a clear example of what Julia Kristeva refers to as the abject “what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). The pregnant body challenges borders by encompassing another self. The placenta connects the woman to the foetus, allowing the exchange of both nutrients but also waste. As Barbara Creed explains, the womb “represents
the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces” (49).

Marian’s fear of the abject can also be seen in her uneasiness with bodily wastes. Anthropologist Mary Douglas discusses how bodily wastes and, in particular, the body’s orifices highlight the fluidity of the body:

We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its especially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing force have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. (121)

Bodily fluids and waste draw attention to the margins of the body and the boundary between inside and outside. While clearly both men and women produce waste matter, it is the bodies of women that have come to be associated with fluidity. Elizabeth Grosz notes how the female body has been constructed as “a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting . . . a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order” (203). It is primarily women’s reproductive role that has prompted such a construction.

Marian is clearly very uncomfortable with bodily fluids and waste and all they represent. She admits to cleaning away the ring around the tub
in the shared bathroom after Ainsley has used it and is embarrassed by Clara’s children’s excrement when they come to her apartment for dinner. She also dislikes the way Emmy, one of the office virgins, constantly sheds bodily products, “her lipstick sloughs off in dry scales, she sheds wispy blonde hairs and flakes of scalp on her shoulders and back; everywhere she goes she leaves a trail of assorted shreds” (18-19). Marian glances “with distaste” (222) at the varieties of tissues and toilet papers in the supermarket, and at the greasy paint her mouth leaves on a glass.

At the office Christmas party, she finds herself watching the other women eating “the continual flux between the outside and the inside, taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato-juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears and garbage”(212). This passage reveals how Marian makes a connection between what the body takes in (potato-chips, cookies, tomato-juice, tea, liquor) and what the body gives out in the form of waste (burps, grease, hair, excrement, vomit, blood, sweat, tears and garbage). Interestingly, ‘babies’ are also included in the list. As something that the body gives out, they are associated with waste.

While watching the women, Marian begins to feel suffocated by “that liquid amorphous other” (213). The use of the word ‘amorphous’ here is reminiscent of Douglas’ discussion of viscosity “The viscous is a state halfway between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in the process of
change. It is unstable but it does not flow. It is soft, yielding and compressible. . . . Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech; it attacks the boundary between myself and it” (194).

Prior to the X-mas party, Marian explains she had thought of the women in her office as being like the office furniture, “objects viewed as outline and surface only” (212). The fatness of older women in the office such as Mrs. Gundridge and Mrs. Grot allows Marian the opportunity to view the women’s bodies differently, to see the previously disguised bulges of fat and to recognise their porous quality.

Marian’s discomfort with the fluidity of women’s bodies is shared by her college-friend Len. When he discovers Ainsley is pregnant by him he is horrified: “Birth,’ he said, his voice higher and more distraught, “‘birth terrifies me. It’s revolting. I can’t stand the thought of having”—he shuddered—“a baby”’ (198). His horror is clearly associated with fluidity “Now I’m going to be all mentally tangled up in Birth. Fecundity Gestation, Don’t you realize what that will do to me? It’s obscene, that horrible oozy . . . .” (202). Len also fears the polluting effects of the pregnant body, yelling at an approaching Ainsley, “Don’t come near me! . . . You’re unclean!” (202).

In addition to her friendship with pregnant Clara, Marian’s relationship with her boyfriend Peter contributes to her growing apprehension about taking on the roles of wife and mother. Peter is a handsome lawyer in his articling years, who lives in a partly completed high
rise apartment complex. At drinks with Peter, Len and Ainsley it becomes obvious to Marian that her relationship has become more serious than she thought. This realisation is accompanied by a feeling of panic and an urgent need to escape. When the group leaves the bar Marian lets go of Peter’s arm and runs off into the night. After she is ‘recaptured’ by Peter they all return to Len’s apartment. With no means of actual flight available, Marian ‘escapes’ by sliding underneath Len’s bed where she gets stuck and has to be rescued. Peter’s superior attitude angers her and she decides to make her own way home. Her decision provides a hint of what is to come “I had broken out; from what, or into what, I didn’t know. Though I wasn’t at all certain why I had been acting this way, I had at least acted” (94).

Marian uses self-starvation to gain the control that eludes her in other aspects of her life and to reduce her reproductive potential. By limiting what transgresses her body’s boundaries (food), Marian reduces the fluidity of her body. Her continued self-starvation will not only reduce bodily wastes but also lead to the loss of menstruation. Lester argues:

[A]n anorexic’s refusal of food allows her to solidify her physical boundaries, her ideal to permit no substances to enter or leave her body . . . She will be totally, completely self-contained a closed system . . . through a solidification of the body boundary through fasting (and the accompanying physiological conditions such as amenorrhea) the anorexic
woman may literally redefine the boundaries of the self.

(486-7)

Marian’s use of disordered eating as a form of protest is reflected in a comment from Duncan “you’re probably representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system; though it isn’t considered orthodox to begin with the digestive system” (245). While Marian’s self-starvation is unorthodox, for her it is one of the few avenues left available. The ‘system’ has made it difficult for her to legitimately refuse Peter’s marriage proposal. After all he is good-looking and has wonderful career prospects. We are reminded of Marian’s parents’ fears about her prospects as a college educated woman. If she does not accept this proposal she may not receive a further one, leaving her a maiden aunt.

Marian’s changed circumstances are signalled by a switch in narration from first person in Part One to third person in Part Two “Marian was sitting listlessly at her desk” (131). W. J. Keith argues that “Marian has resolved to view her own actions from an external perspective” (43). Similarly, Catherine McLay suggests “her body is now seen as external and can be observed from the outside by her mind; the two are no longer parts of a unified self” (127). This is clear in a comment in Part Three which sees a return to first person “Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again” (358). Marian experiences her body as acting autonomously “Whatever it was that had been making these decisions, not her mind
certainly” (192), and “She was becoming more and more irritated by her
body’s decision to reject certain foods. She had tried to reason with it, had
accused it of having frivolous whims, had coaxed it and tempted it, but it
was adamant; and if she used force it rebelled” (226).

Marian’s objectification is also signalled by changes to her eating
habits. The more she transforms into Peter’s ideal woman, the less she eats.
Out at lunch with the three office virgins from work Marian finds she
“wasn’t even hungry”, despite having been “starving” earlier (138). Her
decreased appetite appears to coincide with the decision to tell the three
women about her engagement to Peter. At a restaurant with Peter, Marian
declares she is “ravenous” (147), but finds she is unable to finish her Filet
Mignon. Her failure to eat the steak follows a discussion on how to raise
children in which Peter dismisses Marian’s opinion and accuses her of
having “led a sheltered life” (185).

Significantly, Marian’s initial dietary changes consist of the
elimination of most meat. Adams establishes a connection between
vegetarianism and “the rejection of male acts of violence, identification with
animals, repudiation of men’s control of women” (“Feminism” 245). Adams
cites *The Edible Woman* as one of a number of literary texts in which “male
dominance is seen to cause women’s oppression, war, and meat eating”
(“Feminism” 248).
Marian’s list of ‘allowed’ foods continues to shrink as she begins preparations for Peter’s party. Peter’s party constitutes a climax in the novel, in that it illustrates the ultimate rise of Marian’s discomfort, resulting in her flight. At his request to buy something “not quite so mousy” (268), Marian purchases a dress that is “short, red, and sequined” (268), which turns her into an object of lust. At the party she realises that she cannot deal with the requirements for perfect bride-to-be. She panics and decides to run away.

Marian recognises the artificiality of her new look when she observes herself in the mirror “She held both of her naked arms out towards the mirror. They were the only portion of her naked flesh that was without a cloth or nylon or leather or varnish covering, but in the glass even they looked fake, like soft pinkish-white rubber or plastic, boneless, flexible” (295). Her appearance is reminiscent of the young girl image Ainsley invents to snare Len “like one of the large plump dolls in the stores at Christmas-time, with washable, rubber-smooth skin and glassy eyes and gleaming artificial hair” (81).

While Marian’s new look could be seen as her final objectification, her transformation also suggests a parody or mimicry of the feminine. Bouson comments in *Brutal Choreographies* “even as Atwood shows Marian submitting to the masquerade, she constructs a feminist reading position by focusing on femininity-as-masquerade” (28). The sequined red
dress, fake eyelashes and fingernails, intricately styled hair and large dangly earrings are over the top.

Carole Ann Tyler questions how parody or mimicry can be distinguished from the real thing “The difference between being resigned to femininity and re-signing femininity is not so clearly visible” (28). Despite a woman’s intentions to repeat femininity with a difference, this difference may not be obvious to others and the mimic, “could find herself in the same old story” (Tyler 28). This appears to be the problem that Marian encounters. At the party the office virgins and Trevor, one of Duncan’s flatmates, inform Marian she “should really wear red more often” (308). Similarly, Peter tells her she looks marvellous “The implication had been that it would be most pleasant if she could arrange to look like that all the time” (295). Significantly, the only person who recognises the artifice of the new image, besides Marian herself, is Duncan who arrives at the party but refuses to come in. On seeing Marian at the door he says, “You didn’t tell me it was a masquerade. . . . Who the hell are you supposed to be?” (309).

Marian’s realisation that her new image has been perceived as the real thing causes her to panic when Peter starts taking photos of the guests. She is terrified that if she is ‘captured’ on film she will lose the power to ‘take off’ the femininity “Once he pulled the trigger she would be stopped, fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change” (317). Peter’s comment “That red ought to show up well on a slide” (299) is
a reminder of the earlier rabbit hunting story in which Peter and his friends shoot and gut a rabbit. Marian recognises the danger of “black light meter” (299) which directly extend from the camera. Marian’s resistance to be photographed by Peter reflects an underlying fear of “slaughter”, as she is “backed against the wall” (299) and arranged by Peter’s lens. Marian recognises herself as a target and realises that after marriage she will be silenced, renamed for consumption and assimilated into Peter’s lifestyle. She is caught between her fear of being consumed and the conventional inner voice (of a suppressed woman) that seeks to justify the use of the camera. Peter’s suggestion to take a snapshot leaves her “unreasonably anxious” (299). The coupling of “unreasonable” and “anxious” underline Marian’s pull between resistance and acceptance.

Among the guns, black-light meters, blue flash bulbs, knives, and forks that litter Peter’s apartment Marian stands out as an object of desire. The “technologies of misogyny” (Wilson 8), as Deborah S. Wilson refers to them, exert their power through—not so much their use—but merely in their existence. The “concave silver circle” (298) of Peter’s flash gun never actually takes a shot of Marian, but its presence alone instils anxiety since it is a “tool of power” (Sontag 8). It functions as an altering device, the photographer “always imposing standards” (60) on its subjects. In addition, the material document of a photograph suggests “sequences of consumption” (9) that are carried on outside of the subject as well. Peter’s
appetite is unending. Marian’s perception that she is an object of prey is emphasised by other hunting imagery. Her party dress provides her with a “protective camouflage”, allowing her to make her way to the door “behind the concealing trunks and bushes of backs and skirt” (317).

Marian returns to fleeing as a method of escape. She manages to leave the party undetected and runs off in the direction of the Laundromat. Marian decides that Peter, the “dark intent marksman” had been there all the time, “hidden by the other layers, waiting for her at the dead centre: a homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands” (318).

Like many of Atwood’s male characters, Peter is depicted as double in nature. When Marian believes she recognises one of the doctors in the hospital when visiting Clara, “in spite of the mask there was something familiar about him” (169), we are reminded of previous comparisons of Peter and medicine. He runs his hands over Marian’s skin, “almost clinically” making her feel “that she was on a doctor’s examination table” (188). He also smells of soap all of the time, a smell Marian associates with “dentists’ chairs and medicine” (70). Marian also entertains the idea that Peter is the Underwear Man, a man who, posing as a Seymour Survey interviewer, rings women to ask questions of a personal nature. Marian’s boss, Mrs. Brogue’s description of the offending man as “probably some nice ordinary man” (144) recalls the description of Peter as “ordinariness raised to perfection” (71).
After locating Duncan at the Laundromat Marian spends the night with him at a hotel. The following morning at a grimey coffee shop Marian discovers she is unable to eat anything at all, not even a glass of orange juice. “Her body had cut itself off. The food circle had dwindled to a point, a black dot, closing everything outside” (333). Marian cannot face going back to her flat and the inevitable questions from Peter and her family so Duncan takes her on a last ‘escape’ down into one of the city’s ravines, where she finally faces her inner conflicts, a confrontation which causes her to turn back to her normal life with better understanding of her hybridity. It is here that Marian reconsiders her strategy of self-starvation “she didn’t see any point in starving to death. What she really wanted, she realized, had been reduced to simply safety. She thought she had been heading towards it all these months but actually she hadn’t been getting anywhere” (341–42). Marian realises she can no longer rely on the tactics of running away and self-starvation as forms of communication. With directions from Duncan she climbs out of the ravine and returns home.

When Peter calls demanding an explanation for her disappearance she invites him over for tea in a few hours. Marian’s interaction with Peter is significantly different before the party, with her controlling the direction of the conversation and making the time for the visit. While her voice sounds “sweet, conciliatory” (346), it is simply a ploy to ensure he attends “She was conscious of her own craftiness” (346). Despite her increased assertiveness
over the phone, Marian still feels the need to continue to communicate with Peter in non-verbal ways: “What she needed was something that avoided words; she didn’t want to get tangled up in a discussion” (346). She decides to bake Peter a cake in the shape of a woman. The preparations for the baking of the cake further signal Marian’s newly found confidence and direction.

The cake baking also signals an important change in Marian’s relationship to food. Prior to this occasion Marian shows little interest in food preparation. At the dinner party she holds for Joe and Clara her main concern is making a recipe that will allow her to hide her unusual eating habits. Other cooking examples include “frozen peas and smoked meat, the kind you boil for three minutes in the plastic packages” (74), and TV dinners. Marian’s eating habits are synonymous with her single lifestyle. Cooking, in particular baking, is associated with married women. This is clearly evident at the office X-mas party where the “food had all been brought by the ladies themselves” (205). Marian in fact buys her contribution, chocolate brownies, and puts them in a different bag. The expectation that married life will result in the ability and interest in making Orange-Pineapple Delight is hinted at in Peter’s protest, “Why can’t you ever cook anything?” (74), over Marian’s dinner of boiled meat. This makes Marian’s choice of a cake to communicate with Peter all the more
significant. Marian uses one of the very symbols of femininity to voice her dissatisfaction.

The decoration of the cake is reminiscent of Marian’s transformation for Peter’s party. She begins to “operate” (349) on the cake as she was operated on by the hairdresser “they treated . . . head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented” (268). The “scooped out part” (349) of the cake that becomes the head recalls Marian’s description of her head the morning following Peter’s proposal. The pink dress and “masses of intricate baroque scrolls and swirls” (350) are a recreation of Marian’s red sequined dress and professional hairdo. As John Lauber suggests, the cake is “a caricature of Marian at her most artificial. . . . Symbolically, it represents woman as simply an object for male consumption” (28). In this way, Marian’s cake becomes the mimicry or parody of femininity that she previously attempted through her appearance at Peter’s party.

When Peter arrives, angry and demanding an explanation, “Now what’s all this . . .” (351), Marian cuts him off by asking “Why don’t you go into the living room and sit down?” (351). He is clearly taken aback by Marian’s assertiveness as, she suspects, “he must have been expecting an awkward apology” (351). Marian presents Peter with the cake woman “You’ve been trying to destroy me, haven’t you,’ she said. ‘You’ve been trying to assimilate me. But I’ve made you a substitute, something you’ll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn’t it? I’ll get
you a fork” (352). By presenting Peter with a substitute made out of cake, Marian is stating her refusal to become the pliable wife figure he desires (her decision to make the cake a sponge is quite significant) Mervyn Nicholson refers to Marian’s cake making as a trick “the woman-shaped cake . . . suggests a substitute offering to avoid being eaten, a kind of trick to placate the powers that be, whether of society or superego” (40).

Before Peter arrives Marian proposes that if Peter merely laughs at the cake she will know it means her fears about a future with him are just “silly” (351). Peter, however, takes the presentation of the cake woman very seriously “His eyes widened in alarm. Apparently he didn’t find her silly” (352). Peter does not find Marian’s cake, ‘silly’ as ‘silly’ implies it is nonsensical and, therefore, non-threatening. For Peter, the presentation of the cake woman does not only signal Marian’s assertiveness but also her possible madness. It is this that Peter finds most alarming causing him to leave “quite rapidly” (353). Peter initially chooses Marian as his girlfriend because she has common sense and is “such a sensible girl” (108) (he declares this is the first thing to look for when picking a wife). Her ‘madness’ is not conducive to being the wife of a lawyer with prospects.

There is some suggestion that Peter may find Lucy a suitable alternative. At the party Marian finds her in Peter’s bedroom telling him, “You’re even handsomer than you sound on the phone” (307). Lucy also volunteers to help Peter look for Marian at the end of the party. Despite
Marian’s claim that “As a symbol it [the cake] had definitely failed” (353), it does allow her to end her relationship with Peter with minimal discussion: “they didn’t have much of a conversation after all” (353). Marian’s cake woman not only brings about the end of her relationship with Peter but also the end of her starvation. After Peter leaves she feels “extremely hungry” (353) and begins to eat the cake woman, feet first. When Ainsley returns home to discover Marian eating a piece of thigh she exclaims, “You’re rejecting your femininity!” (354). Marian replies, “Nonsense” “It’s only a cake” (354).

The significance of the cake-eating scene in the novel has been widely debated. Gloria Onley claims Marian’s eating of the cake both “destroys a false image and reabsorbs her culturally split-off female self” (74). Marian’s statement ‘It’s only a cake’, suggests that for her the cake has served its symbolic purpose and now it is nothing more than an elaborately iced sponge.

Part Two ends with Marian severing the head and body of the cake woman with a fork. Part Three sees a return to first person for Marian who is cleaning up the apartment few days later. She is interrupted by a call from Duncan who is enquiring about the whereabouts of his flatmate Fischer (who has married Ainsley after meeting her at Peter’s party). Marian invites Duncan over for tea and offers him the leftover cake. After finishing the last piece he says “Thank you” . . . “It was delicious” (363). Unlike Peter,
Duncan appears not to take any notice of the shape of the cake and its possible significance: “the cake was absorbed without exclamations of pleasure, even without noticeable expression” (363).

Critics have also speculated on the novel’s somewhat ambiguous ending, in particular the fate of Marian. Several critics assume she will now enter into a relationship with Duncan. Ellen Peel explains that Marian, “has taken up with Duncan, who is certainly more interesting and self-aware than Peter, but Duncan is hardly less self-absorbed” (112). Likewise, Marge Piercy’s comment assumes Marian has chosen Duncan over Peter “The relationship into which Marian seems headed is . . . conventional in the subculture and basically about as masochistic” (55). There are, however, few indications that Marian is going to pursue a romantic relationship with Duncan. She appears disinterested in his phone call, confessing she had “more or less forgotten about him” (277). She is also annoyed at his complete self-absorption “I found my own situation much more interesting than his” (358).

Ainsley and Fischer’s marriage provides the required ‘happily ever after’ ending, leaving Marian free to be single, at least for the moment. Marian’s options are limited as the society in which she lives remains unchanged. As Atwood explains in Second Words “It’s noteworthy that my heroine’s choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning: a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it” (370).
Atwood’s second novel *Surfacing* introduces a marginalised unnamed protagonist whose “fight for autonomy is extended beyond sexual politics as Atwood addresses Canada’s struggle to escape cultural domination by America” (Tolan 36). Like Marian, the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* deconstructs the plight of women and nature in the phallocentric society and exposes “the tension between Toronto and childhood, the green world of wilderness, and the grey world of the city, the urban and the rural” (Suka 209).
CHAPTER - III

Surfacing

No hints or facts, I didn’t know when it had happened . . . there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb. (117)

“I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place” (195).

Atwood’s second novel Surfacing can be called a precious gem in the genre of ecofeminist literature. It can be seen as a “feminist / ecological treatise”, which exposes the existing dualism in the phallocentric society (Hutcheon 145). George Woodcock observes “after the publication of Surfacing, an ecological direction began to emerge in comments on her [Atwood’s] writing, recognising her concern over the discordance between modern materially oriented civilization and the natural world” (17).

In the novel, Atwood has clearly deconstructed/decoded the masculine principle and the feminine principle: while masculine principle represents logic, violence and rationality; the feminine principle supports “an existence beyond reason, a realm of primitive nature where there are connections between life and death, suffering and joy, madness and true sanity, where opposites are resolved into wholes” (Rigney, Madness 93).
Since childhood Atwood has been very close to nature. *Surfacing* is a testimony to her strong bond with nature. The theme of ecological awareness plays a crucial role in the spiritual development of the novel’s protagonist. In the novel Atwood’s protagonist undertakes “a journey into the past, into her history, her origins, in order to explore her own identity” (Kaur 56). Atwood writes in *Survival* “if you aren’t too sure where you are, or if you are sure but you do not like it, there’s a tendency both in psycho-therapy and in literature, to retrace your history to see how you got there” (112). Marilyn Yalom calls *Surfacing* “the chaos of the unconscious” (72).

The title *Surfacing* symbolises the re-birth or self discovery of the unnamed protagonist, who after diving into the lake of the forest undergoes a process of transformation. Under the water she has visions that connect her with her ancestors and her dead father. *Surfacing* refers to her surfacing in the lake and her realisation of her real identity.

Through *Surfacing*, Atwood has explored how traumas affect one’s life. It is a story of a woman’s journey into her own self, her past, and to her childhood surroundings. It exposes a deep division inside a person. Abortion is also one of the motives of the novel and Atwood annoyed some of the feminists by presenting in *Surfacing* a multifaceted picture of the issue.

When *Surfacing* was published in 1972, discussion on abortion was present everywhere in the western countries. Some reflection of the cultural feminism of the 70s can be seen in the novel. The denial of medical care to
the female body and the desire to be one with the environment are visible in
the novel. Shannon Hengen in her book *Margaret Atwood’s Power* argues
that “by the year 1972, when *Surfacing* was published, cultural upheaval in
both Canada and the United States had called traditional mores into question
and, as if in response, Atwood begins to look more urgently for solutions
through her female characters” (53). Through *Surfacing*, Atwood exposes
how patriarchy exploits female bodies for their selfish needs including their
ambitious dynastic drive.

George Woodcock has called *Surfacing* “the first successful novel of
a writer who already, even before its appearance, seemed destined to become
a leader of the generation of the young and talented writers emerging during
the early 1970s” (14), and he further argues “it was with the publication of
*Surfacing* that Margaret Atwood became regarded, perhaps more than she
had bargained for, as a woman novelist speaking especially for and to
women” (20). In *Surfacing* Atwood reveals how men devalue and demean
women by reducing them to their bodies only. Men want to control the
female body in the same way as they want to control nature. Madeleine
Davis argues “Atwood’s fictional female bodies become battlefields where
anxieties relating to wider power structures are written on to female flesh”
(58). In the novel, the attitude of the society in a patriarchal social order
towards nature is reflected in the attitude towards the female body. Karen J.
Warren rightly points out:
Women are identified with nature and the realm of the physical . . . men are identified with the ‘human’ and the realm of mental . . . whatever is identified with the ‘human’ and the realm of the physical is inferior to whatever is identified with ‘human’ and the realm of the mental. (“The Power” 176)

When Atwood wrote *Surfacing*, she was already aware of “the urgent preservation of a human place in a natural world in which the term ‘human’ does not imply ‘superior’, or ‘alone’, and in which what is fabricated or artificial is less satisfying than what has originally occurred” (Hengen “Margaret Atwood” 74). She suggests in the novel that it is not impossible to develop an environmental ethic by perceiving the human body “as organism, not machine” (Gray 92) and by recognising that “the body is intimately connected to all that surrounds it” (Gray 92).

The unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* “fights the belief in the split of the head, traditionally a masculine element, from the body, a feminine element” (Serpa 142). The protagonist experiences a deep connection with land and animals. *Surfacing* aligns with the ecofeminist tradition in three specific ways: through the suffering of the protagonist from a loss of identity due to a painful past; secondly, through her traumatic abortion that caused her to distance herself from her body, and finally, through her need to re-establish the link between mind and body, and consequently rediscovering her own identity.
In *Surfacing*, Atwood writes from the perspective of a woman who is isolated by the presence of patriarchy and is experiencing the emotional trauma of ‘Othering’. Atwood’s exploration of woman as ‘Other’ is a reaction to the patriarchal and time-honoured comparisons of women and nature that suggest that both are inhuman and, therefore, impotent. Atwood begins the motif of woman as ‘Other’ by choosing to leave her protagonist unnamed. It is not just the protagonist who is without a name and identity but “none of the women had names then” (29). In *Surfacing* “it seems that by depriving her protagonist of a name, Atwood has been able to suggest that what she is describing not the agonies of a particular woman but of women at large” (Kaur 21).

*Surfacing*, takes woman as nature to the next level, examining woman as ‘Other’ and the harmful social ramifications that are the results of designating women as weaker sex. The novel reveals that a woman’s link to nature is not only inherent maternalism but also the fulfilment of the caretaker’s role and recognition that human fate is tied to the earth’s. Atwood in the novel invokes the rhetoric of the ecofeminist position that views human fate as intertwined with the earth’s, of our relationship with birds, fish, nature and each other, Carson writes “they reflect the web of life-or death-that scientists know as ecology” (189).

*Surfacing* is a narrative of an ecofeminist quest of the unnamed narrator of the story. It is a story of a young single woman who has
suppressed memories of a negative and demanding relationship with her older married art teacher. She receives the news of her father’s disappearance, takes up the search journey with her friends Joe, David and Anna to the undeveloped island that she grew upon, to search for her missing father; in the process, she unveils the ambiguities in both her personal life and in the phallocentric society. The exodus from big city life to the countryside provides the characteristically ecofeminist comparison of the two worlds.

The narration in the novel is character bound: the nameless narrator is also the protagonist of the story. Stream of consciousness is in abundance in the text. The novel is divided into three parts: the first and the last parts are narrated in the present tense, and the middle part is narrated in the past tense. The language of the text brings out the image of a confused mind of the protagonist that has a strong, “poetic sensibility” (Mills, Feminist 36). Stein also argues that:

She strings together independent clauses with almost no coordinating or subordinating linkage. Consequently, all observations have equal weight, and causality is seldom indicated . . . because she lacks a coherent sense of self, she takes in information but does not integrate it into her experience. The stylistic discontinuities reflect her emotional fragmentation and displacement. (53)
In order to reclaim her identity and roots, the protagonist begins a psychological journey that leads her directly into the natural world. She explores herself and her past in order to find a point of balance, an understanding of her own place in her environment. The journey which the narrator undertakes is in two forms, physical and metamorphic. She undergoes a painful process of self-realisation. As the action in the novel grows, the narrator goes through a psychological breakdown and this breakdown acts as an agent of purgation, and in the end she emerges as an individual. Her quest which initially begins with her quest for her missing father gradually becomes her own quest for identity.

The separation between head and the body symbolises the separation between the human and the natural world, and feminine and the masculine world. Since her childhood the protagonist became conscious of the existence of two different worlds: masculine / feminine “the symbolic significance of her parents’ marriage helped to bring together two worlds; the feminine, intuitive, and instinctive one and the masculine, reason-oriented and scientific one” (Hutcheon 144). The protagonist lives with the thought that “my father explained everything but my mother never did, which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn’t tell” (79-80).

Throughout the novel, the narrator constantly struggles to survive in the male dominated society, she feels devoid of emotions and yearns to
speak and listen to the language which does not smell of masculinity only. The repeated reference to language and speech reveals protagonist’s initial anxieties and apprehensions towards her feminine side. The protagonist finds it difficult to understand and to relate with the words as she enters the forest (a feminine principle) “Now we’re on home ground foreign territory. My throat constricts, as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing. To be deaf and dumb would be easier” (12).

She has learned “to view language as a masculine tool, an instrument of betrayal and coercion” (Bouson 45). Her obsession and distrust of language dominate throughout. After all “the animals learned what to eat without nouns” (160) and they look more balanced than humans in the novel. Narrator constantly refers to her inability to communicate, even to those closest to her, and “it was language again, I couldn’t use it because it wasn’t mine” (115). She feels alienated from the words that have been passed down to her, feeling they have not come from her own experience, her own values and ideas, but from the white European or American male who essentially has had different meanings and ideas in the words that have come to produce and explain, not only his world, but the world in general. The notion of language as a set of meanings is demonstrated in the novel through the cultural differences that words acquire and denote, highlighted by the narrator’s examples; how the worst words in any language are those
we are afraid of, in French, these are religious words and in English they are connected with the body and how in some countries the innocent Canadian emblem of a beaver has become a synonym for a female sexual organ (49).

On a microcosm, her rejection of language represents her struggle to understand the feminine and masculine world. Language also functions as a cause of her alienation and fragmentation. She feels that “language divides us into fragments” (157), because it is used by the society as an analytical tool. She finds the separation between head and body as primarily a linguistic split. Being conscious of the split, she struggles to reunite the head and the body:

The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I’m not against the head or the body either; only the neck, that creates the illusion that they are separate . . . if the head extended directly into the shoulders like a worm’s or a frog’s without that construction, that lie, they wouldn’t be able to look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets; they would have to realize that if the head is detached from the body both of them will die. (81)

The characters in the novel reflect the ‘separation’ by relying on the modern technology and considering themselves superior to nature. Need to control the dam reflects human desire to enslave nature “sixty years ago they raised the lake level so that whatever they wanted to flush the logs down the
narrow outflow river to the mill they would have enough water power” (18). Characters in the novel have become dead to an entire part of the female self “I didn’t feel awful; I realised I didn’t feel much of anything, I hadn’t for a long time” (114).

Atwood, in the novel, makes use of the landscape to serve as a source of self-knowledge as the female protagonist goes back in time and place, and tries to recognise the meaningful and symbolic signs in the wilderness. In Surfacing, Atwood’s construction of the concept of wilderness—both physical and mental—expresses her own concern with the cultural myth of wilderness she has inherited, such a myth helped shape Canada’s identity and became a source of inspiration for the Canadian authors.

In the novel, there is an interconnection between the protagonist and Canadian wilderness which leads the female protagonist to undergo an empowering experience. Such interconnections can be associated with ecofeminism, which has the basic principle, the notion that patriarchal thinking is harmful to nature and to women. In traditional western thought, both women and nature are seen as objects that must be dominated.

With Atwood, geography is never a matter of accident, in Surfacing, French Canada (Quebec) is an essential element in the heroine’s search for her past and for herself. In the mental geography of the protagonist, Quebec is simultaneously home and not home; because it is where her parents have painstakingly built the house on the wilderness island which is the locus of
her only true sense of self; but not home because the province really belongs to mysterious, alien people. From the time of her childhood, the narrator suspects that Quebec enjoys a kind of cultural authenticity that has been forfeited by English American Canada. Unimpressed by her father’s eighteenth century scientific rationalism, she was instead fascinated by the tiny church of village.

As a child, she attributed special powers to the unknown. As an adult, she retains much of her childhood vision of French Canada. When she returns to Quebec at the beginning of the novel, thoroughly alienated from her own gods, she is still intrigued by the sight of a “roadside crucifix with a wooden Christ, ribs sticking out, the alien god, mysterious to me as ever” (14).

The ways in which Quebec is ‘not home’ for the protagonist emphasise the extent of her alienation from her past and her present life, but the fact that Quebec is still very much her home means that in lower Canada she recovers her buried life. During her days of isolation she turns her back on ‘rational civilization’ in order to probe the levels of her own psyche. Her cultural identity appears to have been built starting with the layer of her native Canadian Indians, to which the English layer was added, the French one realised by the strong influences of her family friends, as a child, and the American one that has been acquired while living in the city. The environment that she lived in and all the cultural influences make her unable
to recognise herself. This is the reason for her attempt at discovering her real identity, thus her roots-which she believes are represented by her ancestors who lived peacefully in the wild Canadian bush in communion with nature.

The opening passage of the novel is filled with images of separation, blockade, disjunction, and unfamiliarity. The small city which used to be a landmark has “swelled enough to have a bypass” (7). “The road ought to be here”, she adds, “but instead there’s a battered chequer board, the way is blocked” (12). This place is where the protagonist was raised, yet the expected intimacy is undercut by her having to ask for directions. It is as if she has entered a completely new place “Nothing is the same, I don’t know the way anymore” (13). The bypass and the new road have taken away one of the protagonist’s expected experiences. The difficult journey into the bush she remembers is denied to her and she feels cheated “We’re here too soon and I feel deprived of something, as though I can’t really get here unless I’ve suffered; as though the first view of the lake . . . should be through tears and a haze of vomit” (15-16). Already she creates a connection between the absence of the landscape she has expected to see and the absence of her father. She takes him as a controlling figure, some kind of topographical custodian “Why is the road different, he shouldn’t have allowed them to do it” (13).

The protagonist’s feeling of disconnection from her former home and her reactions to the disappearance of her father are very closely connected.
As we see later in the novel, the lake is where we’ll find him. It is through finding her father, and beginning to incorporate her suppressed memories that she begins to re-establish a connection with the changed environment.

The protagonist gradually accepts the changed landscape, even to the extent that she comments “We’re coming into my territory” (34). However, the initial sense of familiarity is lost again and the empty cabin becomes threatening “at any moment the loss, vacancy, will overtake me” (39). Despite remembering a number of woodcraft skills, she learnt from her father, she still feels as if she is in an alien environment. She has lost her immunity to mosquito bites, even sounds are disconnected from their meaning:

Birdsong wakes me. It’s pre-dawn, earlier than traffic starts in the city, but I’ve learned to sleep through that. I used to know the species; I listen, my ears are rusty, there is nothing but a jumble of sound. They sing for the same reason trucks honk, to proclaim their territories: a rudimentary language. Linguistics, I should have studied that instead of art. (45)

The protagonist’s detachment is further emphasised by the change of tense in the second part of the novel. Now that the protagonist has re-acclimatised to her former environment to some degree, an emotional effect sets in to reinforce the alienation caused by the emerging false self. She becomes
completely analytical, detached from any real connection to her emotions. They even become like pieces of clothing:

I rehearsed emotions, naming the: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized. But the only thing there was the fear that I wasn’t alive: a negative, the difference between the shadow of a pin and what it’s like when you stick it in your arm. (120)

Even her fear of being emotionally dead is described with a calm, almost scientific concern. She has completely anaesthetised herself in order to cope with her memories, which even at this point are starting to assert themselves. During this passage the image of the protagonist being prepared for surgery arises, oddly foreshadowing her coming alive into the lake:

They slipped the needle into the vein and I was falling down, it was like diving, sinking from one layer of darkness to a deeper, deepest; when I rose up through the anaesthetic, pale green and then day light, I could remember nothing. (120)

The protagonist is unhappy to see the harm and injury done to the landscape of Canada by American business concerns. Wherever she looks, the protagonist finds the signs that her childhood version of Quebec is being violated by Americans and Canadians who have assimilated ‘American’ values of material progress and self-centred ecological destruction. The
The protagonist calls ‘Americans’ a brain disease, linking American identity to behaviour rather than nationality. “For her Americans are part of the same evil people she thought were destroyed when Hitler died” (Woodcock 55), she feels “It was like cutting up a tape worm the pieces grew” (139). To the protagonist, an American is anyone who commits senseless violence, loves technology or over consumes.

The unwanted presence of the Americans is consistent throughout the novel. The road to the village has been straightened and shortened; the gas station is decorated with stuffed moose, one waving “an American flag” (14), the village economy depends on catering to American holiday fishermen, “The city invited them to stay, they were good for business, they drank a lot” (9). The protagonist feels protective of nature and reacts with hostility to the American tourists who over fish, kill for sport and litter the ground. *Surfacing* is full of tourists, urban outgrowth and technology that directly encroach upon the unspoiled land. Atwood depicts American expansion as a result of psychological and cultural infiltration:

Further in, the trees they didn’t cut before the flood are marooned, broken and grey-white, tipped on their sides, their giant contorted roots bleached and skinless; on the sodden trunks are colonies of plants, feeding on disintegration, laurel, sundew the insect-eater, its toenail-sized leaves sticky with red
hairs. Out of the leaf nests the flower rise, pure white, flesh of gnats and midges, petals now, metamorphosis. (179-80)

Once the protagonist discovers that the tourists are Canadian, her dichotomy model collapses and she no longer has an obvious enemy to point a finger at. Her entire set of explanations turns upside down so as to discover that Canadians would sometimes set a bad example themselves without thinking of the consequences.

Rather than representing Canada as a victim, then, *Surfacing* insists on the impossibility of maintaining the opposition between Canada and America; between an innocent narrator and a threatening outside world; between a green world where self discovery is possible and correct alienating urban environment. American culture and economic domination is indeed a threat to Canadian autonomy, but Atwood makes it clear that ‘America’ is not a nation but a metaphor for a set of economic, environmental and political practices that belong to Canada too. (Fiamengo 7)

The protagonist sees the American infiltration of Canada as a direct result of American restlessness during the post world war II period. *Surfacing*, examines the ambiguous moral landscape left in the wake of World War II. The novel is paced with the images of Americans invading and ruining Canada. In the novel “the image of Canada as colony, physically exploited
and psychologically oppressed by the United States, is manifest” (Schlueter 1). Atwood’s exploration of Canadian / American relationship is a part of her study of the “Paradigms of dominance / subservience” (Castro 223). In the novel there are five layers of binaries, whose oppositions are interchangeable: human / the land, Quebec Hydro / the lakes, the English / the French, the Indians, and men / women (Castro 223). Importantly, however, Atwood’s argument moves away from the binary opposition, leaving open the possibility for a victim to become a non-victim. Atwood constantly reminds the reader about the ecological destruction prevalent in the novel:

The lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have sea planes for hire. But this is still near the city limits; we didn’t go through, it’s swelled enough to have a bypass. (1)

One of the protagonist’s friends David, a Canadian by birth, claims that he hates Americans yet he loves baseball and imitates Woody Woodpecker. David can be accurately called a failed Canadian, who is more certainly ‘American’ in a stereotypical sense. It is important to understand each of the significant male characters with reference to his ‘Americanisation’, as men play an important role in the protagonist’s coming to identity. As Shannon Hengen writes:
The narrator’s own sense of disconnection with her past results from her intimacy with men who suffer in varying degrees from pathological narcissism. Only when she can glimpse a female ethos represented by her Canadian mother can the narrator find a way around the male’s confusion. (Margaret Atwood’s 54)

At first the protagonist assumes like David, that in wilderness the Americans are easy to identify. They are the ones who scare away the fish with souped up speed boats, who violate the game laws by catching far more than they can eat, and who want all their camping equipments to be automatic and collapsible. But in Northern Quebec, Americanism reveals itself not to be a nationality, but a state of mind, when the protagonist’s friends and the Ontario fishermen mistake each other for Americans, the protagonist suddenly realises that in North America, it is impossible to be a non-American “If you look like them and talk like them . . . you do” (139).

Americanism is an ideology and it infiltrates the minds and lifestyles of the people of the less powerful, less affluent, submissive countries, and then the diseased ideology does not have to derive a direct inspiration from America, for it turns self-begetting, self-proliferating. Ideological imperialism is a most important international phenomenon, and millions or billions of dollars are spent daily to keep this disease growing,
spreading. There is a valid economic and political rationale for so much expenditure. If people of the poor countries turn American in their thoughts, dreams, aspirations, ideas, then real hard business automatically follows. (Jaidev 66)

David, who is most prone to denouncing the, “fascist pig Yanks” (43), is the one who is most like them, with his desire to control and capture that which is not his to take, like the protagonist’s and many other women’s bodies and the ‘Random Samples’ he collects. He is of the same breed as the Canadians who are initially mistaken for Americans, and who have killed the herons, as though they were theirs to destroy, and the developers and the holiday makers who take over and ruin the natural world and the wilderness, eventually turning it into their idea of how things should be, as though it were theirs to order.

Through David, “Surfacing draws attention to the oppression of women in a male defined order of hierarchal and oppositional roles that empower men at the expense of women” (Bouson 43). As Anna States, “He’s got his little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except that he keeps changing them so I’m never sure . . . He likes to make me cry because he can’t do it himself” (131).

A communication teacher, David is garrulous indeed; late in the novel, the protagonist sees David clearly for the first time as a man who “didn’t know what language to use. He’d forgotten his own, he had to copy.
Second hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infested, garbled, and I couldn’t help him: it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true” (163).

While David completely separates himself from all personal emotions and feelings, Anna struggles to get through the mental anguish that he dumps on her. She gets panicky after forgetting her make-up on the camping trip constantly tries to get a tan, puts with the names he calls her, and listen to his stories about other sexual affairs.

David is an example of a patriarch who has established the “Original hierarchy”, ‘Othering’ his wife, the protagonist, and the primitive habitat they have on the island. David is entirely convinced of his role as a natural dominator. The marriage between Anna and David is its own microcosm, in which the severity of power relationship and domination of Anna disgusts the on-looking protagonist.

This destruction of power surfaces in another, more ambiguous way as well: through David and Anna’s relationship. The Surfacer provides us with a firsthand account of the tension and imbalance in their relationship: David acts as all powerful and dominating male figure. Anna discloses that David has never seen her without make-up, cheats on her and forces her to take birth control pills. David punishes Anna either by abstaining or by engaging in violent intercourse. David confronts the narrator with his misogyny in an awkward preposition for sex. When she refuses, he loses his
poise and calls her a ‘tight-assed bitch’ (162). Immediately she notes, “Power flowed into my eyes” (162), she could clearly see the humiliation of rejection in David’s eyes, who couldn’t believe that the protagonist could ever resist his advances.

Whenever he has an audience and gets the chance, David uses language (primarily a masculine quality) to tease, disrespect, and emotionally drain Anna. He openly flirts with the protagonist and makes constant reference to the female anatomy “I hope you didn’t sell out,” David said to me. I shook my head. ‘Good girl’, he said, ‘your heart’s in the right place. And the rest of her too,’ he said to Joe, ‘I like it round and firm and fully packed. Anna you’re eating too much” (105).

It comes as no surprise that David has the same attitude towards nature that he has towards women. He wants to hunt fish, which is an act of dominance, but doesn’t know how to turn his kill into food, which is an act of sustainability. With the protagonist’s help, David is able to catch a fish on his line but then asks the protagonist to kill it. The protagonist prepares the fish as food, so that she doesn’t feel guilty for its death “killing was wrong . . . only enemies and food could be killed” (141). While David may be convinced for man’s biologically determined superiority in his male-dominated urban habitat, his true impotency is revealed after only a couple of days in nature. The parallels between natural references (including the
bird and the female anatomy) and Anna’s victimisation expose the nature/women oppression connection:

Women are described in animal term, as pets, cows, sows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, old hens, mother hens, pussy cats, cats, cheetahs are hare brains. Animalising or naturalising women in a (patriarchal) culture where animals are seen as inferior to humans (men) thereby reinforces and authorises women’s inferior status. (Warren, *Ecofeminism* 12)

David’s frustrated unimaginative and voyeuristic mind arrives at its logical conclusion “pornography” (a silent tool to disrespect women) when he demeans his wife Anna by asking her to show her body for his movie *Random Samples*:

“Come on, take it off, David said; his light humour voice.

“I wasn’t bothering you,” Anna was muted avoiding.

“It won’t hurt you we need a naked lady”.

“What the hell for”? . . .

“You’ll go in beside a dead bird, it’s your chance for stardom, you’ve always chance for stardom, and you’ve always wanted fame. You’ll get to be on Educational T.V.” he added as though it was a special bribe. (144)
Woodcock argues “Cameras and photography play a crucial role in both the action and the metamorphic structure of *Surfacing*. . . . The very act of filming becomes a negation, an offense against life, when David uses it deliberately to humiliate his wife Anna and proposes to humiliate the narrator in the same way” (43-44). Various ironies about David exist here. The protagonist feels that David is trying to prove that he can control Anna. But most of all, though he has married Anna, he has no respect for her. He knowingly undermines her status twice in the same sentence, comparing her naked body with a dead bird, and telling her that her closet shot at stardom would be an appearance in a little watched educational programme. The alignment of Anna with a dead bird is a cruel strategy, as he suggests that his naked wife is sexually dead. He keeps on exploiting the female insecurity in Anna by comparing the smell of her body parts with the smell of a decaying fish “The smell was like decaying fish” (124).

Their marriage is exposed as a mutual imprisonment in hate and sexual exploitation. He is the unconscious victim of a cultural conspiracy. He even parodies an anthem celebrating the British acquisition of Canada as “The Maple Beaver Forever . . . In days of yore, from Britain’s shore / Wolfe, the gallant hero, came / It spread all o’er the hooerhouse floor/ On Canada’s fair domain” (128).

David relates the British colonisation of Canada to sexual violation by replacing a line from ‘The Maple leaf forever’, which describes the
planting of Britain’s flag on Canadian soil, with the pornographic image of British semen spreading over Canadian territory following penetration on the floor of a brothel. This metaphor equals the ravished landscape of Canada with sexual violence against women.

Atwood’s narrative plays on the double meaning of beaver in David’s title; beaver is the animal icon for Canada that appears on a nickel, and also for female genitalia. David is a mouthpiece of those confused Canadian men who are ignorant of the fact that they have become ‘Americans’ by their insensitive behaviour towards their landscape. David doesn’t recognise Canada as a country to be revered. He mocks at his own country without realising that by doing this he is strengthening an American viewpoint on Canada “That this country is founded on the bodies of dead animals? Dead fish, dead seals, and historically dead beavers, the beaver is to this country what the black man is to United States” (43).

The protagonist increasingly notices oppressive mechanisms in the relations e.g. objectification and victimisation of women in the relation of Anna and David, which somehow serves as a mirror wherein she sees oppressive mechanism of her own relation reflected. She could feel the lustful and cruel masculine gaze of David while he was filming Random Samples. His filming his wife with a dead heron establishes the derogatory link between women and nature. Even after facing so much humiliation in the hands of her husband, Anna ultimately agrees to do what he wanted her
to do. The protagonist doesn’t approve of what Anna does, she couldn’t
develop sisterhood bond with Anna. The protagonist was intrigued by David
and Anna’s marriage, she wanted to know what exactly David thinks of his
wife, and he replies:

I know what you are thinking . . . but I’m all for equality of
women; she just doesn’t happen to be equal and that’s not my
fault, is it? What I married was a pair of boobs, she
manipulated me into it, it was when I was studying for the
ministry, nobody knew any better then. (148)

Throughout her life the protagonist faces the pressure of being female in a
masculine world. Since her school days she has been experiencing sexual
colonialism:

[I]t was worse for a girl to ask questions than for a boy. If a
boy asked a question the other boys would make derisive
sucking noises with their mouths but if a girl asked one the
other girls would say ‘think you’re so great’ in the washroom
afterwards. (105)

Throughout her journey, the protagonist increasingly noticed oppressive
mechanisms in the relations (e.g. objectification and victimization of women
in the relation of Anna and David, Americanisation of Canadianism in her
own people and exploitation of nature by Americans). Protagonist’s
discovery of her deep connection with nature / wilderness is an interior, non
violent feminist spiritual quest. This quest is contrasted by the men counterparts in the novel. In the course of her journey at one point she realises that her father was no different from other men. He was also a part of the patriarchal set up “The narrator’s mother is her husband’s opposite and is repeatedly associated with the nature he tried to dominate. His is an exclusively logical, mathematical, scientific attitude, whereas hers goes beyond ordinary language” (Hengen, Margaret Atwood’s 58).

Joe, her current lover, is linked by his occupation to her first lover; a potter. He also tries to control the protagonist by offering her marriage proposal. “We should get married”, Joe said . . . he’d got the order wrong, he’d never asked whether I loved him, that was supposed to come first” (92). The protagonist looks at his marriage proposal as another move in a power struggle demanding her submission so that for him it can be “a victory, some flag . . . head” (93). Joe silences her with his silence. She is attracted to him because he has some of the characteristics of an animal-surely unresponsive, unable to communicate his feelings using language, other than grunts and occasional swearing. In the eyes of the protagonist he is much closer to nature. For her, his inability to use language means he has still the chance to develop his own. She observes, “What will preserve him is the absence of words” (170).

“Her relationship with her brother creates the pattern for her connection with her first lover. In both relationships, she fears, hates and is
in awe of their power” (Hengen, *Margaret Atwood’s* 57). Her brother “never caught birds, they were too quick for him, what he caught was the slower things” (141). She fears, the live creatures in her brother’s laboratory and then, faced with his anger, becomes so frightened to do so ever again, concluding that “because of my fear they were killed” (141). She later realises that she could similarly have protected her foetus against the controlling intelligence of her lover.

David reminds her of her own emotional exploitation by her art teacher, her first lover, who was a married man:

> For him I could have been anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that’s where I learned. I worshipped him, non-child bride, idolater, I kept the scarps of his handwriting like saints’ relics, he never wrote letters, all I had was criticisms in red pencil he paper-clipped to my drawings. CS and DS, he was an idealist, he said, he didn’t want our relationship as he called it to influence his aesthetic judgement. He didn’t want our relationship to influence anything; it was to be kept separate from life. A certificate framed on the wall, his proof that he was still young. (158)

The unnatural act of her abortion and her continual struggle to be at ease with words and language exposes the extent to which society (particularly her ex-lover) oppressed and consumed the protagonist. The impact of
abortion on the psyche of the protagonist strengthens the ecofeminist belief that “the implications of a culture based on the devaluation of life giving and the celebration of life taking are profound for ecology and for women” (King, “The Ecology” 23). She is never at peace with herself and the memory of the abortion haunts the protagonist twice: she initially represses and then relives the act. Both times illustrate the empowering and dominating characteristics of her ex-lover:

I never identified it [the unborn child] as mine; I didn’t name it before it was born even, the way you’re supposed to. It was my husband’s, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me. I felt like an incubator. He measured everything, he would let me eat, he was feeding on me, he wanted a replica of himself . . . he was clever: he kept saying he loved me. (37)

Later on, he forces her to go for the abortion without any remorse. He acts like an emotionally callous controller:

He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said, it wasn’t a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary, I let them catch it . . . After the slaughter, the murder, he couldn’t believe, I didn’t want to see
him anymore; it bewildered him, he resented me for it. . . .

(155)

The protagonist suffers from a strong guilt “I could have said no but I didn’t; that made me one of them too a killer” (155). The protagonist, like Mother Nature, “is raped, mastered, conquered, mined; her secrets are ‘penetrated’ and her womb is to be put into the service of the ‘man of the science’” (Warren, Ecofeminism 12).

The negative impact of the abortion takes its toll on the mental health of the protagonist. In her healing process, she begins identifying with two highly symbolic characters: the dead heron and the loon. Her quest takes the form of the encounter with a dead heron which epitomises the protagonist’s guilt and her need to face the existence of evil “It was behind me, I smelled it before I saw it; then I heard the flies . . . it was hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon rope tied round its feet . . . its wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye” (115). The protagonist becomes conscious of the heron’s presence because of its smell, a sign that she is ready to let her animal instincts take the lead. Moreover, the dead heron looks like Christ on the Cross, heron’s Christ-like position acts as a redeemer for the protagonist’s crime and as a symbol for her growing sense of guilt. The bird’s eye, focussed on the protagonist, highlights the fact that faking innocence is no longer possible for the protagonist, and that she must
explore the depth of her guilt. The horrifying and unnecessary murder of the heron also symbolises the ecological destruction in the hands of men:

Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn’t they just throw it away like a trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise, it was valueless . . . the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it.

(125)

The Americanised Canadian men victimise nature, without thought and as a result become representatives of “the ones who stuffed the pontoons of their seaplane with illegal fish . . . got drunk and chased loons in their powerboats for fun, backtracking on the loon as it dived, not giving it a chance to fly, until it drowned or got chopped up in the propeller blades” (130-31). Male figures ruin the protagonist, the heron, and the loon:

It doesn’t matter what country they are from, my head said, they’re still Americans, they’re what’s in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can’t tell the difference. (139)

In order to reconnect with nature, the protagonist must embrace the “ecofeminist perspective about both women and nature that involves a shift in attitude from arrogant perception to loving perception of the non human
world” (Warren, *Ecofeminism* 136). The deep disgust that she feels towards the killing of the dead bird illustrates the beginning of this process “the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted” (141). However, the change in perception doesn’t come to full circle until the last few chapters. She is at the height of her emotional detachment, and yet from the protection of her false self, she can begin to act on her own, to challenge the dominating force with her own power. She has begun to make an important powerful connection between herself and the transformative space “My heart bumped, I held still, translating the noises on the other side of the canvas walls. Squeaks, shuffling in the dry leaves, grunting, nocturnal animals; no danger” (134).

The most significant transformative event in the novel is triggered by the protagonist’s dive into the lake. Making such an immersion into water is symbolic of her new openness to the transformations which will help her to deal with her ontological crisis. It is a traumatic revelation for the protagonist and her first immersion is quite painful “Water ran from my nose, I gulped breath, stomach and lungs contracting, my hair sticky like weeds, the lake was horrible, it was filled with death it was touching me” (152). It appears that she has not consciously recognised that the dead thing in the lake is her father, but she does realise the pain of her abortion—‘Dive’ brought back the repressed memories of her unborn child and painful past. Confronting the suppressed memories help her to break out from her false
self. Her description of the repressed memories echoes the malignance of that wound “Since then I’d carried that death around inside me, layering it over, a cyst, a tumour, black pearl” (155).

Her immersion in the lake leads her to an awareness of the gods of that place. They are positive beings to her now, taking on parental roles “These gods, here in the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten, were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed; and freely” (155). She realises that the lake and the shore are the sites where she needs to engage with them “I had to go onto the shore and leave something: that was what you were supposed to do, leave a piece of your clothing as an offering” (155). While the immersion in the lake is the beginning of the transformation for the protagonist, it is the place where the majority of the transformative work takes place. The protagonist accepts the transformation offered by these parent gods; “it was time for me to choose sides” (165). She chooses the irrational, Primal nature of the old gods. After diving into the lake of the forest she undergoes a process of transformation, having visions that connect her with her ancestors and with her father that passed away. She rediscovers herself through shamanistic experience.

The protagonist prepares the descent into the subterranean region by following a shamanistic ritual that takes several days. She deliberately goes in search of shamanistic powers and she deliberately invokes the guardian spirits of the earth.
In order to enter into contact with the spirits, she first withdraws into solitude. She prepares her descent into the underground through the mediation of mushrooms that cause a state of trans. The imagery with which the narrator describes the mushrooms that cause her intoxicated mental state bear resemblance to the symptom signifiers that used to regularly erupt from her unconscious. The white, “fish-colour” mushrooms, with “chalk gills” and an “invisible part, thread like underground network” call back to mind the deadened life force of the protagonist. Yet the mushrooms are associated both with death and life. (Staels 61)

Her actions after returning to the island take on the aspect of a ritual. She begins by offering clothing, and as a result of this communion “feeling was beginning to seep back into me, I tingled like a foot that’s been asleep” (156). More significant is the protagonist’s realisation that engaging in any sexual activity would almost automatically result in her conceiving. She refuses both Joe and David; they still represent the ordered destructive world she has rejected. She does see that there is some potential in Joe, a possibility that he could undergo a similar transformation “At that moment I thought, perhaps for him I am the entrance, as the lake was the entrance for me” (157). But she must reject him until he begins his own transformation “they think I should be filled with death, I should be in the mourning. But
nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive” (159). The protagonist’s father and mother may be corporeally dead, but their legacies are beginning to act on her. The transformative space has made the protagonist’s parents into a part of itself, into a way for her to regain the balance between worlds vital to her life.

Soon, the body of the protagonist’s father is discovered and the confirmation of his death pushes the protagonist beyond her breaking point. At this point she begins to abandon the rationalising process of her false self and give herself over to the logic of the transformative space. When her friends decide to leave the island she starts feeling her connection with the life around her:

Through the trees the sun glances; the swamp around me smoulders, energy of decay turning to growth, green fire. I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply . . . I walk to the hill and scan the shoreline, finding the place, opening, where they disappeared; checking, reassuring. It’s true, I am by myself; this is what I wanted, to stay here alone. From any rational point of view I am absurd; but there are no longer any rational points of view. (168-169)
By uniting herself with nature, literally floating naked in the water and wandering at one with the island in a pre-linguistic, mad state, she conceives new life in an affirmation of woman’s unique power of birth. The protagonist chooses to mate with Joe, and she directs it as an animalistic intercourse “I’m impatient, pleasure is redundant, the animals don’t have pleasure . . . It’s the right season, I hurry” (173). She is convinced that she has become pregnant, and imagines her child will be a new form of being, totally integrated into nature:

The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I’ll lick it off and bite the chord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words. (173)

The lake imagery returns at the moment of conception “He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent” (173). As the protagonist goes through her transformative episode, she adopts characteristics similar to the image of her child “My body also changes, the creature in me plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply” (180). The maternal imagery used in this part of the novel is heavily associated with the lake and water; the protagonist imagines both herself and her child as having
supernatural vision while floating in the womb’s fluids. Having gained a new child to protect, the protagonist is free to submit to the transformation she will undergo. She has begun to make changes in her life by asserting her power.

The protagonist’s rejection of her false self leads her to a psychological quest for her parents with those parent-gods themselves as her guide. After destroying David’s film and evading her departing companions, the protagonist holes up in the cabin. Rain falls the first night, and she imagines the lake flooding, suggesting that she realises this is a chance for her to start over “I feel the lake rising, up over the shore and the hill, the trees toppling into it like sand collapsing, roots overturned, the house unmoored and floating like a boat, rocking and rocking” (186).

She at first imagines she is in control of the process “If I will it, if I pray, I can bring them back. They’re here now, I can sense them waiting, beyond sight on the path or in the long grass outside the fence, they are pulling against me but I can make them come out, from wherever it is they are hiding” (185). In order to be able to identify with nature she feels the need for ritual. She uses a shamanistic ritual to both find answers for her father’s death and find answers for her own disoriented life. She succeeds in doing both and leaves the water of the lake having symbolically washed her sins and discovered what she wants and why she previously lost her balance.

As a ritual of purification, the protagonist bathes at the shore:
My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water. The earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon; the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it, searing away the wrong form that encases me, dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. I dip my head beneath the water, washing eyes . . .

When I am clean I come out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock. (191)

Trying to find her roots, the protagonist contacts the unseen world of the dead in order to receive the needed reassurance of her true identity. However, the parent-gods of the transformative space assert their own guidance over the protagonist’s will. She is eased out of the cabin, her clothes, the garden (a feminine space and a symbol of the protagonist’s parents’ perseverance on the island), until she escapes into a lair and tries to reach the spirit of her parents by becoming a part of the natural world:

I hollow a lair near the woodpile, dry leaves underneath and dead branches leaned over, with fresh needle branches woven to cover. Inside it I curl with the blanket over my head. There are mosquitoes, they bite through; it’s best not to slap them, the blood smell brings others. I sleep in relays like a cat, my
stomach hurts. Around me the space rustles; owl sound, across the lake or inside me, distance contracts a light wind, the small waves talking against the shore, multilingual water. (192)

After the shedding of her “false-body”, her integration is surprisingly rapid. She sheds her human attire which, like Anna’s makeup, disguised her animal behaviour; this allows the environment around her to respond to her as another animal. First, she is accepted by the wildlife “In shore a loon; it lowers its head, then lifts it again and calls. It sees me but it ignores me, accepts me as part of the land” (191). Over the course of that day, the protagonist’s self image expands dramatically, from human to animal to tree to place “The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word. I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning” (195).

The goal of total integration of self and nature has been achieved; the protagonist’s rewards come quickly. She is given a vision of her mother, which implies that she has been reincarnated or manifested as a blue jay and becomes part of the ‘Nature’:

I can hear the jays, crying and crying . . . I walk towards them up the hill. I see them in the trees . . . they continue to call. Then I see her. She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out . . . she is turned half away from me, I can see only the side of her face. She doesn’t move, she is feeding them: one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder. . . .
The jays cry again, they fly up from her, the shadows of their wings ripple over the ground and she’s gone. (196)

Pratt observes “to a certain extent the mother’s legacy is the image of herself as strong figure close to rescue her son from drowning, and tame the wild birds” (55). The protagonist has integrated this role sufficiently to perform the same protective role of her own child. The protagonist also sees her father and incorporates his rejection of the garrison into her own:

He has realised he was an intruder; the cabin, the fences, the fires and paths were violations; now his own fence excludes him, as logic excludes love. He wants it ended, the borders abolished, he wants the forest to flow back into the places his mind cleared: reparation. (201)

Her confirmation with the parent-god in the above allows her to accept the death of her father as a transformation; his becoming a part of nature is compensation for his intrusion into it. The protagonist has internalised her father’s legacy as well; the transformative space at this point begins to fade, preparing her to return to the civilised world. In the end she affirms that she will not return to her status as a victim. She creates a divine self out of her divided self.

She is not sure about her future course of action, but her individual triumph in the wilderness is an accomplishment that consolidates her newly acquired identity. She has stripped herself of all illusions. For her now there
are no rules, there are no gods, “No total salvation, resurrection” (204). She says “withdrawing (from society into wilderness) is no longer possible and the alternative is death” (206). For her, in other words the known avenues of life are blocked, but she will proceed making a new way. She has exorcised her false self and is now ready to develop, not to find her true self.

She will go to Joe because he is something of the same state. He, too, “isn’t anything, he is only half-formed, and for that reason, I can trust him” (207). At the end of the novel, he is standing on the dock, “which is neither land nor water” (207). She knows that society might not accept her as a sane person if she goes out as a “natural woman” (204), now, she is not worried:

They would never believe it’s only a natural woman, state of nature, they think of that as a tanned body on a beach with washed hair waving like scarves; not this, face dirt-caked and streaked, skin grimed and scabby, hair like frayed bathmat stuck with leaves and twigs. A new kind of centrefold. (204-205)

The opening passage of the last-chapter reflects new acquired strength by the protagonist. She is not scared of being a woman. She is a determined person now “This above all is to refuse to be victim, unless I can do that I can do nothing, I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless over hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been” (206).
She is in no hurry to join the civilised society “I re-enter on my own time” (206). She feels for her unborn child and believes that her child would be “the first true human; it must be born, allowed” (206).

Eventually, in the end of the novel, she seems to embrace the ecofeminist ideal “The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing” (208). By writing *Surfacing* Atwood has brought to light the “possibility of self-actualisation for women despite the psychologically devastating effects of the male supremacist societies in which they live” (Rigney, *Madness* 119).

From the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing*, who celebrates the womanhood by realising her maternal power; power which makes her one with nature, we move to the first trickster protagonist of Atwood, called Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle*. Joan carries the ecofeminist belief of the protagonist of *Surfacing* to another level by demystifying women’s obsession with ‘classical body’, and also by exposing patriarchal methodology of creating a great divide between women and wilderness. Wilson observes “The metamorphosis image, suggested in *Surfacing* by the phoenix, becomes dancing in Atwood’s 1976 metafiction, *Lady Oracle*” (*Bodily Discussions* 120).
CHAPTER - IV

Lady Oracle

I planned my death carefully, unlike my life which I meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror . . . I wanted my death, by contrast, to be neat and simple, understated, even a little severe, like a Quaker Church or the basic black dress with a single strand of pearls much praised by fashion magazines when I was fifteen. No trumpets, no megaphones, no spangles, no loose ends, this time. (3)

This is the opening paragraph of Lady Oracle which reveals the first trickster protagonist of Atwood’s literary world, and her inability to control her life, leading her to fake her death. She plans her death to escape from the intricate, entangled web of phallocentric society, where she is being consumed as a woman and a woman writer as well. Single strand of pearls signifies the obsession prevalent in the society for glamorous classical body.

Atwood’s Lady Oracle engages with many of the themes of The Edible Woman primarily the use of body as a protest. The novel scrutinizes and criticizes Western society’s problematic gender politics, which is brought up through the Gothic genre.
Gothic is a genre, which emerged at the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. It has always been regarded as a female and feminine form of writing, and a genre beyond realism. Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Marry Shelly’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Emily Bronte’s *The Wuthering Heights* (1847), are examples of classic Gothic writing. The classic works often dealt with feminist issues and even served feminist purposes. In Gothic *Forms of Feminine Fictions*, Becker writes that the Gothic “has, throughout its history, strongly challenged established notions of femininity . . . and has always been provocation and rebellion against order, control and the powers of restrictive ideologies” (4).

Atwood commented that she was interested in and puzzled by women’s longing for the Gothic stories, and finds her novel as an “anti-Gothic”:

I think in an anti-Gothic what you’re doing is examining the perils of Gothic thinking . . . you have a scenario in your head which involves certain roles- the dark, experienced man, who is possibly evil and possibly good, the rescuer, the mad wife and soon-and that as you go to real life, you tend do cast real people in these roles as Joan does. Then when you find out that the real people don’t fit in these two dimensional roles, you can either discard the roles and try to deal with the real
Atwood in her interview given at the University of Oslo in Feb 1979, called *Lady Oracle* “a parody of Gothic romance”. Parody can be twofold: it can criticize a particular text of genre, and it can also scrutinize the contemporary society (Dentith 9). In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood’s intention has been to do both: to discuss with the genre and its influence on women, and the society’s problematic values. Written in the earlier days of second wave feminism, *Lady Oracle* resonates with issues of importance during that phase, such as exposing sexual discrimination and deconstructing the societal apparatus that reinforce female subordination and servitude.

Atwood has used the protagonist of the novel *Lady Oracle*, Joan, to allude vicariously to the obstacles that she herself faced as a female writer in a patriarchal culture. She writes in *Second Words* that “the woman writer, then, exists in a society that, though it may turn certain individual writers into revered cult objects, has little respect for writing as a profession, and not much respect for woman either” (204). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that throughout history, patriarchy has perpetuated a phallocentric myth of creativity, in which literary production is a male prerogative, and they respond by arguing that “Women must escape just those male tests which . . . deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them” (Madwoman 13).
Like *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle* is explicitly concerned with the complexities of body image. In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood also deals with the ecofeminist principles of mind / body, male / female dualism. Val Plumwood, a famous ecofeminist, in her book *Feminism and Mastery of nature*, talked about “master model”, the identity which is at the core of Western culture and which has initiated, perpetuated, and benefited from Western culture’s alienation from nature. According to Val Plumwood, the master identity is not merely a masculine identity as some cultural feminists have argued; rather, it is a “complex cultural identity . . . formed in the context of class, race, species and gender domination” (5). This master identity creates and depends upon a dualised structure of otherness and negation. This mind / body, male / female, dichotomy has pervaded Western thought for centuries.

According to the ecofeminist philosophy dualism positions human experience into two separate categories: the spiritual and the bodily. In this equation the body is merely an external vessel for rational, objective mind. Susan Bordo vividly captures this mind / body struggle in *Unbearable Weight*:

> What remains the constant element is the construction of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, freedom . . .) and as undermining the
best efforts of that self. That which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization. (5)

This self/other dualism is likewise reflected in the constructed opposition of culture and nature, and reason and emotion. If the mind is allied with culture and reason, then it follows that the body is associated with all that is “other”. Historically, women have been defined by their ‘biological potentiality’, and their child bearing capacity has worked against them by confining them to the sum of their child-bearing parts.

Considering this inherently sexist construction of gender, it is no surprise that the ‘body’ has always been central to any feminist debate. In 1990, Sociologist Arthur Frank declared “Bodies are in, in academia as well as in popular culture” (131).

Margaret Sanger wrote in 1992 that “no woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body . . . It is for women the key to liberty (533). The female body, as a site of oppression, has always been the means by which patriarchy exerts control over women.

In Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory, Katie Conboy writes:

Just as man’s civilizing impetus transforms wildlife, land, and vegetation into territories to tame and control, so too does it render woman a form of nature to apprehend, dominate, and defeat. In fact, culture has, variously, valued supposedly
‘natural’ feminine bodily characteristics (narrow waists, small feet, long hair, for example), which have required the most unnatural maintenance (corsets, foot-binding, products for straightening or de-tangling. (2)

Femininity is supposedly the ‘natural’ essence of womanhood itself; to be feminine is to be a woman. By contrast, Conboy argues that femininity is just another social mechanism which is based on male desires and used to curtail the freedom of women.

Through *Lady Oracle*, Atwood has tried to explore relatively uncharted terrain by giving voice to a young woman’s spiritual quest and desire to create an authentic life given the limited options faced by many women within Western culture. Atwood, challenges Eurocentric myths designed to restrict women’s access as contributors in the world of art and literature, where the female role is that of a spectator, rather than an agent of cultural evolution. In a phallocentric society “the weight of a patriarchal tradition educates women into nothingness and denies them transcendence of being” (Godard, “My (m)Other” 42). Elizabeth Janeway observes that through literature women escape to their ‘own world’, she explains the reason behind women’s need for escape:

[V]ery few women can be really good at everything they are expected to do. Some are good mothers and bad wives, while some devoted wives and loving mothers are perfectly terrible
homemakers. Some women who can do all these things adequately find it hard to shift back and forth from one to the other as quickly as may be needed. As a result, there is almost always a little failure packaged in with any woman’s success in playing her various roles . . . Men are more free to walk away from failure than women. Women’s traditional role demands that she go on doing things even if she knows she’s not very good at them. So women more or less have to live with knowledge that they are failures in certain areas of their lives and see themselves as disappointing creatures who have to act out their disappointments over and over. (Fleenor 63)

In the year 1972, Atwood told the Winnipeg Free Press that women concerned with liberation should have examined “the critical vocabulary available for talking about books. It is a male – oriented critical language” (Bolton 12). Joan, the protagonist of Lady Oracle, strives to live her life as a wife and a published writer, and thus challenges a myth woven into numerous fairy tales, legends and stories, the myth of the doomed woman artist.

Lady Oracle follows the life of Joan Foster, from an obese child and adolescent to a secret costume Gothic writer, and an author of an acclaimed book of poetry called Lady Oracle. When a blackmailer threatens to expose her secrets, Joan fakes her own death with the help of her friends, and
escapes to Terremoto, Italy. As a baby, Joan is painfully obese “merely plump” (39), but as she grows older she fails to lose her baby fat, continuing to grow in size. Joan’s mother reacts to her daughter’s size by trying to render her invisible, beginning with the discontinuation of a photographic record. When Joan reaches the age of six the pictures of her in the family album, “stopped abruptly” (39). Joan explains how her mother “no longer wanted my growth recorded. She had decided I would not do” (39).

At school, her mother conspires with ballet teacher, Miss Flegg, to limit Joan’s participation in the annual spring dance recital. Miss Flegg is described by Joan as having a “spiny exterior, the long bony hands, the hair wrenched into a bun” (40), and “almost as slender and disapproving as my mother” (39). Miss Flegg, like Joan’s mother, represents the classical body, static hard and complete with no loose ends. Miss flegg choreographs three numbers for the seven year old girls including ‘The Butterfly Frolic’, in which the girls are butterflies, complete with short gauzy spirits, spangled antennae and coloured cellophane wings. On the advice of Joan’s mother, however, Miss Flegg decides that Joan’s figure in the Butterfly Frolic costume does not achieve the desired effect. Her obesity becomes an obstacle “Jiggly thighs and the bulges of fat where breasts would later be and my plump upper arms and floppy waist, I must have looked obscene, senile almost, indecent: it must have been like watching a decaying stripper” (42).
Miss Flegg makes Joan give up her butterfly wings to become a mothball, consisting of a white teddy bear costume from one of the previous dance groups. The mothball costume is designed to disguise Joan’s body but also results in its accentuation. Joan’s reaction to being turned from a butterfly with wings into a smelly insect repellent is the first example of her refusal to be reduced and diminished. Although she has not been given steps to her mothball dance, Joan creates her own very loud and fast paced routine in order to compensate for her loss of wings. As Joan gets older she fully recognizes her mother’s anguish over her size and the power that comes with the growth of her body. Upon reaching her teens, her weight gain had become deliberate and methodical “By this time I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly” (67).

Joan’s growing body is contrasted with the ideal classical body of her mother. Joan’s mother herself is a victim in a phallocentric society; subconsciously she has been following the path of objectification. She idealises socially constructed image of a beautiful ideal woman. She names Joan after the movie star Joan Crawford, someone who symbolizes to her everything a woman should be, thin and beautiful. The ecofeminist principle works here through Joan’s mother exposing how living in an objectifying culture trains women to routinely take an observer’s perspective on the physical self. Joan’s mother always quarrels with her and this quarrel is on the territory of her body. Her mother is a victim of self-objectification.
Women in a heightened state of self-objectification scrutinize themselves relative to the feminine beauty ideal, which, in Western Industrialized societies, is largely a social construction, created through modification of the natural body. Clinical Psychologist Freedman writes:

Not only is a woman socialized to act differently than a normal adult, but to look different as well-more like a female than a person. Her lips must be redder, lashes longer, waist smaller, skin smoother... props and paint accentuate gender differences, creating some that have no basis in nature (blue eyelids) and exaggerating others that are minimal (hairless legs). Shape of brows, contour of feet, style of hair become potent substitutes for natural sex differences. (30, 35)

Appearance is one fundamental way that gender is socially constructed in our culture. Joan’s mother wants her daughter to emulate the feminine beauty ideal. Joan is a rebel in her own way. Joan’s weight gain as a source of rebellion is emphasized by the use of war metaphors “I swelled visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining room table, in this at least I was undefeated” (67). Here, Joan’s body is described as being like an advancing army. The war metaphor is continued in her statement “The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body” (67).
She accentuates her size through her choice of clothing, a reaction against having to give up her butterfly costume. She refuses to be tied down by the fashion rules which are basically meant for the classical body. While her mother provides her with a clothing allowance to buy clothes that make her “less conspicuous” (85). She deliberately breaks all the rules by choosing clothes “of a peculiar and offensive hideousness, violently coloured, horizontally striped” (85). Joan prefers clothes that make it impossible for her not to be noticed. She explains her buying strategy “The brighter the colours, the more round the effect, the more certain I was to buy. I wasn’t going to let myself be diminished, neutralized, by a navy blue polka-dot sack” (85).

One day, when Joan arrives home wearing a coat “flashing like a neon melon”, her mother cries “hopelessly, passively” (86). Although Joan is dismayed she also feels “elated too at this evidence of my power, my only power” (86). Joan has used one of the few avenues available to her, her body and her clothing to resist the future her mother had planned for her “I had defeated her: I wouldn’t even let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful” (86). Joan escapes her wretched childhood when her aunt dies, leaving her a bequest of two thousand dollars, on condition that she loses weight of one hundred pounds. Her mother behaves badly when she starts losing weight. She goes on baking spree, leaving pies and cookies lying around the house to tempt her. As Joan’s weight diminishes her mother
becomes frantic and starts to drink more heavily. Her conversation with Joan continues as if Joan is still overweight “Get out of here, the sight of you makes me sick” and “if I were you I’d be ashamed to show my face outside the house” (123). Joan comments “While I grew thinner, she herself became distraught and uncertain” (122). Joan’s diminishing body destabilizes her mother’s identity as thin.

In an interview to Cathrine Martens, Margaret Atwood talked about mother-daughter relationship in *Lady Oracle*:

The girl’s fatness gives the mother satisfaction because it gives her a project to work on. And it also gives her living proof that she is superior to her daughter. In any competition she is more attractive, which is important to her, . . . the fatness of the girl is, in fact, more desirable for her. She wants the girl to be fat, at the same time that she is saying that she doesn’t want her to be. So that when the girl loses weight, the mother is very threatened. She’ll be deprived of her project. (Martens 48)

Joan reaches London as a thin woman, she enters into a live-in relationship with an old Polish Count, and soon realizes that for him woman is the “Other”. During her relationship with him, she is repeatedly confronted with culturally gendered distinctions that limit their existence to the corporeal. In a conversation with her Polish Count lover, Joan questions the binary constraints that dictate she is solely body:
“You have the body of a Goddess,” the Polish Count used to say . . .

“Do I have the head of one too?” I replied once, archly.

“Do not make such jokes,” he said.

“You must believe me. Why do you refuse to believe in your own beauty?” (141)

Gender dualism is clearly reflected in Polish Count’s views, who believes that for woman physical abnormality is worse than idiocy, he goes on to remark “Ah, but the mystery of man is of the mind . . . whereas that of the woman is of the body”(166). This works to illuminate an earlier statement that Joan makes to her husband Arthur “You’re always telling me women should become whole people through meaningful work” (32). Here, after all, it is implied that women are incomplete, and will remain so, until they acquire ‘the mind’; according to the Count, of course, ‘the mind’ is thoroughly incompatible with femininity.

Such a rejection is alluded to in Joan’s depiction of Dyna’s statue at Ephesus. As Goddess of, amongst other things, fertility and childbirth, the statue symbolizes the essence of femininity itself. It is like a paradigm of the patriarchally controlled female body:

She had a serene face, perched on top of a body shaped like a mound of grapes. She was draped in breasts from neck to ankle, as though afflicted with a case of yaws: little breasts at
the top and bottom, big ones around the middle. The nipples were equipped with sprouts, but several of the breasts were out of order.

I stood licking my ice-cream cone, watching the goddess coldly. Once I would have seen her as an image of myself, but not anymore. My ability to give was limited, I was not inexhaustible. I was not serene, not really. I wanted things, for myself. (255)

By using comic analogies which firmly ground the Goddess in ‘reality’, Joan’s description completely undermines the familial virtues for which the Goddess is traditionally worshipped. Her serene face is perched on top of her body rather than being a part of it, emphasizing that the body is the female’s primary site. With this in mind, Joan detaches herself from the figure, acknowledging her own limits and desires. Her assertion is a protest against the society that situates her own limits and desires. Her assertion is a protest against the society that situates her as a reproductive machine.

In a society that worships slenderness, Joan’s excess weight marks her as an undisciplined woman, a non-conformist who occupies more than her allotted space. By diminishing the female form, patriarchy diminishes the woman, promoting devices such as the corset, silicon breasts, to imprison her in the feminine ideal. “The culture’s feminine beauty ideal puts women in an antagonistic relationship with their natural bodies” (Scott 148).
In an effort to follow the classical body, women indulge in various ecologically unfriendly beautifying practices. They use products such as make up, anti-ageing serums, nail polish, hair colour, and depilatories, which contain chemicals linked to cancer, organ damage, fertility impairment, and birth defects. Women are expected to adopt themselves to masculine desires, irrespective of health hazards.

Women who fail to adopt are, put simply, not women. Overweight in her youth, Joan explains “Some employers welcomed me: I was as cheap as a woman but didn’t cause the disruption among male employees and customers other women did” (94). Outgrowing her allocated female space, Joan exceeds the cultural definitions of her gender and is thus not viewed as a woman. In her obese body, Joan is completely desexualized “Though immersed in flesh, I was regarded as being above its desires, which of course was not true” (93). Joan’s comment clearly goes with the mind/body dualism; For Joan Foster, the space society provides her is so restricting she cannot help but overflow; She does so literally, her heavy body spilling over its allocated space. This habit continues even after her weight loss “The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a phantom moon” (216). As she obtains the right shape she realizes she has the “wrong past’ ‘I’d have to get rid of it entirely and construct a different one for myself, a more agreeable one” (141). In her search for a more acceptable self, Joan creates a number of identities, all of which signify an attempt to
meet the demands of the ideal feminine. As she attempts to contain herself, to conform, Joan is visited throughout the novel by a series of ‘other’ female bodies: the astral figure of her mother, a creature composed entirely of her ‘lost’ flesh, and the circus Fat Lady adorned in a pink fluffy skirt and glittering tiara. Molly Hite writes “Clearly these visitants represent aspects of Joan that exceed the societal roles to which she is trying to conform” (“Writing” 137).

Just as Marian in The Edible Woman protests, so do these bodies protest, transgressing boundaries and refusing to stay in their place. As the Fat Lady floats into the arena during the game of ice-hockey, Arthur (her husband) and Joan are watching on television, the reader is faced with the clearest example of the female body forgetting her place:

The US team scooted across the bottom of the screen like a centipede, but no one paid any attention, they were all distracted by the huge pink balloon that bobbed with such poor taste above their heads . . . The Fat Lady kicked her skates feebly; her tights and the huge moon of her rump were visible. Really it was an outrage. ‘They’ve gone for the harpoon gun’, I heard the commentator say. They were going to shoot her down in cold blood, explode her, despite the fact that she had now burst into song. (276)
The Fat Lady has escaped her own space and invaded masculine territory. As Molly Hite describes it, ‘the Fat Lady’ as Joan conceives her, is the embodiment-literally-of the female potential for excess, of the threat that unmutilated, unchecked femininity will overflow boundaries, obliterating, distinctions and violating proprieties (The Other 139). This episode symbolizes the patriarchal fear of unchecked femininity and the need to cut down female body to size. Necessitated by the gendered division of nature and culture, it is apparent that society designates some areas masculine and other feminine. The Fat Lady at the hockey game is an apparent example of the female body out of her space and leaking into hostile masculine terrain.

Joan’s compulsive-eating is linked to her desire to get fat. Her large size is a deliberate and physical resistance against patriarchal construction of femininity. In Joan’s fat, argues Chernin, “we are enabled to read many kinds of hostility and a great deal of emotional distress” (72). Joan’s distress is clear when, after her dramatic weight loss, she is sexually desirable for the first time. Her fat had meant that ‘she never developed the usual female fears’; it provided her with fleshy armour “I didn’t experience men as aggressive lechers but as bashful, elusive creatures who could think of nothing to say to me and who faded at my approach” (139). However, her physical reduction exposes her to sexual depredations, gazes from ‘strange men’ who look at her “like a dog eyeing a fire hydrant” (122). Joan’s response to these leers is a longing to be fat again “It would be a disguise. I
could be merely an onlooker again, with nothing too much expected of me. Without my magic cloak of blubber and invisibility I felt naked” (141).

According to Hite, “Atwood’s representation of the consequences attendant on a dramatic change in body size reveals graphically that for a woman in Western society, to be perceived as sexual is to be a potential victim” (*The Other* 138). As a thin woman, Joan retrospectively conceptualizes her fat as a form of sexual protection; it removed her from the category ‘sexual object’ and allowed her to function as ‘someone’ rather than ‘something’. Her longing to be fat again cements the connection between compulsive-eating and woman’s desire to rebel against her powerlessness. Like Marian in *The Edible Woman*, Joan imparts the hidden intentionality of compulsive eating and non-eating. Orbach underlines the importance of examining the process by which women learn this role “it is a complex and ironic process; for women are prepared for this life of inequality by other women who themselves suffer its limitations—their mothers” (28). Chernin also observes:

Indeed, the problem with female identity that most troubles us, and that is most disguised by our preoccupation with eating and body-size... has a great deal to do with being a daughter and knowing that one’s life as a woman must inevitably reflected on the life of one’s mother. (37)
Joan’s troubled relationship with her mother characterises the mother-daughter conflict that Orbach and Chernin describe. Joan’s attempt to escape the fate of being her mother’s daughter is articulated in the same language she uses to express all her anxieties about being a woman: food and body.

Joan’s mother personifies the feminine ideal. She is a wife and mother, maintains an immaculately tidy home and performs a rigorous beauty regime. Her socially acceptable life is disrupted by her fat daughter and thus, in a somewhat tyrannical manner, she begins a dietary campaign against her daughter to correct this anomaly. However, Joan doesn’t succumb easily and this ensues a battle of wills centered on food.

Joan eats to defy her mother and the social conventions she represents. She will not allow herself to be moulded into a socially acceptable product “I wouldn’t ever let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful” (86). Instead, Joan compulsively eats and dresses conspicuously provoking her mother to cry in desperation “If I looked like you I’d hide in the cellar” (86). For Joan, over-eating is a means by which she can reject her mother’s role; but for Joan’s mother, her proprietary interest in her daughter’s body is an attempt to justify that role. Indeed, “for a daughter to be like her mother is”, according to Orbach, “a way to validate the mother’s life” (29). Only after her mother’s death, does Joan achieve clarity:
I knew that in my mother’s view both I and my father had totally failed to justify her life the way she felt it should have been justified. She used to say that nobody appreciated her, and this was not paranoia. Nobody did appreciate her, even though she’d done the right thing, she had devoted her life to us and made her family her career as she had been told to do.

(179)

In a powerful scene, Joan gorges herself on the entire contents of her deceased mother’s refrigerator, expecting, her mother to appear disgusted by her gluttony. After she has abused her stomach to its limits, she vomits, as though purging herself of her mother’s unfulfilled life. Through her body and the volume of food she consumes, Joan attempts to escape the limitations of femininity and to separate her fate from that of her mother. For Joan, her mother epitomizes the oppressive social conventions she wishes to reject.

Ecofeminists believe that urban settings include pervasive commercial contexts that expose women to cultural messages about body appearance ideals. According to ecofeminist philosophy if women spend more time in natural settings their sense of connection to nature increases; and this facilitates positive body image. Lady Oracle also offers an insight into the threat posed by self-objectification, and the feminine ideal to women’s sense of connection to nature is increased by the fact that they not only
psychologically disconnect women from nature but also discourage women from being physically connected with nature. Outdoor recreation has traditionally been perceived as a masculine domain. One barrier to women’s participation in outdoor recreation is fear of being objectified, harassed, or subject to sexual violence while recreating. Ecofeminist Greta Gaard, in her article “Ecofeminism and Wilderness” writes:

> With all the words devoted to the social construction of women’s “closeness to nature”, not enough has been said about various forms of women’s alienation from nature. Yet it is a commonplace that in patriarchal Western culture, women have followed their husbands in terms of locating the family home, pursuing work or career aspirations, thus women have constituted a privatized sexual colony in which they too have been severed from their homelands in order to ensure their economic survival. Women are supposed to fear wilderness due to the possible threat of rape . . . resulting alienation from wilderness. (10)

Joan also fears wilderness because her mother always lectures her about the terrors of the ravine, “My mother was terrified of this ravine: it crawled with vines and weedy undergrowth, it was dense with willow trees and bushes, behind everyone of which she pictured a lurking pervert, an old derelict rendered insane by rubbing alcohol, a child molester or worse” (54). In the
novel, the ravine contains a fairly harmless exhibitionist who exposes himself from behind a bunch of daffodils and saves the protagonist when other girls leave her behind tied up. Friends turn into foes in the ravine, but the threat posed by the ravine doesn’t originate from wilderness, but from human activities.

Throughout the novel the image of mother haunts Joan, suggesting a feeling of guilt on her part, while at the same time she cannot accept her mother’s ideas and attitudes. But Joan also discovers evidence of a kind of rebellion in the life of her mother. Looking at some old photographs, she sees that the mother has actually cut out the faces of her husband and other men, seeking revenge on the male sex in this symbolic manner. Her father is an insensitive and irresponsible man who is an anesthetist at the Toronto General Hospital. As a doctor he has two sets of costumes, namely ‘healer’ and ‘killer’. He goes to war leaving his wife pregnant and doesn’t return till Joan turns five. He suspects his wife of infidelity. Joan’s mother remains a silent victim at the hands of her father. Her mother says “you don’t know what it was like, all alone with her to bring up while you were over there enjoying yourself . . . It’s not as though I wanted to have her. It’s not as though I wanted to marry you. I had to make the best of a bad job” (75). She is one of those women who are trapped into marriage by an undesired pregnancy and entangled in domesticity “a plastic-shrouded tomb from which there was no exit” (180).
Joan realises that she is an “accident”, the unwanted daughter of an insecure, unhappy woman and carries her sad story around her neck like “a rotting albatross” (215). Joan’s mother’s influence still haunts Joan in a destructive way, undermining her self-confidence, refusing to recognize her real self, threatening the very survival of her selfhood.

Another woman who has influence on Joan’s life is her Aunt Lou, an unconventional, uninhibited woman who defies the expectations that keep women down. She inspires her with her strength to live life on her own terms. She tells Joan “that’s just the way I am . . . If other people can’t handle it, that’s their problem. Remember that, dear. You can’t always choose your life, but you can learn to accept it” (86). She got married when she was just nineteen. Her husband was seven years older to her, and a compulsive gambler. He left her with a void in her heart forever “I wonder if he’s still alive; if he is, I suppose I’m still married to him” (82). After her failed marriage, Aunt Lou settles down as the Head, Department of Public Relations, of a Canadian firm. The silent victimization of Aunt Lou also shapes Joan’s ideas about man woman relationships. She realises the oppressive nature of patriarchal society and the helplessness of women in performing the roles carved out for them by men. With the death of Aunt Lou, Joan makes her first escape. As soon as she gets to know about her being Aunt Lou’s heir, if she loses weight, she decides to leave her mother’s house.
When Joan decides to shun her weight, she rejects the bond between her and her mother. By becoming thinner she says no to her mother. Orbach states that when a girl or a woman starts making individual choices concerning her eating, she feels that she is rejecting her mother. It is a conflict between individuality and dependence and love for the mother (32). Her mother becomes violent to find her losing weight. When Joan tells that she has lost almost enough weight in order to collect the inheritance, and plans to leave the parents’ house, her mother attacks Joan “She took a paring knife . . . and stuck it into my arm . . . It went through my sweater, pricked the flesh, then bounced out and fell to the floor” (124). After stabbing, they both pretend that nothing happened, and Joan makes them tea. She leaves home the same night. To Joan the mother stands for suffocating power and loss of self and to her mother Joan’s independence represents loss of subjectivity.

In her relationships with men, Joan is no paragon of virtue. She tends to be detached, and is also capable of using men in the same way that men use women. But it is also the case that men in her life, Arthur, Paul or Chuck, the Royal Porcupine, though they may love her and actually be more committed to her than she is to them, still want to trap her in the mother/housewife role. Hence, Joan always fears being trapped and is involved in various escapades and transformations. Ultimately she realizes that all the men in her life had two costumes:
My father, healer and killer; the man in the tweed coat, my rescuer and possibly also a pervert; the Royal Porcupine and his double, Chuck Brewer; even Paul, who I’d always believed had a sinister other life I couldn’t penetrate. Why should Arthur be any exception? . . . The fact that I’d taken so long to discover it made it all the more threatening. (295)

After leaving her home, Joan travels to England chasing dreams of Camelot looking for her knight in shining armour. She is disheartened however when she finds that, in reality, London “is not as romantic as she expected it to be” (Jensen 32). Expecting “castles and princesses, the Lady of Shallot floating down the river in a boat” (142), Joan finds instead “a lot of traffic and a large number of people with bad teeth” (143). Not dwelling on her disillusionment, Joan romantically links herself with ‘royalty’, a polish count named Paul, but soon begins to feel restricted by his control of her life. Paul poses as “Mavis Quilp”, the writer of “nurse romances” (155). Through Paul, however, she discovers her love for writing. Paul becomes her connection with the publishing world.

Joan takes the name Louisa K. Delacourt as the pseudonym under which she writes the Costumes Gothics. She uses pattern of Aunt Lou’s eccentric life to shape her Gothic heroines, career women of a kind who lure away other women’s husbands and find a shaky happiness. Soon Joan understands the real character of Paul – a manipulator. She finds him a threat
to her identity as a writer. She refuses to be with men who categorize women as ‘wives’ or ‘mistresses’ – derogatory words. She says:

It’s an old term, ‘mistress’, was how he thought of me, these were the categories into which his sexual life was arranged; wives and mistresses. I was not the first mistress. For him there was no such thing as a female lover. (150)

She leaves Paul for Arthur. She meets Arthur by chance while taking a walk through Hyde Park, composing “Escape from Love”, a piece which she writes to escape Paul. She immediately romanticises Arthur, and wins him over through pretence and lies. Joan dedicates herself to Arthur’s political cause and showing her devotion, she hides her identity as a pulp fiction writer. She continues to write in secret. She knew her husband would never approve of her writing novels. Unwilling to give up either her husband or her writing, Joan creates two mutually exclusive identities. At home she is Joan Foster, Arthur’s wife; to the publisher she is someone else completely. Joan had submitted both the name and photo of the overweight, but flamboyantly dressed Louisa Delacourt, Joan’s deceased Aunt.

She expects Arthur to be different from the rest of the men; but she is disheartened to realise that Arthur, the so-called ‘leftist’ expects her to be a good cook like a stereotypical wife. Like a dutiful wife Joan tries her hand at cooking. She soon realises that Arthur doesn’t want her to have an
independent identity, and he turns out to be a sadist who leaves no chance to discourage his wife. She says:

Arthur enjoyed my defeats. They cheered him up. He loved hearing the crash as I dropped a red-hot platter on the floor, having forgotten to put on my oven mitt; he liked to hear me swearing in the kitchen; and when I would emerge sweaty-faced . . . he would greet me with a smile and a little joke, or perhaps even a kiss, which was as much for the display, the energy I’d wasted, as for the food. My frustration and anger were real, my failure was a performance and Arthur was the audience. (211)

He is not interested in her becoming mother and forces her to take birth control measures. She feels suffocated with Arthur and finds writing gothic an emotional necessity. She sees her Gothic novels as a “necessity” for her readers, like food or medicine. It is a way of escaping, as “painkillers” that “could be taken in capsule forms, quickly and discreetly” (31). The romance eases women’s anxiety and unhappiness; it acts as a drug which makes them feel more satisfied with their lives. According to Joan, women desire the Gothic and romance in their lives:

They wanted their men to be strong, lustful, passionate and exciting, with hard rapacious mouths, but also tender and worshipful. They wanted men in mysterious cloaks who would
rescue them from balconies, but they also wanted meaningful in-depth relationships and total openness . . . They wanted multiple orgasms, they wanted the earth to move, but they also wanted help with the dishes. (217)

Through her writings also Joan supports her reader’s needs for escape:

Life had been hard on them and they had not fought back. . . . Escape wasn’t a luxury for them, it was a necessity. They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them . . . neatly packaged . . . I knew all about escape, I was brought up on it. (31)

Her perception clearly reveals her own symbolic hunger of what she expects from her man. In ecofeminist philosophy women represent emotions, and men represent reason and Lady Oracle is a brilliant example showing how ‘reason’ tries to overshadow ‘emotion’. Lady Oracle exposes the ‘emotional emptiness’ witnessed by the women in the phallocentric society which is governed by reason and logic only. Joan’s mother, Aunt Lou, Leda, and Joan herself are victims of ‘calculative’ relationships in one way or the other.

At home Joan does everything to please Arthur, even to her own degradation. She continues writing under the name of Joan Foster. Her pseudonymous activity gives her a secret independent identity, the freedom of a private bank account, but more importantly, the fantasy life of the
Costume Gothic scenario. She hides her identity as a writer from Arthur, in fear of rejection. He is appalled by the news of the publication of *Lady Oracle*. He is unable to appreciate Joan as a celebrated writer and he becomes indifferent towards their marriage.

Her suffocating marital relationship with Arthur leads her into an extramarital affair with Chuck, the Royal Porcupine a “homicidal maniac” with costumes. He tries to convince Joan to leave Arthur and live with him. They begin a playful affair through which Joan lives out her romantic and sexual desires, and yet another secret is born: Joan is no longer living a double life; she has become triplicate “I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many. The Royal Porcupine had opened a time space door to the fifth dimension” (247).

She leaves Chuck also when she realizes that he has plans to occupy Arthur’s place, which she was afraid of. Paul reappears in her life and after knowing about her crumbling marriage, he tries to convince her to leave Arthur. He tells her if need arises he will kidnap her. Soon she realises that Paul doesn’t have any true feelings for her, he just wants to have “the adventure of kidnapping her from what he imagined to be a den of fanged and dangerous communists” (285).

Through the character of Joan, Atwood has skillfully exposed the obstacles faced by female writers in a patriarchal culture. Historically, woman who could ‘think’ and ‘write’ has often been accused of either
Elaine Showalter argues in *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, that “in ecstatic religions, women more frequently than men speak in tongues, a phenomenon attributed by anthropologists to their relative inarticulateness in formal religious discourse” (340). Showalter further argues: “the problem is not that language is insufficient to express women’s consciousness but that women have been denied the full resource of language” (341).

Through Joan’s ‘Automatic Writing’, Atwood suggests that women must develop feminine writing that makes women receptive to a maternal agency outside the patriarchal social set up. Ecofeminism stresses on woman’s deep spiritual connection with nature. *Lady Oracle* foregrounds the philosophy of ecofeminism by presenting a female writer who eludes patriarchal discourse with the help of her deep connection with ‘maternal voice’. Joan refuses to be her men’s muse, and decides to be her own muse. She remains fascinated with occult spiritualism which brings her close to her inner self. In an interview Joan confesses that the poems were “dictated . . . by a spirit hand” (239), thus increasing her mystique and accenting her role of prophet-poet. Cixous remarks that “What is going to write itself comes from long before me, me . . . being nothing but the bodily medium which . . . transcribes that which is dictated to me” (Conley, 146). Cixous does not take personal credit for her feminine writing, but admits her debt to some oneiric voice outside herself:
I am a dreamer. . . . I owe everything, almost everything to dream. . . . I owe everything to somebody else, and in my innocence of times past, I felt guilty because when I started to write under pressure, under dictation, under the influence of the dream, which made me terribly ashamed. I was not the one who was writing. (Conley 154-55)

Cixous asserts that the source of this oneiric voice is an idealized mother, “something . . . repairing and feeding, a force that . . . runs codes ragged” (93). She suggests that the writer assumes the role of spokesperson for this ‘maternal voice’ in order to become a sibyl, a woman similar to the Delphic Oracle, someone revered by the Ancient Greeks for her discursive insights normally inaccessible to men. Lady Oracle strengthens the ecofeminist philosophy by depicting ‘Feminine Spirituality’ as a power source for women. Even the names of the characters of Joan’s best selling poetry Lady Oracle establish a connection with mystical insight. Joan believes that her mother has named her not after Joan Crawford, the movie star, but after “Joan of Arc” (337), the martyred prophetess, “accused of witchcraft . . . roped to the stake” (337), and burned so that “only her heart remained” (337). Just as Joan of Arc communes with the Virgin, Joan in Lady Oracle learns to commune with apparently transcendental, maternalistic forces. She seems to have privileged access to the supernatural.
Leda, the spiritualist in the novel emphasizes that Joan is endowed with some practical talent for the occult and encourages Joan to participate in automatic writing: “you have great gifts . . . Great powers. You should develop them” (111). She believes that her work originates in some inexpressible agency beyond her conscious control. In Lady Oracle, automatic writing is portrayed as surrender to spiritual possession to “the feeling of being, well, taken over” (112).

Joan’s experiments with ‘Automatic Writing’ lead her into the mirror’s labyrinthine passageways and corridors, and a tentative connection with Ariadne figure, Lady Oracle until one day, when a candle goes out during one of her sessions, and Joan abruptly puts a stop to this psychic exploration:

I think the candle really did go out and that was why I was stuck there, in the midst of darkness, unable to move. I’d lost all sense of direction; I was afraid to turn around even, in case I ended up going farther in. I felt as though I was suffocating.

(225)

Thus far in her labyrinthine explorations, Joan did not “get to the end of the corridor” (224), in her mirror journey, nor did she find what she is seeking “the things, the truth or word or person that was mine that was waiting for me” (223).
What she does gain from these ‘Automatic Writing’ sessions is a book of poetry later published as *Lady Oracle*; a book so strange and unconventional that Joan denies any personal connection with the characters or scenarios, viewing it instead as a “Gothic gone wrong. It was upside down somehow” (234). In time Joan begins to see that the images in *Lady Oracle* are parts of herself with whom she needs to reconcile; however, Joan ignores the call of her inner self by creating distractions – such as becoming involved in an affair and assisting in the design of a ‘terrorist plot’ - and further alienating her from her true self.

*Lady Oracle* not only reinforces the motif of the visionary, but also stresses that the protagonist must confront the underprivileged status of female writers. Joan has to contend with gendered disadvantages when trying to establish her literary vocation: she must at first overcome a variety of patriarchal obstacles, particularly the lack of male support. She has to initially write within the shadow of the sexist Polish Count, “who preferred to be called Paul, his third name, after Saint Paul [the misogynist saint]” (151), and who believes that woman is a commodity valued by her body.

Moreover, Joan must later write clandestinely, trying to fulfill adequately her role as a good wife to Arthur, while indulging the literary aspirations of her true self. She believes that divulging her profession to Arthur must result in his disrespect for her intelligence “It was fear . . . , and I knew if he found out I’d written *The Secret of Morgrave Manor* he
wouldn’t respect mine” (30). Within the novel, the female writer must transcend an inferiority complex, induced in part by the dismissive attitudes of males who subscribe, sometimes unwittingly, to the social expectations of patriarchy: the female writer must in effect operate in an environment where, according to Aunt Lou, “the tongue is the enemy of the neck” (37) – at least for women.

Joan has to face the contradiction between her own creative desires and patri-social expectations. Joan remarks “behind my compassionate smile was a set of tightly clenched teeth, and behind that a legion of voices, crying What about me? What about me? When is my turn?” (90).

She has “learned to stifle these voices to be calm and receptive” (90), to indulge in what Gilbert and Gubar might call the “feminine schizophrenia of authorship” (17). Joan cannot easily reconcile the tension between her life as the housewife Joan, and her life as the writer Louisa K. Delacourt.

Joan’s decisions are “based on the clear message that she has received throughout her childhood and adolescence -that a woman cannot have both a marriage and a career at the same time” (Fee 46).

Joan’s multiple identities, reinforce and expand a belief perpetuated in western culture described by Julie Fenwick as the “underlying theme of the risk to women of certain choice – to seek forbidden knowledge, to exercise creativity, to desire, to speak, to dance” (51). Joan draws a striking parallel between phallocentric militancy and everyday language by
suggesting that the two are inextricably linked “words were not a prelude to war but the war itself, a devious, subterranean war that was unending because there were no decisive acts, no knockdown blows that could be Jacques Derrida calls “the unity of violence and writing” (Derrida 106). The notion that social inequality is perpetuated through the very structures of discursive practice in short, language is used primarily to oppress. Joan reveals that language is inherently phallocentric since it merely, establishes relationships of power between a victim and victimizer a fact that manifests itself most obviously in the attempts made by the sexist Fraser Buchanan to blackmail Joan (292-93), to assert power over her by threatening to speak. Joan tries in vain to escape such constraints assigned to her in advance by the various men in her life. Ultimately she decides to get rid of Fraser Buchanan when she gets to know about the existence of his black notebook, which is the collection of the data about the lives of the women, his ‘clients’. Blackmail is the very breath of Fraser’s life. She takes his black note book and runs away leaving him in a drunken state. She tears out a page from the black note book and sends it to him so that he gets to know that she is in the possession of the black note book. She also puts a note “If anything happens to me the book is in good hands. One word from you and it goes to the police” (Italics original 294). Thus acting smartly she turns the table against him.
Joan plans to start a new life by staging her death, believing that her life “couldn’t possibly have a happy ending”, the only way Joan can imagine escaping from a “snarled” web of deceit her life has become, is to plan her own ending—a neat one. Something terminal, like scissors” (312).

Mary Daly, an ecofeminist, however, points out, that “journeying to the centre is undoing the knots, not cutting the knot. To try to cut the knot is merely to take a misleading short cut” (406). Daly further advises that:

There are non knots, which should not be confused with knots. These should be recognized as snarls . . . Unlike a knot, it is not characterized by the complexity of integrity, but by inherent confusion. (406)

Joan’s “snarled” life line is, indeed, characterized by confusion and it is only in the retelling of her story, after her “death”, from an alternate perspective on “the other side”—in Terremoto—that Joan sees the order and patterns that have shaped her life. Joan enjoyed her multiple identities and it seems she was aware that integrating her different identities could have disastrous consequences “If I brought the separate parts of my life together (like uranium, like plutonium harmless to the naked eye, but charged with lethal energies) surely there would be an explosion” (218). She stages her own drowning because she is afraid of her other lives to be discovered soon and that she will be reduced to a single identity. She says “the thought of going on with the same kind of life forever and ever depressed me. I wanted to
have more than one life” (141) and “I pretended to die so I could live, so I
could have another life” (315). Joan’s obsession with living out her romantic
fantasies prevents her from accepting reality. Coomi S. Vevaina rightly
points out:

Unable to distinguish between fantasy and fact, Joan fails
disastrously in her numerous attempts to live out one trashy,
melodramatic script after another. Joan’s Quixotic mind-set,
the chaos of her psyche and her multiple selves are brilliantly
conveyed to us through the form of the novel. (Re/membering
49)

In Terremoto, she begins to create new identities, the first inspired by the
adjectives on a box of a hair dye she buys in Rome “the birth of my new
personality (a sensible girl, discreet, warm, honest and confident , with soft
green eyes, regular habits and glowing chestnut hair)” (184). She invents
another identity when the landlord, Mr. Vitroni tells her that a man calling
himself a reporter has been asking about her. She tells him that she is a rich
woman and is being pursued by someone who wants to kill her for money.
When Sam, her friend who helped her to plan fake death, sends her an
envelope of newspaper clippings about her ‘drowning’, she discovers her
Joan Foster identity is undergoing changes even after her ‘death’.

The media have decided her drowning was suicide and consequently
have portrayed her as having a morbid intensity, doomed eyes and “fits of
depression” (315). When Joan hurts reporter, she adopts the role of a caring nurse. She also starts to think of him as a possible romantic partner, “there is something about a man in bandage” (345). She doesn’t stop fantasizing even at the end. Despite her intentions to return to Toronto to clear Sam and Marlene’s name (they have been arrested for Joan’s Murder), it is not clear if this will ever eventuate. She appears in no hurry to return and set them free “Right now, though, it is easier to stay here in Rome” (345).

Lady Oracle challenges false femininity that allows a woman to experience desire only in so far as it is prescribed by the desires of men. Joan defines herself as an “artist-an escape artist” (335). Her artistry derives from her ability to evade singular embodiment. She is not one woman, but many and her multiplicity cannot be resolved unambiguously into uniformity. As such the female body and ultimately female identity cannot be neatly packaged within ‘femininity’.

Atwood has created a strong protagonist who has the ability to unsettle the phallocentric distribution of creative authority. Joan emerges out as “a powerful woman . . . , a potentially dangerous anomaly” (Second Words 331). Novel ends with a line which suggests that Joan is aware of her ability to create chaos in the lives of men around her, and at the same time enjoys their vulnerability. She turns out to be a female ‘picaroon’. The diversity of her character reveals the complexity of her psyche, and her sense
of alienation. Joan ultimately “got on as far as saying I am who I am, take it or leave it” (Struthers, “Interview” 25).

From the trickster protagonist of Lady Oracle, we move to the naive protagonist of Bodily Harm, who exposes the direct relation between male violence / domination against weaker section of society, and environment.
CHAPTER - V

*Bodily Harm*

Then it comes to him: he’s lost of female body! . . .

Catch it. Put it in a pumpkin, in a high tower, in a compound, in a chamber, in a house, in a room. Quick, stick a leash on it, a lock, a chain, some pain; settle it down, so it can never get away from you again. (Atwood, “The Female Body” 37)

*Bodily Harm* came into existence a decade after *Surfacing*, but there are similarities that connect both the novels. Like *Surfacing*, *Bodily Harm* is also a tale of a woman who must fight hard both internally and externally to win over the obstacles and emerge as a survivor. Sunaina Singh has rightly pointed out that:

> It is *Bodily Harm* which seems to answer the question about ‘Women’ in totality . . . Atwood very categorically states in *Bodily Harm* that one should be glad if one is able to escape for a short while, for the final victim position is certain – there is no getting away from it. (53)

Atwood’s *Bodily Harm* is a reaction to much publicised phenomenon feminism. Atwood published *Bodily Harm* in post feminist era when women were living in the mirage of gender equality and women empowerment. Sunaina Singh further writes that “Atwood thought it fit to evaluate the depth of liberation that women are supposed to have attained” (53). *Bodily
*Harm* reflects the true picture of a dominant society where women are still same in the eyes of men – ‘Other’. In the novel Atwood has exposed the blind spots within feminist ideology:

> It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed . . . the goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we’re living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the same subject. (*Second Words* 370)

*Bodily Harm* explores male violence and power relations on several levels. It raises many questions about a woman’s control over her body and violence towards it. Theme of the novel reflects the sentiments of ecofeminists, who insist that there is a correlation between violence against women and environment, and power equation in patriarchal set up. The gendered pattern of the novel emphasises that men are aggressive and violent because “they can” (269) and they “don’t feel pain” (74).

*Bodily Harm* also validates the issues raised by ecofeminists all around the globe, regarding the relationship pattern between developed and developing nations, responsibility of West for its ‘Others’, and repression of weaker sections of society.

In the novel Breast Cancer is used as a metaphor on two levels, on one level it reveals the selected contamination and amputation of the self by psychic structures. Atwood has highlighted the self disgust and low self
esteem found in the women diagnosed with breast cancer. When Rennie, the protagonist of the novel is diagnosed with breast cancer, she feels as if her body is infested and she tells her doctor Daniel “I don’t feel human anymore . . . I dream I’m full of white maggots eating away at me from the inside” (87).

On the other level breast cancer exposes the deteriorating political systems around the globe. The increased level of violence in North America, pollution, diseases, oppression and corruption and abuse of power against women and nature on the part of phallocentric society.

In Bodily Harm, Atwood’s involvement in organizations such as Amnesty International is visible. In her address at the world meeting of Amnesty International Atwood speaks against oppression:

Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings. If the imagination were a negligible thing and the act of writing a mere frill, as many in this society would like to believe, regimes all over the world would not be at such pain to exterminate them. (Second Words 397)

Ecofeminism has the potential to explain an inherent and argumentative justification of Western society that permits the oppression of women and exploitation of environment. Bodily Harm explores the gendered environmental health inequalities. Bodily Harm shares ecofeminists concern
about globalization because it represents the consolidation and concentration of the power of patriarchal capitalism. The novel raises number of ecofeminist questions: What is the relationship between developed and developing countries? How does West treat its ‘Others’? And how women are affected with patriarchal control over environment (patriarchal control through medicine, language, rape and pornography). The ecofeminist alignment with feminist tradition is clearly visible in the novel.

Rennie’s task is to defy oppression in all forms. Howells writes in her book *Modern Novelists Margaret Atwood*:

*Bodily Harm* is another version of writing the female body, this time from the point of view of woman whose own body is already damaged by cancer and a mastectomy. From this “post operative” angle she scrutinizes social myths of femininity, medical discourse on breast cancer and most significantly, the rhetoric of pornography; this novel is emphatically not about bodily pleasures but about bodily harm. (106)

Throughout the novel, Rennie faces plethora of “harms”. She realises that her being a woman is the obvious cause of her victimisation. *Bodily Harm* is a story of a Canadian journalist, called Rennie, who writes lifestyle articles, and is a convalescent from breast cancer operation.

In the novel, Atwood’s focus is on the psychic effects of living with oppression and of facing one’s complicity in a hegemonic structure.
Although novel is set on a Caribbean island during a struggle for power among the representatives of the new political order, Atwood leaves these political struggles as a backdrop of her central Canadian character, Rennie, as she comes to terms with the nature of her own complicity in the power hungry patriarchal society.

*Bodily Harm* is divided into six parts and the narration is in part character bound, in part external. The novel begins with the sentence “This is how I got here” (3), the protagonist is remembering her past, and the circumstances that brought her to the present situation. The narration is mostly in third person form, and returns to the first person mode are shorter. Rennie’s story is consisted of several traumatizing situations and events.

Rennie’s life changes with the diagnosis of breast cancer. The cancer marks turning point in her life, she faces a professional crisis, breaks-up with her manipulating lover Jake, and experiences a short lived affair with her oncologist Daniel. Feeling a need to escape, she gets an assignment to write a travel piece on St. Antoine and St. Agathe, a fictional paired Caribbean island nation, newly independent of Great Britain. She gets a rude cultural shock when after reaching there she realises that it is a depressed country on the brink of revolution and an uprising. She becomes involved in the first free election after independence. Dr. Minnow, the unaligned candidate, urges her to write about the island as it truly is, while Lora, a fellow Canadian and long term resident, drags her unwillingly into gun-running on
behalf of Prince, another candidate. To Rennie, the events on the island resemble a spy thriller which turns out to be more dangerous than fiction. Minnow wins the election but is killed by someone. Rennie, whose behaviour has been innocently suspicious due to her association with Lora and Paul, an American drug and gun dealer, is jailed along with Lora. Lora is beaten to death but Rennie remains alive.

Atwood presented things in a realistic form in the novel. As Rennie Wilford goes from being a burnt out lifestyle journalist in Toronto to committed, involved reporter of human rights abuses in the Caribbean, she traverses the late 1970’s landscape of self-involved urban professionals, reckless American political adventuring, and the various types of ‘bodily harm’ contained in the title. As Rennie experiences several forms of harm, from cancer and a thwarted stalker in Toronto to an assault in the prison, she discovers that no country is exempt, and women are treated as ‘other’ irrespective of class, creed and colour.

Rennie’s consistent misreading of the landscape and the people of island demonstrates both her own ignorance and the blindness of Canadian society at large which in some degree supports misreading.

The novel opens with a scene of potential sexual violence: Rennie comes home to find a “length of rope coiled neatly on the quilt. It wasn’t any special kind of rope; there was nothing lurid about it. It was off-white and medium thick. It could have been a clothesline” (6). Although the
comparison of the rope to a clothesline associates Rennie with female domesticity, the location of the rope on the bed sexually inscribes Rennie’s body because it connotes both physical and sexual restraint. The police, already there, interrogate her:

You close the curtains when you dressed at night?

. . . You have men over here a lot? Different men?

He wanted it to be my fault, just a little, some indiscretion, some provocation. Next he would start lecturing me about locks, about living alone, about safety.

I close the curtains, I said. I don’t have men over. I turn out the lights. I get undressed by myself, in the dark.

The big one smirked at me, he knew about single women, and suddenly I was angry. I unbuttoned my blouse and pulled my left arm out of the sleeve and dropped the slip strap over my shoulder. (7)

The policemen represent the ideology of phallocentric society where a single woman is looked upon with suspicion. The policemen suggest that single women are inherently promiscuous and therefore indirectly invite troubles for themselves. *Bodily Harm* works on the same premise as *Dell Mysteries* which Rennie used to read. When she recalls reading *Dell Mysteries*, she is reminded of pathetic condition of female body, even a dead body is never spared by the lustful masculine gaze:
carefully arranged on floor or bed like a still life, not quite naked, clothing disheveled to suggest rape, though there was no rape in the forties, finger-marks livid around the throat – they loved *livid*. Dead but not molested. The private eyes find them . . . describes each detail of the body fully, lushly, as if running their tongues over it; all that flesh, totally helpless because totally dead. Each one of them expresses outrage at the crime . . . Rennie finds it curiously innocent, this hypocritical outrage. It’s sweetly outmoded, like hand-kissing.

(277)
The highly sexualized, lush description of male tongue that runs over the helpless murdered female body with her “living nakedness” automatically reinforces that the victim provoked the attack with the temptation of her body and therefore deserves her end. Similarly, the policemen attempt to make Rennie guilty of using her body to tempt the stalker. In *Bodily Harm*, Atwood has focused on lustful male gaze “for it is ultimately the Peeping Tom that – through the help of the policemen – succeeds in objectifying the female subject he observes, as opposed to him becoming the object of the third party’s censoring gaze” (Drichel 26). Consequently, Rennie is forced to show the police her amputated breast so that they will believe her. As a fragmented body, her inscription as sexual is thus erased as desirable in masculinist discourse.
It seems Rennie herself begins to think that somehow she is responsible for inviting the stalker to her apartment. According to her, there had been “a vacuum” in her life after her boyfriend Jake had moved out and “may be the man with the rope hadn’t so much broken into her apartment as been sucked in” (36). Rennie takes the burden of guilt as women usually do. They are considered to be responsible of sexuality, and not only of their own but male sexuality too. This eagerness, to take the blame does not only suggest common gendered values and education but also Rennie’s background in Griswold Ontario.

Visibility is a key issue for Rennie. The issue of seeing and being seen is highlighted in the novel with a pretext / epigraph from John Berger’s book *Ways of Seeing*:

A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman’s presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her.

The above lines highlight the power difference between genders and argue that men are the subjects and women the objects. As Howells says “In *Bodily Harm* female bodies are all passive, distorted, dismembered or coerced, witnesses to the sexual power politics of the Berger’s epigraph” (*Margaret Atwood* 122). Rennie is afraid to share her fear with anyone in Griswold, because she knows her family would not understand and they would say “This is what happens to women like you. What can you expect,
you deserve it” (12). As a child, Rennie was dependent on her grandmother and at her mercy. The grandmother’s education and the bed manners of Griswold are gendered in nature. In Griswold, girls and women are always in the danger of becoming grotesque and despicable in the eyes of the others.

Rennie has a mother, but she is under the control of her own mother, who is a smiling abuser. Although Rennie loves her mother who is “practically a saint” (57), yet she doesn’t want to be like her “I don’t want to be trapped, like my mother . . . I didn’t want to be like her anyway” (57). Rennie doesn’t want to tell her mother of her breast cancer because she is certain that she will see it as “Rennies’ fault . . . something you brought upon yourself” (57).

Rennie’s father is absent during her childhood. He is a war veteran and has left them shortly after Rennie was born, lives in Toronto and visits them only at Christmas. When Rennie sees him as an adult, he says that Rennie looks like her mother, and “that was the end of him” (119). It seems that Rennie has constructed an invisible wall between her and her mother “I didn’t want to have a family or be anyone’s mother ever” (57). Rennie leaves Griswold in order to lead an independent life. She thinks that the condition of women would be different outside Griswold, but as life unfolds she feels that no matter in which part of the world women are, they are still treated as ‘Other’ in the society.
During her stay on the island, Rennie goes through many life changing experiences. In the novel, there is an unspeakable amount of violence against women. Any woman who dares to create her own private space is brutally crushed by men on the island. It is man’s privilege to be disloyal to his woman, but a woman dare not. A man is not considered masculine if he doesn’t beat his woman. Mardson humiliated his girlfriend and punished her to the worst possible degree:

If he hadn’t beat her up, the other men would have laughed at him . . . , he made her take off her clothes . . . , he covered her with cow- itch. That’s like a nettle, it’s what you do to people you really don’t like a whole lot. Then he tied her to a tree in the backyard, right near an ant hill, the stinging kind. He stayed in the house, drinking rum and listening to her scream. He left her there five hours, till she was all swollen up like a balloon. A lot of people heard her but nobody tried to untie her . . . because it was a man-woman thing . . . . (240)

It appears to Rennie that women are “valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men” (Hooks 43). She comes across another incidence of male insensitivity when Paul tells her that robbery is a worst crime than killing a woman, “If you get angry and chop up your woman, that’s understandable; a crime of passion you might say” (253). In a society where women are silenced, ‘nature’ is also not spared, and rendered
speechless. The natural flora and fauna of the island is destroyed with the arrival of capitalism. Rennie is hurt to see how natives were selling parrots for money. Developed countries are exploiting the natural beauty of the islands. Mrs. Abbott explains to Rennie, how flow of money from the developed countries has given rise to the greed for more money, which has ultimately eroded the islanders’ sense of oneness with their environment:

In Germany you can get thirty-five thousand dollars for a mated pair. “The Germans have too much money”, says Mr. Abbott. “It’s coming out of their ears. They don’t know what to do with it.”

“It’s the St. Antonie parrot,” says Mrs. Abbott. “They’re very rare, you know. You don’t find them anywhere but on St. Antonie”. (208)

The poverty on the island has robbed people of their sensitivities toward women, animals and environment. Bonnie Mann, a feminist phenomenologist writes:

How we understand, how we revere or disregard, relations of dependency will determine a great deal about what kind of political institutions we build. Of course, in our violence to the natural world we turn away from an equally fundamental obligation, an obligation to the earth that gives us life, moment by moment, breath by breath, while we build a world to live in
. . . this is to say that, like ourselves, our social world is dependent on the earth for sustenance. (138)

Rennie is shocked to find hurricane victims living under inhuman condition in the tents despite receiving aid from the developed countries. By pumping more money into the island, developed countries have ruined the island by giving rise to a population thriving on corruption:

Even outside there’s a smell of bodies, of latrines and lime and decaying food . . . The people here are mostly women and young children . . . “They from the hurricane”, says Dr. Minnow softly. “The government have the money to rebuild their houses, the sweet Canadians send it to them. Only it has not yet happened, you understand”. (135)

Globalisation brought economic and cultural colonialisation on the island. In an echo of Surfacing, the Canadian attitude, personified by Rennie, is to distance herself from the active harm done on the island by the United States and the Soviet Union. After British left the island, it is indirectly controlled by many big economies. As Dr. Minnow says:

The British make a big mistake in the nineteenth century, they put us all together in one country. Ever since then we have trouble, and now the British have got rid of us so they can have their cheap bananas without the bother of governing us, and we have more trouble. (139)
Ecofeminists identify globalisation as an outgrowth of capitalism which, according to their analysis is the locus of social and environmental crises. They argue that the essential characteristic of capitalism is its patriarchal nature. The fundamental contradiction of capitalism is not between capital and labour but between production and reproduction. Valued and economically recognised male labour is separated off from invisible domestic female service. This is thought to be the deepest contradiction of patriarchal capitalism because women’s reproductive labour remains in nature while men’s productive labour is removed from nature. It is their close connection with nature that is said to put women in the position of being able to liberate humanity and nature from capitalist domination in order to create new healthy societies. Rosemary Radford Ruether an eminent ecofeminist in her book *Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*, argues that there is an interconnection between the domination of women and the domination of nature:

This interconnection is typically made on two levels: ideological-cultural and socio-economic. On the ideological-cultural level women are said to be ‘closer to nature’ than men, more aligned with body matter, emotions, and the animal world. On the socio-economic level, women are located in the spheres of reproduction, child raising, food preparation, spinning and weaving, cleaning of clothes and houses, that are
devalued in relation to the public sphere of male power and culture. (91)

The capitalistic ideology has brought victimisation of women and ecological crisis on the island. The island is badly exploited by the capitalist powers. The reef has become a dump yard and the islanders are in the grip of drugs. Lora meets Rennie on the boat and shows her the deteriorating condition of the reef “The reef’s getting all messed up by the oil and junk from the harbor. What you need is a snorkel and stuff, over at St.Agathe. That’s where I live” (92). Ariel Salleh in her book, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*, writes:

> The basic premise of ecofeminist political analysis is that ecological crisis is the inevitable effect of a Eurocentric capitalist patriarchal culture built on the domination of nature, and the domination of ‘woman as nature’. . . . it is the inevitable effect of a culture constructed on the domination of women, and domination of Nature ‘as feminine’. (13)

Rennie leaves Griswold in order to create an identity for herself. She doesn’t want to be squeezed off her individuality in the system where women should be invisible, and not to be heard, she remembers what her grandmother used to say “As a child I learned three things well: how to be quiet, what not to say, and how to look at things without touching them” (52).
She doesn’t want to live a speechless life; she leaves Griswold to reclaim her ‘voice’, and joins journalism to have her own space. Democratic theorist and ecofeminist cultural studies scholar Catriona Sandilands reminds us in *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* that:

For a woman, for example, the right to speak differently and not be spoken for is not merely a question of claiming equal power in the privileged male domain of speech but a way of discovering or creating a new voice to express experiences not apprehensive through dominant constructs . . . This process represents both means and ends: the creation of a new series of codes through which to perceive and act in the world and through which to challenge and therefore change dominant and oppressive constructions of sense. (80)

*Bodily Harm*, takes exploitation of women and animals to another level – ‘Pornography’. To forget the shocking incident of a man who intruded in her apartment leaving a rope on her bed, Rennie decides to take on a write-up on pornography. She writes an article on pornography as an art form from the ‘woman’s angle’ for a magazine called ‘Visor’. She interviews Frank, an artist, who showcases nude women as an art form. She even visits the Toronto Metro Police Department’s pornography museum along with Jocasta.
Her first interview subject, Frank the artist, constructs sculptures using mannequins that appear detached from any relation to women’s fantasy lives:

The women were dressed in half-cup bras and G-string panties, set on their hands and knees for the tables, locked into a sitting position for the chairs. One of the chairs was a woman on her knees, her back arched, her wrists tied to her thighs. The ropes and arms were the arms of the chair, her bum was the seat.

(232)

In Toronto Metro Police headquarters, Rennie realises how women and animals are looked down by the men. The ‘bias’ is rooted in biological determinism (reproductive power). It is beneficial to the religious and ideological underpinnings of Western society to give prominence to the biologically determined roles, thus reinforcing an attitude that finds man and woman’s gender and sexuality immutable. When we root our values and belief systems in “genetic and / or hormonal differences” (Birke 102), women are aligned with animal’s victim status, since they are not believed to have same amount of reason and intellect as men have.

Rennie is shown some videos which reconfirms her belief that women and animals are powerless and speechless in the eyes of men, “a woman with a dog, a woman with a pig, a woman with a donkey” (235). The graphic description of the rat coming out of the woman’s vagina is
particularly horrific as it is described in terms similar to those used for the birthing process to being devoured, thereby linking the woman’s body, and rat (symbol of animals) to the images of exploitation. Rennie is unable to understand what drives men to enjoy watching women treated inhumanly:

The woman was black . . . nothing was moving. Then something small and grey and wet appeared, poking out from between the legs. It was the head of a rat. Rennie felt that a large gap had appeared in what she’d been used to thinking of as reality. What if this is normal, she thought, and we just haven’t been told yet? (235)

After Rennie and Jocasta finished watching pornographic equipment and violent pornographic videos at a police station, she realises that Jake, her boyfriend has also been using her, and she wants Jake to shun his aggressive sexual behaviour:

She had trouble dismissing it as a game. She now felt that in some way that had never been spelled out between them he thought of her as the enemy. Please don’t do that anymore, she said . . . Lately I feel I’m being used. . . . (236)

Through Rennie, the novel reveals women’s uncomfortable feelings and attitudes towards pornography. This experience makes Rennie reassess her status as an independent woman. She realises that Jake has been packaging her according to his own desire as “he was a designer of labels, not just
labels but the total package . . . He was a packager” (110). He decides on everything and she has just become an object:

It took her more time than it should have to realize that she was one of the things Jake was packaging. He began with the apartment, which he painted several shades of off-white and filled with forties furniture, chrome for the kitchen and a deep-pink bulgy chair and sofa for the living room, ‘like thighs’, he said, with a real trilight he’d picked up at the Sally Ann . . . Then he started on her. You have great cheek bones, he said. You should exploit them. (111)

Like David in Surfacing for Jake also women are meant for sexual pleasure only, for him a woman is “A head with a cunt attached or a cunt with a head attached? Depends which end you start at” (264). In Atwood’s own words:

It would be mistake to assume that everything has changed . . . the goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we’re living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the same subject. (Second Words 370)

Anthropologist Nick Fiddes argues that most of the time women are portrayed as “man’s willing prey” (150), claiming this is clearly visible in pornographic material or pornographic magazines. Susan Griffin observes pornography is saturated with:
Associations between women and animals. We see a film in which women become animals, who are then trained with a whip. Juvenal tells us that a woman filled with sexual desire becomes ‘more savage than a tigress that lost her cubs’. In *Hustler* magazine, a woman is photographed surrounded by the mounted heads of wild animals and animal skins. . . .

(*Pornography* 148)

Pornography embodies the very idea of male sexual abuse towards women’s bodies as MacKinnon observes:

Pornography is a means through which sexuality is socially constructed, a site of construction, a domain of exercise. It constructs women as things for sexual use and constructs its consumers to desperately want women, possession, cruelty and dehumanization. Inequality itself, subjection itself, hierarchy itself, objectification itself, with self-determination ecstatically relinquished, is the apparent content of women’s sexual desire and desirability. (139)

In *Bodily Harm* Atwood focuses on the ecofeminist concern of technological annihilation, and its impact of globalisation on the society. Sociologist Marry Mellor in her essay “Gender and the Environment” analyses the impact of global development on women and their response in addressing environmental problems:
The gender dimension of environmental issues rests on two linked claims. The first is that women and men stand in a different relationship to their environment, that the environment is a gendered issue. The second is that women and men respond differently to environmental issues, in particular that women are more responsive to nature. Nature in this sense is more diffuse than the specific natural environment (the local ecosystem, the resource base of communities, and so on); it reflects a more holistic and active view of nature as a force. (12)

Ecofeminists argue that women interact more deeply with nature than men do. Wherever an environmental crisis takes place, women and children, and weaker section of the society are badly affected. The pressures of poverty make the exploitation of women and nature as cheap and disposable resources, easy to achieve and highly visible. In the novel we can see how the capitalist market systems have ruined the sustainable way of life that was associated with subsistence economic systems, and the mindless use of technology has caused catastrophic ecological crisis: sea shores are polluted because of oil spill, coconut plantations are abandoned because people are more interested in buying and selling drugs and guns.

Ecofeminists believe that wherever an environmental crisis occurs women may be the first to notice foul water, obnoxious smells or bodily
ailments. When Rennie goes to beach with Dr. Minnow she is appalled to see the pathetic condition of women and shares her concern with him. She could feel how the poverty will force these women to disconnect themselves from their environment and in order to earn livelihood, they might ruin their surroundings. The filth and the bad smell are indicators of their disconnection with the nature. Dr. Minnow doesn’t think the way Rennie is thinking. He is not at all concerned about the women-nature connection, he is more into politics. He shifts blame on Canadian charity, which according to him has given rise to the power of Ellis, and unemployment. People on the island are afraid of Ellis as he receives “money from the sweet Canadians . . . using threats now, he says he will take away the jobs and maybe burn down the houses of those who do not vote for him” (146).

Men worship power in all forms and power is the basis of all forms of oppression. Men on the island symbolise the universal acceptance of power as a ‘masculine quality’. They are scared of Ellis because he has the power of money “He is using the foreign aid money from the hurricane to bribe the people” and “He spends their money on new cars and so forth for himself and friends, they applaud that.” People on the island “. . . see this as power and they admire a big man here” (146).

Dr. Minnow asks Rennie to write an article on the political atmosphere on the island, and she finds it strange that how Canadian aid has ultimately become a tool in the hands of government on the island to
dominate and control the ‘Other’. She finds that the status of women and nature on the island is ultimately connected with the issue of colonialism. Rennie is upset with Canadian government’s attitude of turning a blind eye to the misuse of their charity. In *Second Words*, Atwood writes:

I have always seen Canadian nationalism . . . as part of a larger, non-exclusive picture. We sometimes forget, in our obsession with colonialism and imperialism, that Canada itself has been guilty of these stances toward others, both inside the country and outside it, and our concern about sexism, man’s mistreatment of women, can blind us to the fact that men can be just as disgusting, and statistically more so, towards other men, and that women as members of certain national groups, although relatively powerless members, are not exempt from the temptation to profit at the expense of others. (282)

Like in *Surfacing*, the Canadian attitude, personified by Rennie and the Canadian consul, is to distance themselves from the active harm done by the United States and the Soviet Union, while passively participating in it through inaction or ignorance. Canadian money keeps the corrupt government of St. Antonie in power:

“‘There is no longer any place that is not of general interest,’” says Dr. Minnow. “The sweet Canadians have not learned this yet. The Cubans are building a large airport in Grenada. The
CIA is here, they wish to nip history in the bud, and the Russian agents. It is of general interest to them”. (147)

The developed countries wants to control the island for their capitalistic gains Dr. Minnow tells Rennie “We are a gap in the chain. Whoever controls us control the transport of oil to the United States. The boats go from Guyana to Cuba with rice, from Cuba to Grenada with guns. Nobody is playing” (148).

In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies place great emphasis on the role of expanding international capitalism neocolonialism or into the South and its interaction with subsistence modes of living “contemporary development activity in the Third World super-imposes the scientific and economic paradigms created by western, gender-based ideology on communities in other cultures” (xvii).

Like the symbolic rebirth of unnamed narrator in *Surfacing*, Rennie also reborns symbolically after her mastectomy. She realises that Jake exploited her in all possible ways. Rennie is trapped “in things that are beyond control” (47), when she is diagnosed with breast cancer by Dr. Daniel Luoma, a male gynecologist. Jake shows his true personality and starts displaying his discomfort in the company of Rennie following her mastectomy. For Jake, the scar on her breast is “the kiss of death on her” (20). Jake leaves her and she feels guilty of driving him away from her. Her illness makes her feel devoid of sexual “It is something lost . . . severed
from her” (49). Her life changes and she realizes that a woman remains a victim irrespective of her social or economic status. She is more vulnerable to the changes in the environment than men.

Since the 1960s women’s health activists have forged sophisticated transnational coalitions to draw attention to the health needs and threats specific to women. The recent history of women’s health includes a long list of accomplishments: exposing international patterns of forced sterilization and other systematic reproductive rights abuses, drawing attention to the global epidemic of violence against women, tracing the emergence of the epidemic of breast cancer in Western countries, challenging the normative assumption of conventional health care and dumping of unsafe pharmaceuticals and devices in minority communities and developing countries.

Around the globe, public awareness about the impact of environmental deterioration on human health was focused by a series of “discoveries” and spectacular environmental accidents in the 1970s and 1980s: discovery of the ozone hole, chemical disasters in 1976, Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984 and nuclear catastrophes in Chernobyl are among them. But while these events catalysed public attention but the broader trend toward making a sustained connection between health and environmental movements was forged around more mundane and modest health issues that
disproportionately affected women and that women were the first to “notice”.

In the United States and Europe ecofeminists were instrumental in forcing attention to the possible environmental sources of health problems such as escalating rates of breast cancer in women in western countries. As prominent ecofeminist Vandana Shiva argues “Women’s involvement in the environmental movement has started with their lives and the severe threat to the health of their families . . . The ‘environment is not an external distant category . . . The ‘environment’ for women . . . is the place we live our lives” (*Close* 2). She further argues “environmental problems become health problems because there is a continuity between the earth and the human body through the processes that maintain life” (*Close* 3).

Throughout the novel, Rennie has not been shown as realising the link between environment and her disease. Rennie is a victim of “scientific proof”, game which again is linked with logic / capitalistic mindset. This uncertainty is acute in matters of health: it is not easy to establish “scientific proof” that exposure to any given chemical at any given point in time “causes” cancer that may appear several years later and in people who may have moved to a new location far from the exposure site. Scientific uncertainty serves as a refuge for the capitalists. Chemical producing and pollution causing industries have relied for years on the “cover” that scientific uncertainty affords them.
Knowledge of the relationship between chemicals, endocrine disruption, and cancer is not new. Rachel Carson, the author of *Silent Spring*, herself detailed the link in the 1960s “the over 200 basic chemicals that have been created for use in killing insects weeds, rodents and other organisms described in the modern vernacular as ‘pests’; and what a luxury to worry only about 500 new chemicals that annually find their way into actual use in the United States alone” (7). What is new is the evidence pointing to a widening array of substances with these effects, their persistence in the environment, and evidence of the increasing link to breast cancer.

Rennie’s disease becomes a symbol of rampant selfish attitude of patriarchal mindset. Even her affair with her doctor makes her realise that she has been the raw material, violated and doctored by Dr. Daniel. She awakens to the fact that she has been surgically as well as sexually violated by Dr. Daniel and Jake. After her surgery, Dr. Daniel appears as a saviour and she falls in love with him. She thinks that Daniel has power because he has seen her “on the table unconscious as a slit fish” (80), and he has seen inside of her, something she herself has not. Daniel is a married man and Rennie soon realises that “She might be the icing on his cake but she sure as hell wasn’t the cake” (155). Rennie wants Daniel to help her, to save her, but she is disappointed after understanding that Daniel is hungry for her too “He had needed something from her, which she could neither believe nor forgive.
She’d been counting on him not to . . . she was supposed to be the needy one, but it was the other way around” (238).

During her stay on the island, she meets Paul and starts an affair with him. He is a powerful and mysterious businessman who sells guns. Having sex with Paul is shown as a healing experience for Rennie “She’s open now, She’s been drawn back down, she enters her body again” (20). Gradually she realises that Paul is an immature man and she views him as a stranger with no face, a relation of the rope man “someone is touching her neck. Paul: A faceless stranger” (233). She wanted love from Paul, but for him love is the other name of sex. She is disillusioned with him and feels that falling in love is “like running barefoot along a street covered with broken bottles” (102). She feels like running away from all relationships “I should take my body and run. I don’t need another man. I’m not supposed to expect anything” (227).

Ultimately she realises that ‘male’ desire is different, they are hungry for power and violence, not for connection and love. Rennie is accused of massive involvement in the current revolution and its political affairs of the islands. She is arrested for being an outraged tourist. In the prison she meets Lora Lucas. After listening to Lora’s life story, Rennie’s over confidence in woman’s liberation is completely shattered. Lora tells how she lived a life of exploitation and terror under the gross brutality of her step father, which provoked her to stab him and leave the place for good. Lora’s bitter
experiences make Rennie realise the vulnerability of a woman. In *Bodily Harm* women identify themselves as sexual beings to exist merely for men, and internalize not only a male image of their sexuality, but also their identity as women through the process of socialization.

The novel suggests that there is unspeakable amount of violence against women, but sometimes women’s own perceptions and willingness to co-operate in harmful relationships – which can be seen to result from division of the self and traumatising situations – do increase the harm done. The rope man is inside of Rennie, too “he’s only a shadow, anonymous familiar, with silver eyes that twin and reflect her own” (287). He is her projection of her own potential for aggression and destruction. Another moment of understanding takes place when guards brutally beat Lora in front of Rennie. Here Lora is compared to an animal and an edible as well “a worm that’s been cut in half” (293), and afterwards Lora’s “mouth looks like a piece of fruit that’s been run over by a car, pulp” (298).

Lora is brutally raped in prison by the guards. She is punished for being a woman as the patriarchal society controls women’s sexuality mainly through sexual abuse and violence. MacKinnon indicates that rape, incest, sexual harassment, pornography, and prostitution are the primary abuses of the female sex (533). Lora’s character brings out that “rape is a man’s act . . . and being raped is a woman’s experience”, the fact of the rape also
indicates women’s inferior status and sexual inequality under patriarchy (Shafer 334).

After the beating, Rennie feels helpless and goes back in time to her days in Griswold, when one day her grandmother, felt as if she had lost her hands:

I can’t find my hands, she says. She holds out her arms to Rennie helplessly, her hands too hanging loose at the ends of them. Rennie cannot bear to be touched by those gripping hands, which seem to her like the hands of a blind person, a half-wit, a leper. She puts her own hands behind her and backs away . . . She starts to cry, screwing up her eyes like a child. (336)

Her abusive grandmother has become helpless like a child and Rennie refuses to help her. Rennie’s mother helps her mother by holding her hands and tells her “Here they are” (298). Rennie comes back to present times in the prison cell and touches badly beaten and dying Lora:

She’s holding Lora’s left hand . . . nothing is moving, and yet she knows she is pulling on the hand, as hard as she can . . . Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through . . . this is the hardest thing she’s ever done. (299)
Rennie doesn’t want to get involved, not to touch but she cannot. She is involved. The dead body of Laura shakes her feminist sensibilities. She is traumatised to see Lora’s defaced face:

She moves the sticky hair away from the face, which isn’t a face any more, it’s a bruise, blood is still oozing from the cuts . . . she could lick this face, clean it off with her tongue, that would be the best, that’s what animals did . . . She holds her hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again something will get born. (337-38)

By licking Lora’s face, Rennie identifies herself with the pain of Lora. Imagery of hands symbolises Rennie’s personal (spiritual) growth. The feminist consciousness of Rennie makes her one with the dead Lora. She tried to bring her back to life by holding her hand. Hand imagery plays an important role in the novel. When Rennie was locked into the cellar by her grandmother, she tried to hold grandmother’s hand to keep the connection with the world, but she pushes her hand away. Jake likes to keep her hands violently on their place when they have sex. When she is with Daniel, she yearns for “the touch of the hand that could transform you, change everything magic” (195). After her operation, when Daniel touches her hand, she feels that his hands saved her life and are pulling her back to life. Paul’s hands make her restore her own body which she started disliking after the
operation. Paul becomes an agency for her ‘symbolic reincarnation’. Her lovemaking with Paul bridges the gap between mind and the body that she recognised in the dream in which she sees her body “under glass” (248). Paul doesn’t reject her as an incomplete woman “He reaches out his hands and Rennie can’t remember ever having been touched before . . . and there’s a moment of pain, incarnation . . . he’s touching her, she can still be touched” (204).

Lora’s death makes her realize that her physical illness is nothing in front of ‘bodily harm’ done to Lora. She gains a new consciousness.

At the end of the novel, Rennie imagines another hand in her hand, symbolising Lora’s hand, solidarity, companionship and friendship “She can feel the shape of a hand in hers, both of hers, there but not there, like the afterglow of a match that’s gone out. It will always be there now” (339).

The concluding lines of the novel attracts many interpretations “She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued. She is not exempt. Instead she is lucky, suddenly, finally, she is overflowing with luck, it’s this luck holding her up” (341). The paradox is quite visible in the contradictory statements at the end of the novel. Like *Surfacing*, it seems that Rennie is rescued and becomes a human right activist journalist in Toronto.

In the novel it is not clear if Rennie ever leaves the prison on the island. The narrative describes her release from the prison and her flight back to Canada, but *Bodily Harm* throws light on the turbulent world affairs
engulfed in economic imbalance, abuse of human rights, unauthorized imprisonment without trials and universal victimisation of women and environment. Atwood has created Rennie to warn women not be as complacent as Rennie and fall victim to the capitalist mentality. *Bodily Harm* reveals that “nobody is exempt from anything” (290).

From the naive protagonist of *Bodily Harm* who goes under the symbolic knife “that cuts lovers out of your flesh like tumors leaving you breastless and without a name, flattened, bloodless, even your voice cauterized by too much pain” (Atwood, *True Stories* 51), we move to Offred, the protagonist of *The Handmaid’s Tale* who is driven into silence by the patriarchy. Both the protagonists are in need of love and recognition to make their lives better. In fact, “relentlessly exposing the misogyny underline present day culture, *The Handmaid’s Tale* constructs a feminist reading position as it continues *Bodily Harm*’s critique of the sexual degradation and violence to which women are subjected” (Bouson 19).
CHAPTER - VI

The Handmaid’s Tale

What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies. (194)

The Handmaid’s tale authenticates Margaret Atwood as a visionary. Her political consciousness and her deep concern for the environment are quite apparent in The Handmaid’s Tale. The novel fully explores the women-nature connection, their oppression, and their place in the phallocentric society. The Handmaid’s Tale is a “note of warning that every aspect of environmental degradation, destruction and abuse of nature will translate itself into a serious menace to the life of future generation” (Suka 210).

The Handmaid’s Tale presents a glimpse of what can happen if men remain insensitive towards environment and women, and keep treating them as ‘Other’. It also exposes how women are exploited and treated as scapegoats for all the environmental problems. The ecofeminist position at the core of the novel draws most explicitly from the woman-nature and man-culture relationships. Vandana Shiva in Biopiracy warns that we are still colonized, irrespective of living in a free world; the only difference is that instead of nations the weaker sex and nature is colonised. She is shocked to see the fast pace of degradation in relation to women and nature in the late 20th century. She fears, since nature has been all but conquered, it is now
nature’s embodied faces, i.e. women, people of colour and animals that are to be further exploited “The land, the forests, the rivers, the oceans, and the atmosphere have all been colonized, eroded, and polluted. Capital now has to look for new colonies to invade and exploit for its further accumulation-the interior spaces of the bodies of women, plants, and animals” (45).

Irene Diamond further reinforces the women-nature connection, but inverts the focus by linking environmental degradation to infertility and reproductive problems. She argues that a polluted earth is reflected in sick women and children and that a continued fixation on human reproduction (in the form of a preoccupation with fertility and infertility) without recognition of the related environmental problems will prove counterproductive. She warns “The conception and birth of a healthy child on a thoroughly poisoned earth is likely to be so problematic that the choice of non-intervention will be totally lost” (Fertile Ground 97). Ultimately, she draws a direct analogy between the nature and women because of women’s prominent role in human reproduction as birth givers “The Handmaid’s Tale is a scathing satire on woman’s specific biological functions and is a grotesque speculation about a society that reduces womanhood to sheer procreation” (Singh, Only 194).

The themes of fertility, infertility and birth defects which work as an indicator of the condition of the natural world are at the core of the novel. “In the age of environmental crisis, Atwood takes her writing as a mission to
do some good, to ameliorate the crisis” (Suka 208), Atwood hopes to cover the gap between the sexes and men’s approach toward environment through her writings. She writes in Second Words “Writing, no matter what its subject, is an act of faith; the primary faith being that someone out there will read the results. I believe it’s also an act of hope, the hope that things can be better than they are” (349).

Atwood’s dystopic novel, The Handmaid’s Tale, is predicated upon a future society of reproductive fundamentalism, which results from the pollution that has caused mass infertility and the one-in four odds of giving birth to a deformed child.

[T]his was the age of the R-strain syphilis and also the infamous AIDS epidemic, which, once they spread to the population at large, eliminated many young sexually active people from the reproductive pool? Still-births, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-wastes disposal sites, of which there were many thousands, both legal and illegal—in some instances these materials were simply dumped into the sewage system—and to the uncontrolled use of
chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays . . . the effects were noticeable. . . . (316)

The handmaidens are the class of women who exist as “two-legged wombs, sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (146), for the purpose of breeding children for the rich infertile wives of commanders. In the Republic of Gilead, women are categorised by their reproductive capacities, their social status, reflecting the possibility of a live birth.

The novel clearly interlinks the fate of women and the earth. In Atwood’s futuristic nightmare, one witnesses how reverence for natural maternity could ultimately become distorted into the ultimate legitimisation for a reproductive fundamentalism that controls every aspect of woman’s existence. Atwood “imagines a world in which women are explicitly defined by their potential fertility (or its absence); procreation and maternity are simultaneously idealized and dehumanized” (Rubenstein 102).

The narrative is set in a speculative future, exploring, gender inequalities in an absolute patriarchy called the Republic of Gilead, in which women are breeders, housekeepers, mistresses or housewives or otherwise exiled to the colonies. In Atwood’s fictional Gilead, Offred-the protagonist’s tale functions as a critique of women’s oppression, as we can see from one of her earlier statements problematising biology, determinism “I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because its shameful or immodest
but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (72-73).

*The Handmaid’s Tale*, written in the mid 1980s, describes a patriarchal world that reflects the New Right ideology in the American culture of that era. “The New Right is one of Atwood’s prime targets for its warnings against the declining birthrate, is antifeminist, anti-homosexual position, racism, and its strong adherence to The Bible” (Howells, *Margaret* 129). Atwood, worries that the American New Right advocates some traditional family values which confine women, because its aims may serve to frustrate the feminist movement of the 70s and 80s and negate women’s promoted status in society. With the rise of feminist consciousness, women begin to work outside their home as members of the labour force. Women gradually started becoming economically independent and the standard family form in the New Right’s perspective collapsed. The New Right intended to restore the patriarchal authority and dominance of husband, or father figures, in the traditional American family.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* as a speculative novel attempts to show the kind of fractured oppressive and sterile society that might evolve if environmental crisis is not handled carefully. The foolishness and greed of humans hurt the environment and, in turn, the people. Radiation from atomic power plants has rendered almost everyone in the U.S (Now called the Republic of Gilead) sterile, cutting off population growth and creating the need for
surrogate mothers-the handmaids. The unwomen-mostly lesbians and poor women who cannot or will not be surrogate mothers-are sent to clean up the toxic mess. The toxic mess is the creation of men who always pay much attention to the strength and power that science and technology bring to them, and burn their energy on increasing their ability in competition and rivalry. Vandana Shiva’s following statement affirms Atwood’s fear regarding bad management of technology:

> In the late twentieth century it is becoming clear that our scientific systems are totally inadequate to counteract or eliminate the hazards. Each disaster seems like an experiment . . . to teach us more about the effects of deadly substances that are brought into daily production use. (“The Impoverishment” 82)

Technology got so out of control in Gilead that, instead of freeing women from domestic tasks, technology took away women’s freedom. Computerized banking took away women’s money in a few short mouse clicks, making women financially dependent on men. Easy computer access to public documents quickly identified which women were morally fit to remain in their privileged lifestyles and which women were “Undesirable” for example: lesbians, feminist, and even those married for whom it was a second marriage. These were the women who became the servants, the handmaids, or the walking dead at the toxic dump sites. Due to the
overdependence on technology and misuse of nuclear power, the technological tactics were needed in order to establish and maintain the system of handmaids. Donna Haraway talks about how it is the technology and its effects which we cannot see, which like radiation seems so “clean” that we have to worry about because we forget its there until it is too late and its disastrous effects cannot be changed:

Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum . . . The diseases evoked by these clean machines are “no more” than the minuscule coding changes of an antigen in the immune system, “no more” than the experiences of stress. (*Simians* 153-154)

It is within these “clean” technologies that we again see the multiple oppressions of women of colour, poor women, women of developing nations and other oppressed groups since it is they who are the most likely to be working in hazardous conditions with little safety gear, it is they who will most likely have to line in an area saturated with radiation or pesticide poisoning, it is they who have higher levels of pollutants in their own breast milk to feed their babies who already have higher risks of being born with serious medical problems and it is they who cannot afford, the medical benefits that this ‘clean’ technology has created, or even the computer whose chips they assembled.
Technology is not, in itself, innately good or bad, useful or harmful, but can be used for bad things. The novel is a clear manifestation of irresponsible use of technology by the patriarchal society. This novel demonstrates that employing technology within current patriarchal systems of power, privilege and oppression to the point that we overstep our ability to control its potentially harmful effects serves to reinforce binary systems of who benefits and who suffers from technological “progress”. In the patriarchal society ‘Progress’ can be defined as simply a power to control ‘Other’. This definition also has a spiral effect: when ‘developing nations’ want to progress, they carry over this mentality and try to find someone they can take from as well, in the process they forget that:

No one can save herself or himself individually; it is an illusion to think that ‘I alone’ can save my skin . . . what modern machine man does will eventually be felt by all; everything is connected. ‘Unlimited Progress’ is a dangerous myth because it suggests that we can rape and destroy living nature, of which we are an integral part, without ourselves suffering the effects. (Mies, “Who made” 93)

Unfortunately, this “catching up” mentality necessitates that other nations and people be subject to even more exploitation pushing them further away from equality with those industrialised nations. It is harder for these ‘other’ nations to be heard and considered and the easier it is for those with power
and wealth to continue stripping the land, taking the fuel, and dumping messes.

The pathetic condition of women and environment in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a result of male psyche of domination; they chose to use their knowledge to dominate the environment rather than to preserve it. As Debra Benita Shaw writes:

> Destruction of the environment through depletion of resources and the indiscriminate use of machine, technologies is . . . identified with masculine power, and their most radical proposition is, as Dennies Livingston puts it, “that the best thing men can do at present is to get out of the way, as women on their own have the potential of creating a culture more ecological, sensitive and humanistic than men have been able to offer”. (128)

The social commentary of *The Handmaid’s Tale* isn’t limited to issues of national security or family values; it also teaches us the need for ecofeminism by showing what the U.S.A could very easily look like if current environment policies and decisions continue to be unchallenged. Religion also plays a damaging role in the lives of women of Gilead. Atwood reveals in the novel the dangers lurking in the process of institutionalisation of the sacred text in the fiction. The Bible is regarded as “a trapped text turned into a lethal instrument because the regime makes it
generate oppressive laws” in Gilead (Filipczak 171). Further, men’s act of transcribing the sentences of The Bible results in the oppression and victimisation of women as mothers. In the opening pages of the novel, the epigraph Genesis, 30:1-3 emphasises Rachel’s plea for children to her husband Jacob:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. 
And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Italics original, The Handmaid’s Tale)

One of the daily sayings by which two handmaids use to greet each other is that “Blessed be the fruit” (29); reflecting the ecofeminist connection between women and nature. The fruit, which plays the coded symbol for fertility, implies the handmaid’s reproductive capacities. The greeting also reinforces the idea that maternity is actually sanctioned by God. In the novel, the commander reads The Bible to the handmaid Offred “God to Adam, God to Noah. Be fruitful: and multiply, and replenish, the earth” (Italics original 99). The three words fruitful, multiply and replenish indicate God’s blessings towards women’s biological destiny. As Lucy M. Freibert
indicates, “the religious trappings that pervade the political structure foster the idea that the primary purpose of the system is to protect woman, while the actual purpose is to control them and reinforce the notion that their biology is their destiny” (“Control” 284). God’s creeds operate forcefully and unconsciously in the handmaid’s minds and result in their willingness and spontaneity to perform their seemingly sacred role as surrogate mothers. The handmaids obey God’s creeds faithfully. Offred, the protagonist urgently wishes for her pregnancy:

Oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man. Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled. . . . (204)

Religion shields the patriarchal society to foster male domination over women and to control their biological function in Gilead. What God says strengthens the maternal image of women like wives and the handmaids “Gilead assures the continuation of male power by appropriating cultural values from biblical patriarchs to determine women’s maternal functions” (Freibert, “Control” 281). Karen Stein writes that “In the guise of a re-population programme, Gilead reads the biblical text literally and makes it the basis for the state sanctioned rape, the impregnation ceremony the handmaids must undergo each month” (195).

The society in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is obviously founded upon principles that negate the rights of women. According to many religious
conservatives, God has ordained women to exist as they always have been historically. A women’s special purpose in life is to take up the role of wife and mother. She is not meant to be more ‘successful and worldly’ than a man. Rather she should stand beside him and support him in his endeavours.

In the novel, Atwood presents a population of women that truly have every personal right stripped off them. The women of Gilead have their names taken away when the new regime takes over. The only jobs that they can have are those that are appointed by the government. They cannot receive or use an education. All women are expected to be passive and obey the men around them. They have no voice in government and cannot own property. Their marriages are determined for them. Aunt Lydia and the Gileadean government think that it is for their own protection and well-being that things are this way. Aunt Lydia says “There is more than one kind of freedom . . . Freedom to, and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (34). The handmaids are renamed to be the “personal possessions” of their commanders.

The handmaid’s children are taken away from them and given to other women (higher in status) to raise. Women are denied of any sexual choice in a patriarchal society. When Janine recounts the details of her gang rape, Aunt Helena and the other handmaids at the red centre tell her that it was her fault, chanting that God caused it to teach her a lesson about being a
tease “Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison. Who led them on? /…she did / she did / she did / Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? / Teach her a lesson / Teach her a lesson / Teach her a lesson (Italics original 82).

Throughout both of his terms as President, Ronald Reagan also pushed strong prayer rhetoric. He stressed the importance of God to the Founding of America, the “inherent virtue” of prayer, and he challenged the congress “to halt the double standard of prayer on Capital Hill, but not in schools” (Moen 203). He specifically saw the legalisation of prayer in schools as a way to incorporate religion into education and policy. He stated that there was a need for remedial legislation. As United States citizens listened to Reagan’s speeches and watched his attempt to integrate his Christian values into their legal system, some feared that the line between church and state was beginning to blur. Gilead itself fears. Atwood also took the rhetoric and practices of 17th century Puritans and made them a part of the mindset of Gilead. References to women as Handmaids or Jezabels is an example of this, as are the ‘Birthing Stool’ and the ‘Birthing Party’ that a handmaid must undergo with commander’s wife and her friends.

Gilead is governed by Old Testament laws of subservience of women to men and severe punishments for crimes, like the wall hangings and the salvaging. There is one religion and one alone. The people live by the strict law of sex for procreation only. Because Gilead has one way of living and
one God to worship, there is a strict punishment for anyone who may be different. Crippled people and barren women are sent away. Free thinkers are snatched by the Eyes (spy wing) and not seen again.

Atwood presents Gilead as an extremely misogynistic in its theocracy and practice. The name of Gilead originally comes from a religious story that concerns women’s childbearing capacities (Bal 36). Old Testament’s Book of Judges delineates that Jephthah of Gilead promises God to offer the first thing that comes from his house as he returns home, if God permits him to defeat Ammon. After the victory from the war fields, he returns home and his only daughter is the first sight to greet him. The father, Jephthah, tells his daughter that she has to die for the sacred contract he has made with God. But before her death, the daughter asks for two months in the mountains to mourn her own virginity (“Jephthah” Wikipedia). For the daughter, to die without bearing any child is a tragedy for a woman to lament about. Besides, in Jephthah’s story, it seems that the daughter cannot disobey her father’s intention and sacrifices her own life to fulfill her father’s promise, which suggests the role of the female as an object only for male use.

In Gilead, the state manipulates women’s biological and reproductive capacities. Atwood creates a late twentieth century future society in which women’s function to procreate is of paramount significance, for disease and pollution have led to a catastrophic decline in the birth rate. In addition, Atwood tries to reflect the current attitude held by women that they will not
have the chance to break through the patriarchal yoke if it is established in a religious light.

The patriarchal Gilead appropriates biblical texts to institute and to enforce political control over its people, especially over women. In *Second Sex*, the key theoretical work of twentieth century feminism, Beauvoir discloses the crucial truth about women’s oppression in history. She indicates that the problem lies in the belief that man is the ‘self’ and women is the ‘other’ (16). Women’s oppression mainly results from their subordination to men. For Beauvoir, women’s subordinate position originates from her confinement to the virtue of otherness. Woman is other because she is not man. Being a woman, she will never be like man, the self, who can define the meaning of his own existence. Beauvoir, claims that “Woman has always been man’s dependent if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality” (20).

Beauvoir questions the notion of biology as destiny by inquiring into the formation of the female sex. Woman is categorized as the second sex, or the other, chiefly for the biological differences between the sexes. Beauvoir points out that biology is one of the most crucial factors for man to determine woman’s subordination:

[S]o there is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own
nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles and they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison weighed downed by everything peculiar to it. (15)

In Beauvoir’s view, the female body justifies the traditional feminine role, ‘the Mother’ which woman should undertake in society and motherhood brings her close to nature. However, the reproductive function is manipulated as a means for men to control women and cast them in the role of the other, and woman are trained to be what a woman is in a male-centered culture. Another feminist Rich explains that the female body is exactly “the terrain on which patriarchy is erected” (55). Because of the institution of motherhood, women’s bodies are probably manipulated for male use. In The Handmaid’s Tale, Rich argues that “the experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests: behavior which threatens the institutions, such as illegitimacy, abortion, and lesbianism, is considered deviant or criminal” (42). In Gilead, women are categorised into three functions: domestics, sex prostitutes and reproductive prostitutes. There are the Marthas, or domestics,
the wives, or social secretaries and functionaries; the Jezebels, or sex prostitutes; ecowives, and the handmaids or reproductive prostitutes.

In the novel, the story is told by a handmaid Offred, who is assigned to be the highest commander’s household for the purpose of allowing his infertile wife to have a child. Offred was captured by the governing Gileadean regime which deprives her of all rights and freedom of speech. Before the uprising of the regime, Offred was a typical young American. She was a college graduate, married with a five year old daughter and worked as a computer technician in a large library close to Harvard University. Now in the Republic of Gilead, she is in strict confinement and has only her inner strength to help her retain her sanity and to survive the rigid demand of the regime to produce a child, a futile attempt because of the commander’s sterility. Throughout her dilemma, she questions the evolution of the fundamentalist’s take over, but she also probes into her own past to examine if her attitude and indifference to violation of human rights and insensitivity towards her environment somehow contributed to women’s vulnerable position in a patriarchal society, governed by the fundamentalists.

In the republic of Gilead fertility rates have declined dramatically due to a combination of contraception, environmental pollutants and sexually transmitted infections:

[T]he air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to
clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. Maybe a vulture would die of eating you. Maybe you light up in the dark, like an old fashioned watch. Death-watch. That’s a kind of beetle, it buries carrion. (122)

Republic of Gilead is an outcome of an extreme capitalist society where capitalist system uses resources for immediate profit or consumption, rather than preserving them. Under capitalism, people master nature in highly destructive ways and their relation to nature is distorted by private property and profit. Capitalism promotes a view of the earth and its resources as passive and inert, a thing to be exploited. People have come to see themselves as superior to systems (physical, biological, psychological, social, and cultural) of which they are actually an integral part, alienating themselves from nature and giving themselves justification to destroy nature. Pollution and diseased environments of Gilead is the manifestation of nature’s wrath. Many of the elite men in the Republic are sterile from coming into contact with a virus that was developed by gene-splitting experiments with mumps suggest that while measures have been taken to correct these problems much of the damage has already been done. Offred’s condition clearly reflects the deteriorating condition of the society:
I can’t think of myself, my body, sometimes, without seeing the skeleton: how I must appear to an electron. A cradle of life, made of bones; and within, hazards, warped proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass. Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody’s fault, during the earth quakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mould could touch. (122)

The right-wing fundamentalist controls the regime and claim in the name of God that they will conquer mass sterility by prohibiting the existence of liberated women, homo-sexual, lesbians, pornography and non religious citizens. These fundamentalists are radical in their political and social views, and they condemn individual freedom, suppress language, and enslave women categorically; wives of the elite are subjected to house and garden chores; infertile women are banished to the colonies where they must remove the waste from the toxic dump sites and fertile women are forced to be handmaids according to the tradition of Rachel and Jacob of the Old Testament.

The handmaid Offred, is the central victim of this drama as she describes her existence in the regime, which is actually a male-supremacist state whose prime ideology is the oppression of women for its own self
serving interests. The novel starts in the middle of Offred’s conflict when she passionately and intellectually explains how she became a handmaid in the commander’s household in the Republic of Gilead. Flashbacks to her previous life in contemporary America reveals her personal history of objecting to the feminist movement. These flashbacks compel her to explain why she has never striven to be a feminist as advocated by the radical feminists who denounce male supremacy, attack the standard image of the female and whose members helped start the sexual revolution and women’s liberation movement in the 1970’s.

Kate Millet’s *Sexual politics* in 1970 and Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* in 1963 are perhaps some of the feminist works to which Offred is referring, since their views were vividly in the minds of many people in the 1980s as they demanded their own rights of freedom and independence. Offered probably like the majority of American women did not involve herself to preserve her rights, and now in captivity, she wants to survive and have a life of freedom and respect “I know where I am, and who, and what day it is. These are the tests, and I am sane. Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes” (119). In her confinement in which she must produce a child for the commander’s household, she hopes patiently for some change to happen in her maddening existence, but she herself has not changed and remains unheroic and passive, which Atwood claims is the
socially formed mannerism of many women, who have never distrusted the power and tactics of right wing fundamentalists.

When Offred appears to comply with her new role in Gilead she is always resisting the regime’s ideologies in small ways at first and later, more blatantly. As Lucy Freibert suggests “The boldness that stimulates her creativity and risk taking comes slowly” (“Control”286).

At the Red centre the handmaids are forbidden to speak with each other so they learn to communicate through low whispering, the touching of each other’s palms and lip reading. They also meet secretly in the toilet to whisper through a hole between the toilet stalls and take delight in the graffiti, “Aunt Lydia sucks” on the toilet wall:

There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities, about those in power. There’s something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden, thrilling. It’s like a spell of sorts. It deflates them, reduces them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with. (234)

Language is also used as one of the tools of oppressions to dominate women in the novel. Handmaids resist the oppression by developing their own language (symbols and codes), which is not dependent on the words coined by patriarchal set up. Doing this small act of inventing their own language, makes them empowered in their own way. An ecofeminist principle lies here
which strongly opposes the use of language which is masculine in nature and reflects the colonial mindset.

The power of language is so important that in societies such as in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, even being allowed to read or write is a privilege for the dominant few. Taking away written language is one of the tactics used to keep women (especially handmaids) isolated, uninformed, and unprepared for any type of collective rebellion. But their rebellion doesn’t come in the form of killing their master; rather, it is in leaving messages of encouragement for others to discover and treasure or in whispering their names to each other to keep their real identities alive. Besides displaying the power of language and storytelling, this dystopian novel shows that rebellion and empowerment doesn’t have to be armed warfare; they can be the little things that unite people against their oppressors and inspire them to remember that they count, that they aren’t invisible.

One of the easiest ways to keep a group oppressed is to isolate them in order to keep them from plotting any type of rebellion. We find this tactic of isolation in *The Handmaid’s Tale* used most clearly among the handmaids. Women aren’t allowed to read, write, or even talk to men in this alternate future, and their conversations with other handmaids are usually observed and thus limited to official phrases of greeting or charts meant to remind them of their subordinated places within society. The handmaids must communicate through lip reading at night in the “training” barracks.
where they tell each other their real names through stolen moments of conversation in the bathrooms where they can tell each other who has escaped and how or through secret messages like “don’t let the bastards get you down” (62), scratched into corner of the wardrobe. Though kept isolated from each other, these brief exchanges between the handmaids are enough to reinforce and remind each other that they are individuals, and pass on strategies for survival and escape.

Offred sometimes forgets what life was like before her rights and identity were taken away. Little things like finding a word stitched on to a throw pillow remind her of the times before when she got to use her mind and wasn’t just kept alive for the use of her womb. Not long after Offred moves into the home of her current commander, he begins to secretly “invite” Offred to his study late at night, first to do mundane things like play scrabble and, later, to dress up like a prostitute and accompany the commander to Jezebel’s, a secret gentleman’s club.

Offred actually enjoys the secret meetings in the commander’s den since it is the only place she is allowed to talk, to read, and even to win a game against a man. These small acts of defiance against Gileadean rules give Offred a small sense of power even though she must rely on the generosity of a man to allow her these stolen moments. While these moments comfort Offred, they remind her of who she was/is, an individual, they also frustrate her since they remind her of what she has lost. Most of
all, Offred covets her commander’s pen, “The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost. I can feel its power, the power of words it contains. Pen Is Envy” (196), an obvious pun with ‘penis envy’. Since Offred can never steal the real source of men’s power in the patriarchal society where the women have no cultural power (even over their own bodies) other than their individual instances of rebellion, she wants to steal the phallic symbol of it.

According to Cixous, in the Freudian/Lacanian theoretical discourse, because woman lacks any relation to the phallus or the transcendental signifier, she is always outside the symbolic, that is, outside language, the place of law and excluded from the relationship with culture and the culture order (“Castration” 46). Woman’s passive role within the linguistic system leads woman to be unable to speak, deprived of her power, desire, speaking and pleasure under the symbolic order (“Castration” 45). Hence, Cixous says that “Woman, for man, is death” (“Castration” 48). Further, she claims that women “always inhabit in the place of silence, or at most make it echo with their singing. And neither is to their benefit, for they remain outside knowledge” (“Castration” 49).

Women are bereaved of their names and identities in the Gileadean regime. The name, Sarena Joy, is not the wife’s authentic name either. Her actual name is “Pam”, as Offred read in a news magazine in the pre-Gileadean life (45). The infinite interchangeability of the handmaid’s new
names in different households stresses the deprivation of their self-identities in Gilead. As Karen Stein suggests, “the most chilling scene occurs when Ofglen, the partner whom Offred usually meets during the routine shopping trip, is not the usual one she expects” (269). But this changed woman bears the same name. Offred describes that terrible moment as she encounters the new Ofglen “Ofglen, wherever she is, no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you get lost, in a sea of names” (295). Offred herself longs to hear her real name. Her name was her identity as an individual, now she is nothing but an object:

I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held, and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable: I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me. (108)

The name game proves the general principle of male ownership toward women and women’s subordination in Gilead’s patriarchal society. The truth is apparent “through its position of a rigid system of hierarchal classification, the Gilead regime effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable objects in the phallocentric economy” (Bouson 137). From the outset, the handmaids get involved in the name game. The handmaid’s as surrogate mothers are stripped of their birth names before Gilead. However the name game means that each handmaid’s name has multiple hidden meanings in it. For example, every handmaid’s
name is called the possessive preposition of and the Christian name of the Commander to whom she is assigned: such as Of-fred, Of-warren, Of-charles and so forth. While having completed a posting to give birth to babies, the handmaids periodically abandon those names, assuming new ones in three different households. The name Offred is not the real name of the handmaid. On the earlier stage, there is a scene when the handmaids seem furtively exchange their previous names in the Rachel and Leak centre, once called the Red centre “We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed “Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June” (14). Among these female names, June is assumed probably to be Offred’s true name because it is the only name which is not accounted for throughout the text.

Immediately after the handmaid Ofglen’s suicide, Offred realises that she wants “to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power” (298). The handmaid Offred’s word “their” actually refers to the omnipresence of male power in Gilead. The novel degree by degree reveals, through Offred’s narration, the fact that women are subordinated and oppressed by men in this male dominated world. Traditionally, it is through family the chief social institution in patriarchy, that women are controlled and oppressed; the family also encourages
women’s subordination to men and aggravates the unbalanced power relations between the sexes. For example, the wives, the women of the highest female class in Gilead, are deprived of the jobs and property that they once had in their pre-Gileadean lives, and revert back to the patriarchal prototype of the family, in which they are delegated to inferior positions under men and they are owned and controlled by their husbands, known as the “Commanders”.

In Gilead, the ‘household’ embodies the place where women are confined and controlled by men: that is, by the commanders. Kate Millett declares that “Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole” (33). In Gilead, the household has replaced the family, the patriarchal prototype, further Millett indicates that the family would lead to women’s subordination and oppression in a male-dominant society:

Serving as an agent of the larger society, the family not only encourages its own members to adjust and conform, but acts as a unit in the government of the patriarchal state which rules its citizens through its family heads. Even in patriarchal societies where they are granted legal citizenship, women tend to be ruled through the family alone and have little or no formal relation to the state. (33)
Moreover, in the novel, the oppression of women in maternity indeed results from the experience of the social institutionalized motherhood in the patriarchal society. Education is the major means by which men subordinate women as mothers within the institution of motherhood. In the novel, the Red centre is obviously manipulated by the Gileadean state as an occasion for the school to educate the handmaids and to force them to accept their tasks as mothers. By means of the function of education, women, as the handmaids, are trained under the “Aunt’s” indoctrination to function merely as reproductive machines for men. Under the regime, women’s biological function in maternity is usurped and exploited in Gilead, for the sole purpose of male dominance.

First of all, the regime of Gilead is marked by its, rigid, physical boundaries that confine women’s activities. Offred is permitted to travel only to the centre of Gilead for grocery shopping. And on her way to shopping she is confronted with various kinds of physical barriers. In the first place she has to leave the household through the back door, because the handmaids are allowed to use the front door only on specific occasions: such as their first visit to their new post or their ceremonial participation in a ‘Birth’day. The garden outdoors also strengthen the image of boundary with its vivid “flower borders” (22). Then, Offred and her shopping companion, Ofglen, proceed through series of checkpoints defended by the Guardians of the Faith. Eventually, they may end the shopping trip within the protective
boundaries of the central part of town near the ominous “Wall” (41). The ‘Wall’ is where any trangressive act is punished. There are often bodies, male and female hung on the Wall. In addition, the Wall stands for the extreme reminder of the boundary that defines women’s existence in Gilead. Offred says that she and Ofglen, “Stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn’t matter if we look. We’re supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall” (42). The handmaids have no options, but only adapt themselves to the patriarchal surroundings of Gilead, and Offred craftily compares herself to a rat during the trip “Now and again we wary the route; there’s nothing against it, as long as we stay within the barriers. A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere as long as it stays inside the maze” (174). In Gilead, it is apparent, in truth, that “perhaps the more impermeable and intimidating barriers are those which exist between individuals in the form of strict gender and class segregation” (Myhal 215).

Not only the handmaids, even wives are victimized. In fact, each woman wears a stigma of fixed identity which indicates her status and function in Gilead. Serena Joy plays the very tragic role of a wife. The wife, Serena Joy, neither the gorgeous lead soprano singing in the television programme of the Growing Souls Gospel House before Gilead; nor is she an enthusiastic speech maker who makes speeches about “the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay at home”(55). As Offred ironically comments, “She doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become
speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word’ (56). All that the wife has to do is to be loyal to her husband and the family. Serena Joy, trapped in the role of wife, confined to the sanctity of the home, is “neither Serene nor Joyous” (Hammer 40). As a wife, she seems like a dying, withered flower. Offred expresses her chilling feelings towards Serena Joy as she meets the wife in the household for the first time:

[H]er blue waist, thickened, her left hand on the ivory head of her cane, the large diamonds on the ring finger, which must once have been fine and was still finely kept, the fingernail at the end of the knuckle finger filed to a gentle curving point. It was like an ironic smile, on that finger; like something mocking her. (24)

The wife Serena Joy, as the property of the commander, is owned and controlled by her husband in the household. Millett criticises the sex role ascribed to women in patriarchy “in terms of activities, sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male” (26). Being a blue-clad wife, Serena Joy presides over her home and attends public functions such as the Prayvaganzas, Salvagings, and Birthings. The Marthas, primarily domestics seem to enact the role of housewives, because they assist in the reproduction of patriarchy in their practical support of the handmaids and
the wives in the respective households. In the household, the wife often sews in the sitting room. Usually, she devotes herself to some trivial domestic affairs as “knitting scarves, for the Angles at the front lines” (22). However, the aged and infertile wife Serena Joy cannot bear any child. Instead the wife produces woolen children, that is, those endless Angel scarves she knits. As Offred regards the wife’s act as “Her form of procreation, it must be” (162). Besides, in Gilead, many of the wives own such gardens as Serena Joy’s because “it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for” (22). The silenced Serena Joy continually cultivates her garden day by day; these gardens seem to be the domains owned by the Wives. Often Serena Joy rules over her depleted kingdom patiently with “her knees on a cushion, a light blue veil thrown over her wide gardening hat, a basket at her side with shears in it and pieces of string for tying the flowers into place . . . the Commander’s wife directs, pointing with her stick” (22).

The Commander’s wife represents a total contrast to the values that Offred’s mother stands for in the novel. Before Gilead was taken over by fundamentalists, Offred’s mother was a radical feminist who supported female separatism; the commander’s wife is a preacher and a hymn singer. Serena Joy is portrayed as both a victim and a slightly monstrous person. When the protagonist comes to the house, she desires the Commander’s Wife to be “an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect me” (26). Serena Joy has been a part of the religious
uprising that created Gilead. In the character of Serena Joy, the novel shows that even religious uprisings that have women as planners do not necessarily serve women’s interests or benefit them. Serena Joy has been given public voice when she wanted women to stay at home, but when it happens to her, she is silenced and trapped. When it comes to her own hunger for a child by Offred, she is willing to break laws and regulations for that.

The food motif in the novel can also be seen as an important dimension of ecofeminism, which is revealed by the protagonist’s deep symbolic hunger. She is not physically hungry, but mentally she is starving. In the context of the repressive society, Offred’s dreams of food suggest rebellion and transgression. To Offred time in Gilead is “heavy as fried food” (279). Handmaid’s food is boring, repetitive and rationed, because the state of Gilead is in war. An orange is an unexpected delight, only rarely available in the store’s selection. Her diet denies pleasure and indulgence; like her whole life in Gilead it gives no room for her desire. Thus her meals and dietary habits are a symbol of her position and her possibilities. The exceptions to her diet occur during the Birth Day, when handmaids get sandwiches and spiked juice, and in summer, when Offred and her shopping partner Ofglen eat strawberries abundantly “The pregnant woman’s belly is like a huge fruit. *Humungous*, word of my childhood” (37). Offred’s food is nutritionally balanced and healthy, in Offred’s words “We are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become
hard and wrinkled for all they care, like the shell of a nut” (107). She is not allowed to cook herself and if she doesn’t finish her portions it will be reported and she might be punished. Coffee, alcohol and cigarettes are forbidden for the handmaids because of their status as possible mothers. Offred yearns for cigarettes, which are a symbol of pleasure and desire.

The protagonist longs to make food and to chat in the kitchen with other women. These things are denied; the only thing she can do with food is to buy it from the store on her daily walk. Longing for making food is also yearning to touch “I would help Rita to make the bread sinking my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch” (21).

The bread dough represents the freedom of the time before revolution. The smell of yeast makes the protagonist nostalgic. It makes her think of motherhood and the power to have kitchen of one’s own where one can do what one wants. Kitchen also represents friendship and company. She is forced to eat alone in her room, and she hungers for talk and gossip.

Handmaids are not allowed to have any cosmetics such as lotions or make up, because they are seen as “vanities” (107). Although it is forbidden, Offred steals butter and uses it to moisturize her facial skin. Butter is a sign of her defiance and rebellion: with it, she has a say over her body. As she points out, it is a shared secret between the handmaids “As long as we do
this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will someday get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire” (107). It makes her “smell like an old cheese” (107). She notes that it will go rancid on her skin – this symbolises the ambivalence of this activity and hope. The pronoun “we” implies that the butter stands for the handmaids’ communal resistance towards Gilead, their stubborn belief that there is a future without the tyranny. Although there are numerous symbols of Offred’s resistance, there are also moments that decrease Offred’s desire to rebel. While watching her morning eggs, she thinks:

It’s a barren landscape, yet perfect; it’s the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside. The egg is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own. To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure . . . women used to carry such eggs between their breasts, to incubate them. That would have felt good. The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg. (120)

The protagonist compares the egg to the moon, god and to a saint’s place of meditation, her hermitage. She connects the egg with pleasure of hatching, being pregnant. The egg becomes a symbol for the whole Universe: its creator, its planets and peace to Offred, a wish to be happy and content. She
finds this pleasure dangerous. She is afraid she will get used to the situation, and stops remembering the past and planning for a different future. The egg and the pleasure it gives threatens her defiance and rebellion, and offers slavery and stability.

In the novel, Offred is in an inner struggle with people who were very close to her in the past: her husband Luke, and her friend Moira. The protagonist’s mother represents, at least in past, the opposite values to Gilead’s patriarchal order. She was a radical feminist, who by choice became a single mother at the age of thirty seven. Her opinions are often angry towards men “A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women . . . there’s something missing in them, even the nice ones” (130-31). She considers her daughter and her traditional heterosexuality wrong “You’re just a backlash” (131). The mother is bitter because her feminist battles are not appreciated, and her daughter’s generation takes the benefit, the earlier generation fought for, as granted, as trivial.

The differences between the radical single feminist woman and the compliant heterosexual married woman are repeated in the protagonist and her relationship with her friend Moira. Moira is strong, independent, and lesbian, and the protagonist finds her behavior and actions admirable but also frightening. Moira’s opinions are very close to those of the protagonist’s mother. Moira escapes from the Red Centre and becomes a legend, a symbol for freedom, and hope for the handmaids:
Moira was out there somewhere. She was at large, or dead . . .
The thought of what she would do expanded till it filled the room . . . Moira had power now, she’d been set loose, she’d set herself loose . . . I think we found this frightening. Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste of freedom. Already we were finding these walls secure . . . Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. (143)

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred’s symbolic hunger is transgression against Gilead, against the handmaid’s oppressed position. Offred feels that her tattoo in the ankle, her handmaid code is “a Braille the commander can read, a cattle brand. It means ownership” (266). Thus, the commander is her owner, the one who has tattooed and marked her as his property. There is no space for her true self in Gilead’s official practices. When Offred prepares herself for the ceremony night—where the commander will have intercourse with her while his wife is present, and preceded by a prayer which the entire household (the driver Nick and two Marthas) attends—she thinks of herself as a product “Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (76).
The ambiguous images of desire and being desired, being an object and putting one’s self on display, are visible in the novel. Before the ceremony the protagonist feels “Washed, brushed, fed like a prize Pig” (79). It is an image of a victim, but it is also ironic in its banality and strong vividness. The protagonist also compares herself to bread, after she has buttered her face “Buttered, I lie on my single bed, like a piece of toast” (108). The image is again a mixture of victimisation and self-irony. On the one hand she is an edible, somebody’s easy breakfast, but on the other hand the butter is a mark of her cunningness and strength, and her pleasure. Offred sometimes enjoys her role as an object of desire and excitement, and looks at the Guardian’s eyes at the passport checkpoint:

It’s an event, a small defiance of rule, so small as to be undetectable, but such moments are the rewards I hold out for myself, like the candy I hoarded, as a child . . . such moments are possibilities, tiny peepholes . . . I know they are watching, these two men who aren’t yet permitted to touch woman. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little . . . I enjoy the power, power of a dog bone, passive but there. (31-32)

These moments are precious to Offred, her “tiny peepholes” to another world. The sexual tension and fluctuation are mutinous and deeply pleasurable: she compares them to a candy she stored as a child. She sees
herself as passive on the surface, active beneath, a catch for these men, trying to cause a reaction of desire in them. She hungers for them to want her. Their desire is her power, one of the few powers left to her, and thus one of her limited chances of changing her present life. As Parker observes here Offred uses power inside the oppressive power that controls her (365). In terms of the feminist object-relation theory, the men in Gilead hold the power to recognise women, and the only way women can achieve this power of giving recognition to another is to be “desirable” and unattainable (Benjamin 171). The handmaids desperately desire to become pregnant. When Janine or Ofwarren is pregnant, she enjoys showing herself, knowing how others hunger for her state:

She’s a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She’s a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done. We too can be saved. . . . She’s come to display herself. She is glowing, rosy, she’s enjoying every minutes of this . . . her partner, who beside her looks spindly, shrunken; as we all do. The pregnant woman’s belly is like a huge fruit.

(36-37)

The protagonist sees the threat around Janine “Jealousy could get her, its happened before” (36). Frustrated and envious women may hurt the pregnant one, wanting to deny the other what they hunger for themselves.
Often the handmaids have problems in giving up their children, and may fight for them fiercely.

Janine’s pregnancy does not end happily. There is a triumphant celebration after the birth, but later people find out that the baby did not survive. When Offred sees Janine after the incident, her “face is white and peaked, as if the juice is being sucked out of her” (226). Janine has been the most willing student of the Red Centre and a compliant handmaid, and her two pregnancies have resulted in two “Shredders” or “Unbabies” (226, 122). Janine’s example implies that Gilead is bound to collapse: the system does not work even with such an overtly compliant person as Janine, who is ever eager to please and to do everything, right.

Offred sees all men mysterious “Who knows what they do, on their own or with other men? . . . Who can tell what they really are? Under their dailyness” (238). Her commander is portrayed as a hunter figure, a Bluebeard who has a “studied pose . . . some old come-on from a glossy men’s mag” (147) and a “forbidden room” (148), full of books. He is repeatedly connected with popular images, such as advertisements, paintings and fairytales. These images suggest that he is an example, a representative of the power.

Offred notes on her Commander “Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence?” (98). She knows he is not good after all; a man of his power
in Gilead cannot be, but his surface is pleasing and ordinary. She has examined him closely and “he’s given no evidence, of softness” (99).

When the Commander is first introduced in the book, the protagonist sees him possibly coming from her room. He has been in an area that is restricted from him, and her head is full of questions and guessing “Something has been shown to me but what is it? . . . the flag of an unknown country… it could mean attack, it could mean parley, it could mean the edge of something, a territory (59). The Commander is a man of power, an unknown person who may be an enemy or an ally.

Handmaids are denied reading and words even the shop signs and the tokens for food are represented as pictures. This deprivation of words is painful for the protagonist and she hungers for letters and writing. The Commander’s right to read is compared to eating a steak “He is like a man, toying with a steak, behind a restaurant window, pretending not to see the eyes watching him from hungry darkness” (99). The Commander has the power and the wealth to be the one with the steak and to eat it in the front of the others, who are hungry, dying for the steak.

In their secret and forbidden meeting the Commander wants to play scrabble with her. Writing and letters are a power in Gilead and in his room he gives her the possibility to play with words, which she finds “kinky in the extreme” (163). Words and writing are a source of immense pleasure to Offred. The scrabble reminds Offred of liberty and the freedom of choice.
To Offred, the counters of the game are peppermint candies, and letter C tastes like lime. When the commander lets her read magazines and the books in his room, she feels like gloating food “I read quickly, voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be gluttony of the famished” (194).

Letters and words are delicious edibles and she eats them hungrily after having starved. This strengthens her and makes her feel more, powerful. She wants to discuss with the commander, she starts wanting to know about things again. The Commander represents power and recognition to Offred. He is a possibility to become a subject, but his promise is full of danger.

In the protagonist’s memories, the novel’s embedded narratives, her husband Luke, too is ambiguous. Although she misses Luke, she also remembers negative things about him. When she loses her job because of the revolution, her own money and everything is transferred to her husband, she feels that Luke doesn’t think she ought to:

You don’t know what it’s like, I said. I feel as if somebody cut off my feet . . . I couldn’t put my arms around him . . . I guess you get all my money, I . . . I though, already he’s staring to patronize me. Then I thought, already you’re starting to get paranoid . . . Luke wanted me to make love. Why didn’t
I want to? . . . It occurred to me that he shouldn’t be saying we, since nothing that I knew of had been taken away from him.

We still have each other, I said. It was true. Then why did I sound, even to myself, so indifferent . . . something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken . . . He doesn’t mind at all. May be he even likes it. We are not each other’s, any more.

Instead, I’ am his.

Unworthy, unjust, untrue. But this is what happened.

So Luke . . . Was I right? Because we never talked about it . . .

I was afraid to. I couldn’t afford to lose you. (188, 191–192)

The narrator’s expression “Luke wanted me to make love” stresses singularity and distance. Luke wants her to make love, instead of for instance “Luke wanted to make love”, or Luke wanted us to make love”. The shift in power makes the protagonist feel numb and dependent, and dependence makes her feel that she is not entitled to question her husband.

The house’s driver Nick, who is one of the Guardians, a sort of police, becomes the object of Offred’s symbolic hunger. When she is walking around the house in the middle of the night, which is of course forbidden, she bumps into him “I want to reach up, taste his skin, he makes me hungry . . . It’s so good, to be touched by someone, to be felt so greedily, to feel so greedy” (109-110). Nick can be seen as a representative of power and subjectivity, Offred narrates “I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout”
(282). She feels that he is not a proper, round character, he is just a satisfier of her hunger and conversely definitely not “just”, but everything she needs. He remains a mystery to her, although she desires his recognition “I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known” (282).

Like all Atwood’s first person narrators Offred acknowledges her deficiencies as a narrator. There are things she does not know, for instances the fate of Luke or her daughter, so she imagines and invents them. At times she is keen to alter the truth so it would be less hurtful and embarrassing, but she also painstakingly corrects the falsely coloured passages. Offred repeatedly says, “this is reconstruction” (150). Offred’s feeling of embarrassment and shame for her involvement with Nick make her tell several versions of their first arranged private meeting:

His mouth is on me, his hands, I can’t wait and he’s moving, already, love, its been so long, I’m alive in my skin, again, arms around him, falling and water softly everywhere, never-ending . . . I made that up. It didn’t happen that way either. I’m not sure how it happened; not exactly. All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate . . . I would like to be ignorant. Then I would not know how ignorant I was. (273-275)

Guilt and pleasure are in conflict in the above scene. Offred’s conflicting emotion and the problematic, illegal situation colour her narration. Her first
story tells us about a passionate, wordless encounter, the second narrates more cynical, reserved attitudes especially from Nick’s side, the third tells us how Offred is unable to forget Serena Joy, the planner of the event, and her husband Luke during her time with Nick. The third is the most guilt-ridden. In all she is hungry for being touched and recognised. The first version shows a healing process, during which Offred feels whole and alive after a long time of feeling divided and false. Stressing the scene by telling it thrice suggests that the event is pivotal in Offred’s life and from here her life changes dramatically.

As usual in Atwood’s novels, the ending of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is open and leaves room for interpretation and speculation. There are actually two endings: the ending of Offred’s story and the epilogue.

At the end of Offred’s narrative, things get heated up in Offred’s life and her household. She is certain that she is pregnant by Nick, and does not want to give the baby to commander and Serena Joy. Offred’s friend, subversive handmaid Ofglen dies, probably hangs herself because her treason has been revealed. Serena Joy finds out that Offred and her commander have had secret meetings. Offred waits in her room for what will happen next, contemplating on suicide. Not only the Gilead and its death punishments threaten her life, but her own desire to die to be “safe” (223), too. Thoughts of suicide have coloured narrator’s story since the
beginning of the novel: death is represented as a way to escape the abuse, to be one’s own self again “Nothing safer than dead” (30).

In her room, she hears the secret police ‘Eye’s’ car arriving. Nick comes to her, says this is an effort to save her, that she should go with them, trust them and him. In the last sentences, Offred ponders what to do, should she trust him or not:

The van waits in the drive way, its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. And so I set up, into the darkness within; or else the light. (307)

The van can suggest death: may be Offred will be executed in front of the other handmaids. It can suggest life: may be these people are here to save her. If this is the case, then Nick saves her: love saves her from Ofglen’s fate.

The critics have often discussed *The Handmaid’s Tale’s* feminist politics. Some see that novel undermines feminism because Offred finds a love affair more important than the handmaid’s underground group, which Ofglen’s character represents. On the other hand, according to the seventies feminist slogan, ‘private is political’, Offred’s revolution starts from herself: She becomes more whole and a more defiant person through her love affair
and pregnancy. To her, there is a private, singular, but radical revolution, which forces her to act, or at least to ask for help from others. As Stein writes, Offred does rebel against Gilead through her body and sexuality, and by telling her tale (85).

The epilogue confuses the allied reader, and creates polyphony. The epilogue, “Historical Notes on The Handmaid’s Tale,” is a speech by Professor James Darcy Pieixoto from Cambridge University, England, in “Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean studies” in year 2195. In his lecture, Pieixoto tells how he found the material, the tapes, and what conclusions he has drawn on them. He and his colleague have concluded that the recordings are a reconstruction from the time Offred had already got out of her post in the commander’s house. Pieixoto tells us that he and his colleague have arranged the narrative in the order they find logical, since there is no knowledge of the chronological sequences of the tapes.

The epilogue reveals that the Gilead is history and safely distanced, only an interesting period to study, which to the readers is a surprise, even a shocking detachment, and a cruelly ironic, confusing reversal. We have read a moving story, identifies with the protagonist, and now academic people are doubting her story, doubting her existence: even laughing at her experiences. For the feminist reader, this sudden change in the novel is deeply gendered: the protagonist who suffers is a woman, and she allies with other women (the handmaids) and with feminists readers. But the lecturer is male and the
academic scene of authoritarian lecturing with witty and sovereign lecturer who is rather sceptic and dismissive of the protagonist’s fate, can be seen marked as masculine in its coldness, distance and irony. As Howells points out, the story move from “her story to history” (*Margaret* 146). Cooke remarks that Professor Pieixoto is not sensitive to or interested in feminist issues or women’s rights, which are present in Offred’s story (129). The epilogue suggests that the societies following Gilead are misogynist, too.

As Linda Kauffman claims, “in Gilead, as in all previous periods of history, women’s histories are repressed; Gilead is merely one of the patriarchal regimes to suppress their voices by prohibiting them from reading, writing or speaking” (227). In Gilead, women are deprived of the tools with which to document their history. In the novel, through storytelling, Offred attempts to reconstruct “her story” and thus challenges Gilead’s location of authority in a male logic centric world. Ironically, Pieixoto’s speech manipulates and effaces Offred’s history.

On the whole, “the novel includes two competing, gendered narratives (narratives authority coded as masculine, silence as feminine which clash in a power struggle within the fictional space: a masculine spoken or written discourse) and a feminine, autobiographical text” (Mahoney 29). Pieixoto devalues Offred’s tale by questioning its importance or relevance as a historical document. For instance, the professor blames the
narrator for not providing efficient historical details about the Gileadean period, because she spends too much time only on her own life story:

Many gaps remain. Some of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the working of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now for even twenty pages or so of print out from Waterford’s [a high-ranking Commander] private computer! (322)

Since the Professor’s version of Gilead’s history and the narrator’s story, are both based on “guesswork”; ironically, he still immediately assumes that his suppositions are true “This is our guesswork. Supposing it to be correct” (322).

As Magali Cornier Michael states, “official history has traditionally been the history of ‘the winners’ and of ‘the male sex’, written by and about ‘males’, and, as such, tends to either marginalise or co-opt women’s versions of history” (167). From the outset, Pieixoto manifests his sexism within his discussion of the oral tale, as we can find in his sexist wordplay between “tale” and “tail” in the title given to the document by Professor Wade (312). Besides, Pieixoto makes an even more sexist pun towards a woman’s escape route; he refers to the “Underground Female road” as the “Underground Frail road” (313). The Professor’s discussion exhibits not only his masculine
bias, but also his total lack of interest in the content of Offred’s oral tale, or women’s histories. All he tries to do is to spend a great deal of energy in talking about how to determine the identity of the commander in whose household the narrator resides. With little information left about Gilead, he proposes two possible famous, high-ranking officials as having possibly been Offred’s commander “Frederick R. Waterford and B. Federick Judd” (388). Pieixoto even compliments the male-centered Gilead state and its male architects. As he asserts, Gilead’s “genius was synthesis” and that Waterford was in “his prime, a man of considerable ingenuity” (319, 321). The Professor effectively downplays the state’s harsh sexual politics and its victimisation of women as he indicates that Gilead should be studied objectively, and that the task of scholars “is not to censure but to understand” (Michael 166). As Pieixoto states, “we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific” (314).

However, Offred affirms her faith in survival in her narrative only when she can posit an imaginary listener who will understand her story and recognise her existence:

It hurts me to tell it over, over again. Once was enough: wasn’t once enough for me at the time? But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it . . . By telling you
Pieixoto resurrects and reinterprets Offred’s tale in order to retell her story as all readers do. But the archivist has little sympathy for Offred’s predicament, or for her pain. The male historian cannot realise his failure in reading Offred’s oral tale; ironically, he even asks; “Are there any questions?” (324). Thus, it is apparent that “willing the audience’s existence is not enough. She must also ensure that her audience will interpret her story as she intends” (Kolodny 105).

Perhaps Offred’s story is, as she speculates, “about who can do what to whom and get away with it” (144). The handmaid might have considered forgiving the commander, an architect of the state that enslaves and tortures her. In the face of totalitarian regime that seemingly appropriates all power for itself, Offred proposes that power may take many forms “Remember forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest” (144). Besides the power to forgive, Offred’s storytelling enables her to reacquire the power and the chances to reconstruct women’s histories. As soon as she reclaims herself, retrieves her voice, she turns to re-inscribe the voices of other women. Offred tries to bring into her tale the women she will see no more: her
mother, her daughter, her friends, and her conspirators. As Kauffman claims, “the entire narrative is a polyphony of distinctive female voices” (227).

_The Handmaid’s Tale_ may correspond to a piece of feminine writing which is open-ended, full of detours, and concerned with pluralities and ambiguities (Lomax 13). As Offred leaves the Commander’s house and sits in the van, she seems to be ready to face challenges of another unknown world:

Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveller in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be. . . . (Cixous, _The Newly_ 86)
CHAPTER - VII

Conclusion

[Ev]ery girl’s got her price, say the cynics, and Canada has always been a cheap lay . . . You’ll notice that in each case Canada gets screwed . . . What it all goes to show, I suppose, is the danger of metaphors. In any case, it looks as if Canada doesn’t want to play the female lead, not at the moment and maybe not anymore. Someone once said that Canada is ruled by men with crystal balls, referring to Mackenzie King’s habit of consulting his mother’s spirit before deciding what not to do. (Atwood, *Second Words* 389)

Margaret Atwood’s exploration of environment, particularly in terms of gender, has provided rich scholarly grounds for ecofeminism. In the previous chapters we can see how the ecofeminist analysis of Atwood’s writings have evolved to encompass new approaches that explore, not only her female characters but also how ecofeminism is embodied in her novels. Ronald B. Hatch writes “mention the name of Margaret Atwood to students of Canadian literature, and one of the first associations is likely to be with the land” (Hatch 180).

In the previous chapters I have tried to explore the supposedly fixed relations between gender, nature and culture. In recent decades ecofeminism has emerged as an impressive tool to praise, and in turn question, why
oppositions around nature and gender are so fundamental to our understanding of the environment. Feminist rewriting of historical and temporary discourses around the notions of ‘natural’ femininity and masculine mastery over nature has been developing in recent years. As a response to persistent patriarchal notions of the ‘female’, environmental feminist writings have uncovered the gender notions around the dichotomy of nature versus culture.

The ecofeminists believe that the ethic of care is an obvious bridge between environmentalism and feminism. Ecofeminists argue that “an environmentalist perspective is theoretically necessary to feminism” (Sturgeon 19). This argument strengthens the viewpoint of ecofeminists who believe that since feminism upholds the ethic of care and seeks to subvert the logic of domination, all feminists are thereby ecofeminists and contemporary feminism should work to incorporate environmentalism into its philosophy. Ecopolitical author Sherilyn MacGregor asserts that one of the main links between feminism and ecology is “women’s dissatisfaction with the environmental movement, in which male domination was a source of frustration” (25).

What we now call ecofeminism is the resulting collaboration of various aspects of both feminism and environmentalism. Both philosophies developed their own divisions and subgroups which found their way into the ecofeminist discussion. Allison Jaggar, a philosopher explains that there are
four different categories within feminism, all of which have influenced contemporary ecofeminism (Low and Tremayne 4).

Feminist writings on the environment are of great interest to contemporary debates in different subjects, precisely because the underlying notions of different works on the environment are related to what are historically gendered concepts. Ecofeminism challenges such notions as the patriarchal symmetry setup between women and nature, which can be traced back, at least to Bacon’s rape metaphor for the scientific method (Merchant).

The history of Western notions of nature, gender, and civilization provides evidence both of the mutability of the political activism around humanity’s relation to ‘nature’ and of its grounding in particular spaces. For example, throughout history, social and political activist have employed particular notions of nature, culture, and humanity in moral debates concerning social change and political priorities. As various feminist versions have suggested, Western hegemonic ideologies of nature and culture, often rooted in Enlightenment thought (Bloch and Bloch), are predicated upon notions of tension and struggle, whereby culture imposes itself and dominates the force of nature: man separates himself from nature by subordinating and conquering it, including ‘woman’.

The common heritage of oppression by patriarchy experienced by women and nature is taken as a common bond by the ecofeminists (Merchant), and others, in an inversion of historic gendered notions of
nature, choose to celebrate the perceived unique connection between women, as life-giving beings, and the ‘natural’ environment (Griffin). The ecofeminists distinguish between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ approaches to the environment, whereby the feminine views the world as a home, and the masculine as a resource and raw material to be made into something else. This gives rise to ecological political practice in which treatment of the world as a ‘home’ is more sustainable and ecologically sensitive.

I have examined the five selected novels of Atwood in conjunction with the development of ecofeminism, and also how her novels showcase the existence of a dynamic relationship between her fiction and ecofeminism. In all the selected texts under study, the invisible definite boundaries between masculine and feminine are visible. Atwood’s writings expose that men are powerful and have most typically possessed transformative qualities that shape and cloister the female sex / nature in its particularities. Atwood through her fiction brings out a world where both ecology and human existence face grave danger. Anthropocentrism in general and androcentrism in particular denote a lack of awareness about the potential dangers awaiting man and nature.

Ecofeminists fight against anthropocentrism and androcentrism. Anthropocentrism exists in the relationship between humans and nature. In order to show their supremacy over nature, human beings subject nature to the brutal exploitation and domination, and androcentrism makes women
inferior in the eyes of men. In Atwood’s novels her protagonists are in continuous struggle with anthropocentricism and androcentrism.

Androcentric societies associate men with culture and women with nature because ‘nature’ and ‘women’ are outside of their frame of reference. In *The Edible Woman* Atwood reiterates the very foundation of ecofeminism: that gender and nature are inextricably linked, and the same logic of domination befalls them both. Marian, the protagonist empathises with her food and realises that she is also nothing more than a consumable meaty piece of flesh in the eyes of her fiancé Peter. Peter’s behavior in the novel appears to be an expression of androcentric behavior. Marian seeks to resist Peter’s selfish attitude by empathising with animals in such a way that it appears that she cannot tolerate the thought of destruction of other life forms even for her own sustenance. Marian follows the ecofeminist philosophy advocated by Ynestra King:

Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It asserts the special strength and integrity of every living thing. For us the snail darter is to be considered side by side with a community’s need for water, the porpoise side by side with appetite for tuna, and the creatures it may fall on with Skylab. We are a woman identified movement and we believe we have a special work to do in these peril times.

(“The Eco-feminist” 10)
In the novel Atwood has cleverly compared the killing of animals to the degradation of women. *The Edible Woman* displays Marian’s physical and mental agony which results in her psychological fragmentation-self-split and her self-reconstruction “Marian’s body becomes an unconscious site of protest against Peter’s metamorphic consumption of her” (Tolan 21).

Atwood’s second novel *Surfacing* “continues and develops *The Edible Woman*’s preoccupation with the female protagonist and her alienation from social expectations, but introduces issues of ecology, nationalism, spirituality and ancestry to Atwood’s canon of political focus” (Tolan 35). *Surfacing* is a repository of ecofeminist principles, Atwood has begun the novel with a journey into the wilderness and the quest of the unnamed protagonist is grounded in the belief that “the hero can escape society and find definition in solitude, and as such, the traditional quest narrative is entrenched in a liberal concept of the self” (Tolan 35). Carl P. Christ observes the spiritual aspect of the quest, and points out that to achieve the spiritual enlightenment, the unnamed protagonist “must choose the isolation of the visionary quest” (qtd. in Tolan 41).

The unnamed protagonist identifies herself with nature and her inner struggle is reflected through the prevalent destructive opposition between masculine culture and feminine nature. The nature is depicted as fragile and threatened and the unnamed protagonist sees herself as nature and therefore realises that like nature she is also threatened and victimised. In the novel,
through her protagonist Atwood exposes how “the system of interconnected hierarchical oppositions results in a situation in which nature, women and Canada are all innocent victims of an aggressive, patriarchal, Americanised culture” (Tolan 43).

*Surfacing* also illustrates how men devalue women by reducing them to their bodies. Men want to control the female body in a similar way as they strive to dominate nature. Accordingly, the male metaphor for the body is one of “control or mastery” (Gray 92). Both the protagonist and her friend Anna are victims of sexist men. The protagonist had to abort her child to please her married lover, and Anna is a victim of her husband David, who never leaves a chance to humiliate her in front of others to show his ownership of her body. He continues denigrating Anna by ridiculing her body. Not only her husband’s hurtful comments, but also her commitment to make-up turns Anna into a victim of male dominated society.

Anna’s extensive use of make-up is related to the idea of rape. It is as if her mask of make-up acts as a shield against her husband. If she forgets to put on make-up, David would punish her with painful sex. David represents the prevalent patriarchal mindset; he wants to conquer Anna over and over again. Similarly throughout history patriarchal society has repeatedly endeavoured to claim possession of land.

Gray has compared the rape of women to “the predicament of the earth today” (125). Gray also observes that the phallocentric society is
unable to identify with “the body of the earth” (125), which it feminises.

David reflects the sentiments of Gray as he literally penetrates a “dead tree trunk with the machete, poking holes in the bark” (54), similar to the way in which he forces sex upon his wife. The protagonist also describes how the Americans made their way on the Canadian soil, she says “Americans hollowed out” the landscape (9). In Surfacing both women and landscape are literally penetrated and dominated.

Atwood’s third novel Lady Oracle supports ecofeminism in a different way. Lady Oracle symbolizes not only “the moral and psychological limitations” of the protagonist, but also exposes “the crippling emphasis that society places on the female image as a consumer item” (Van Spanckeren, Margaret Atwood 13).

Lady Oracle was published seven years after the publication of Atwood’s first novel The Edible Woman, yet it looked like a sequel to the issue of female body image found in The Edible Woman. It is a satire on the world’s obsession with thin classical female body, and it also exposes how men have created such a world where women take pride in catching a man’s fancy, unaware of the fact that men have created a great divide between women and nature.

In order to maintain a classical body, women sometimes behave unnatural, use unnatural things and their desire to look perfect takes its toll on nature as well. Many multinationals use unethical methods for the mass
production of their cosmetics due to the ever increasing demand from women. Many animals and trees are destroyed to sustain the ‘artificial need’ of women.

*Lady Oracle* deconstructs the meaning of womanhood through Joan, Atwood’s first trickster and fat protagonist, who refuses to follow the definition of femininity laid down by the phallocentric society. Joan dares to dream and enjoys life by leading a dual life, a life for her inner and outer selves, for appearances and realities.

All the male characters in the novel reflect the phallocentric ‘anti-women progress’ mindset of society. The language used by the blackmailer Fraser for his women clients is “inherently phallocentric since it merely establishes relationships of power between a victim and victimizer- a fact that manifests itself most obviously in the attempts made by the sexist Fraser Buchanan to blackmail Joan and to assert power over her by threatening to speak” (Derrida 106).

Atwood’s next novel *Bodily Harm*, as the name suggests screams out the harm done to the body. Although the backdrop of the novel is political yet in a very subtle way Atwood has highlighted the colonial mindset of the developed countries towards women, nature and less developed nations.

Through Rinnie Wilford, the protagonist, who is a journalist and a breast cancer survivor, Atwood has dissected the diseased capitalistic and
phallocentric society. Ecofeminists believe that any kind of oppression is against the basic tenets of humanity which is quite visible in *Bodily Harm*.

In *Bodily Harm*, Rinnie lives the theme of wilderness both internally (breast cancer, fear of being a single woman, and pornography) and externally (Caribbean politics, unexplained exploitation of women and nature, capitalism and terrorism). Ecofeminism explores “the intersectionality between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism, and other characteristics of social inequality” (Ecofeminism, “Ecofeminism”, *Wikipedia*), and *Bodily Harm* revolves around these principles of ecofeminism.

Like other heroines of Atwood, Rinnie also struggles a lot to attain the non-victim position. She starts the novel by stating “I’m still alive” (3), and it is not until the end of the novel that we get to realize how much of a struggle it had been for her. She suffered failed relationships; she witnessed violence towards women and nature, and observes how capitalism is instrumental in building up a nexus among terrorism, drug abuse and power politics. She is torn between shutting herself off from society and immersing herself in it. Towards the end of the novel when she truly evolves as a person and licks Lora’s blood stained face, she actually realises the inherent need for human contact/touch for the survival of humanity. By trying to save Lora, she acknowledges that by helping others she can overcome her own victimization.
The Handmaid’s Tale like Bodily Harm offers direct engagement with contemporary political trends / government policies. In both the novels Atwood has observed the result of imperialism, both British and American, of unchecked pollution, and of increased levels of violence prevalent in the whole world.

The Handmaid’s Tale proves Atwood as a visionary. Atwood could foresee in 1970s that anti environment attitude of government and people would result in extreme disaster. What Atwood predicted through The Handmaid’s Tale, the world is witnessing today. The Handmaid’s Tale brings out the result of anthropocentrism and androcentrism. It is a bone chilling story of a fictional country called Gilead, which is governed by the fundamentalists, and where women are valued according to their fertility. Infertile women, lesbians or aged and invalid women are sent to clear the toxic dump at secret places. The novel is replete with references to non-human species:

[W]hich are often juxtaposed with aspects of the human body and / or sexuality. The animals in Gilead are for the most part, repugnant. A virtual menagerie of insects, fish, fowl, and beasts parade, figuratively, through the narrative: ant, beetle, spider, fly, worm, oyster, mollusk, rat, mouse, fish, frog, snake, pigeon, hawk, vulture, chicken, turkey, pig, sheep, horse, cat, dog, elephant. The handmaids are treated like brood
livestock: tattooed with “cattle brands”, they are kept in line by women called Aunts who wield electric cattle prods. (Van Spanckeren, Margaret Atwood 106)

In Gilead women are reduced to their “biological destinies” and ‘progress’ is not meant for women, they are expected to accept their role as god sent reproductive machines. Malashri Lal observes:

[T]he bland recording of contemporary events juxtaposed with scraggy memories of the past combine into a poignant tale of female biological determinism. In this case ‘anatomy is destiny’ precisely what feminism has been fighting against.

(317-318)

Offred, the protagonist, exists as a state property. She is a fertile handmaid, and her name depicts her patriarchal ownership. She is needed only to multiply, to serve as a breeder for whoever man she is assigned to. Her only escape is to go down the memory lane at night and find solace in remembering her past life. Through The Handmaid’s Tale Atwood has indicated that women are ‘natural’ and men are ‘technological’. In The Handmaid’s Tale we find the female protagonist’s struggle to reconcile conflicting identities: her socially prescribed identity and her authentic identity.

Through her novels Atwood has urged the world to stop inferiorising women and nature because their subordination is neither universal nor
natural. Peggy Sanday, an anthropologist, after studying 150 tribal societies
observes:
In societies where the forces of nature are sacralized . . . there
is a reciprocal flow between the power of nature and the power
inherent in women. The control and manipulation of these
women and two sacred natural symbols; men are largely
extraneous to this domain and must be careful least they
antagonize earthly representatives of nature’s power (namely
women). (qtd. in Warren, Ecofeminist)
All the selected novels which I have explored reveal the ‘green’ heart of
Atwood. Patrick Murphy exalts Atwood for caring about the environment
through her writings and creating protagonists, who are deeply aligned with
nature, and while aligning with nature they reach their goal of selfrealisation; and in the process they become aware of their silent oppression
in the phallocentric world. Murphy advocates the use of ecofeminist theory
as he argues that we should “use ecofemiinism as a ground for critiquing all
of the literature one reads” (154).
Through her writings Atwood “has depicted the crucial issue of
environmental degradation brought in by the technocratic society and how it
has affected the lives of women on this planet. Preservation of biodiversity
is a must for the continuation of the human life on the earth. It is in this


context that ecofeminism gains importance as a radical movement” (Reshmi 65).
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