CHAPTER III

The Robber Bride and The Blind Assassin: Economic and sexual dysfunction

Margaret Atwood’s The Robber Bride and The Blind Assassin place before the reader a canvas that is wide in its scope and diverse in the turn of events. The manipulative schemer and the unknowing victim often engage in a shadow play leading to a visible shift in the contours of the novel. This chapter will deal with two aspects of this manipulation- economic and sexual. In order to understand manipulation, it is important to understand the concept of ‘function’ or ‘functionalism’. Durkheim is most closely associated with the concept of functionalism which he associates with biology. He talks of ‘organic analogy’ in which “society is viewed as an organic whole, each of its constituent parts working to maintain the others, just as the parts of the body also work to maintain each other and the body as a whole” (Marshall 241). Variously, functionalism has been defined as “The analysis of social and cultural phenomena in terms of the function they perform in a socio-cultural system. In functionalism, society is conceived of as a system of interrelated parts in which no part can be understood in isolation from the whole. A change in any part is seen as leading to a certain degree of imbalance, which in turn results in changes in other parts of the system as a whole” (Wallace and Wolf 11).

The development of functionalism was based on the model of the organic system found in the biological sciences.

There are important economic and sexual functions that need to be performed in society. They are imperative for the normal functioning of the social order. Economic and sexual functions have a social sanction but when there is a change in these ‘normal functions’ (and hence devoid of social sanction) economy and sex become dysfunctional. There could be various reasons attributed to this dysfunction. In economy, desire for more resources than one requires, desire for wealth that belongs to another, corruption at the level of government, desire to curtail the economic independence of a weaker person, malpractices in trade or mere astuteness in economic matters can lead to dysfunction. In the realm of sex too exhibitionism, deprived childhood conditions, tendencies at machismo, sadism and pedophilia, narcissism and using sex to dominate the vulnerable (read children and women) could lead to dysfunction.
Mahatma Gandhi has advocated the importance of both the economy and sex in the scheme of how a society functions. He has however stressed on the moralistic plank from which both these aspects had to be viewed. Gandhi said that the sex urge was a fine and a noble thing and there is nothing to be ashamed of it. In fact he also said that he was in favour of teaching young boys and girls the right use of their generative organs. However he was in favour of sex within marriage and sex as a tool for procreation only (Paul 81). Similarly in economic matters he was of the view that the pursuit of a livelihood should be a non-violent pursuit bordering on the good of all and the sharing of resources. Gandhian economics are based on six concepts which are:

1. *Swadeshi* which maybe treated as self-reliance
2. Bread Labour
3. *Aparigraha* or non-possession which means non-possession of anything that one does not need
4. Trusteeship means holding possessions as for others
5. Non-exploitation
6. Equality (Diwan and Lutz 56-57)

All that Gandhi advocated were based on a careful implementation of these six principles. Any economic dysfunction was also to be removed through the careful pursuit of these mentioned principles.

*The Blind Assassin* has at its backdrop the story of the World War II, the Depression, Canadian politics and industrial unionism among other things. *The Robber Bride* on the other hand is a saga of betrayal, rivalry, destructive friendship and a complicated identity crisis of individuals. *The Blind Assassin* and *The Robber Bride* represent two aspects that appear to be fairly striking. The first aspect is the subversion of individuals traditionally considered ‘weak’ and ‘vulnerable’ by those customarily considered ‘strong’ and ‘impregnable’. Various ways are employed to affect this subversion- brute force, patriarchal domination, extra marital affairs, rape the war etc; but significantly, one of them is controlling the means of production and the flow of money and hence the economy. This is visible more in *The Blind Assassin* than in *The Robber Bride*. The second aspect is the blatant use of sex as a weapon to settle scores over a variety of issues which is visible in both the novels in an almost equal measure. These two aspects criss-cross each other during the course of the
movement in the novel, with characters manoeuvring, sometimes to an advantageous position and at other times to complete disaster.

In this chapter I will critically examine how Atwood portrays economic manipulation and sexual aberrations in *The Robber Bride* and *The Blind Assassin*. I will examine both the novels with a Gandhian perspective as an immense deal has been delivered by Gandhi on the facets of economy and sexual purity. Mahatma Gandhi has articulated his views on economy, whereby he talked of the means of production, sharing of profits among the beneficiaries and self-reliance as a never-to-be-broken-rule. He also protested against repressive economic pursuits which took away what was due to the poor. Mahatma Gandhi was also vociferous on matters of indulgence in sex and sexual conduct. Having been overtaken by lust when his father was on the death bed, this remained one of his greatest regrets in later life. He had great devotion for his parents and he would have done anything for them, but at that instant “it was weighed and found unpardonably wanting” because his mind was in the grip of lust (Gandhi, *My Experiments* 29). He said that lust should not be allowed to impound the finer details of a man-woman relationship, and sex was only a means of procreation. In *The Robber Bride* and *The Blind Assassin* I look at the reverberations of the Gandhian strains that are echoed in various forms of economic and sexual dysfunction. In other words, Gandhi tied economic progress to ethics. If economic progress is in sync with moral progress of society, then society witnesses “real” progress. Mere economic progress or growth without ethical growth, in Gandhi’s vision, is an illusion.

Gandhi made a distinction between economic and real progress. Real progress according to him was moral progress—progress in the pursuit of truth through love and non-violence, and economic progress connoted largely a limited material advancement. Whether material progress denotes real progress or whether it comes into collision with moral progress are questions that have plagued many thinkers and religious teachers. However Gandhi’s analyses were ‘simple and original’ (Unnithan 31). Gandhi did not agree that all material progress translates into moral progress. He was of the opinion that “material progress above a given minimum was in conflict with moral progress” He believed that material progress so long as it was morally justified— to the extent that it assisted in the removal of poverty can be considered ‘real progress’; beyond this limit not only did it not connote moral progress but was against it (Unnithan 31). Besides this he said that “economics is untrue which ignores
or disregards moral values. The extension of the law of non-violence in the domain of economics means nothing more than the introduction of moral values as a factor to be considered in regulating international commerce.” (Gandhi, *All Men* 166). He also believed that economic equality is the master key to non-violent independence. Working for economic equality means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labour. It means the leveling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation’s wealth on the one hand and a leveling up of the semi-starved naked millions on the other (Gandhi, *All Men* 169).

Gandhi was an ardent critic of modern civilization as it materialized in the West and as it subsequently came to India especially during the colonial rule. Gandhi said there is no greater wealth but the life of an individual and hence using it in a fruitful manner was of great importance. According to Gandhi that country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal and by means of his possessions, over the life of others (Gandhi, *Sarvodaya* 32). He also said that an economics that inculcates Mamon worship, and enables the strong to amass wealth at the expense of the weak, is a false and a dismal science. It spells death. True economics, on the other hand, stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally including the weakest, and is indispensable for decent life (Gandhi, *Sarvodaya* 33).

This thought has been echoed in *Daily Inspiration* which says that at the end of our lives, what will be most important is who we have become and the difference we have made (Sharma January 13). Gandhi attacked the very foundations of western concepts of modernity and progress, and confronted the central claim that “modern civilization was a leveler in which the productive capacities of human labour rose exponentially, creating increased wealth and prosperity for all and hence increased leisure, comfort, health and happiness”. Far from attaining these objectives “modern civilization, Gandhi argued, contributed to unbridled competition among human beings and thereby the evils of poverty, disease, war and suffering” (Chakraborty 33). It is owing to the fact that modern civilization ‘looks at man as a limitless consumer and thus sets open the floodgates of industrial production that it also becomes the source of inequality, oppression and violence on a scale hitherto unknown to human history” (Chakraborty 33).
The Blind Assassin is a multi layered work. In its narrative it moves from smug Victorian life at the Avilion to the tumults of the World War II, the Depression, politics and trade union warfare. Laura and Iris Chase’s childhood cover large parts of the novel, interspersed with the tale of the blind assassin and the virgin on their proverbial journey. The novel opens with unemotional, journalistic detail “My sister drove a car off a bridge” (Atwood, Assassin 3). The rest of the novel will be an eye opener with leads that will take us to the reason for the death of Laura and thereafter the events would fall into perfect place with no crumbs swept under the carpet. The novel tells of the World War II and the depression and at some places echoes the Economic Recession of the 2000s with financial upheavals, lay-offs and hectic trade union activity. In fact at times the novel reads like a chronicle of events dealing with changes in economy and politics. The novel is set against a milieu of tumult in industrial relations, with a major part of the action taking place under an ambiance of “panoptic surveillance by police on the lookout for Bolshevik troublemakers” (Gounelas 687).

The Griffen family is a typical ‘modern urban’ family of Canada. Gittler postulates some characteristics of social relations in ‘modern urban’ families and juxtaposes them with characteristics of social relationships in a ‘primitive’ society. From the comparison it is easy to decipher that the difference between the social relationships and interaction is centered on the intensity of the personal ties that members of the respective communities share with one another (104). Gandhi too made a distinction between rural and urban life. He was of the view that cities were a snare for the common rural folk and the ability to corrupt lay in its very fabric. When contrasted with rural life, city life appeared to be widely corrupting and profane. Gandhi said that he found that the town dweller has generally exploited the villager; in fact he has almost lived on the subsistence of the poor man. Gandhi’s idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary. Thus every village will grow its own crops, cotton for cloth, have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children (Gandhi, India of My Dreams 96). The Griffen household and Richard in particular seem to share a number of these characteristics which apparently border on the utilitarian. The economic motives and the economic manipulation is only a corollary of the nature of social relations in an urban society. Some of these characteristics are:
1. Interpersonal ties as means to ends; more impersonal relations
2. Rationalistic, in which ends and means are consciously evaluated in social action
3. Individualism
4. Extensive division of labour
5. Production for the market
6. Temporal
7. Large in size
8. Rapidly changing society
9. Science and mechanics
10. Governed by law

Modern society with its extreme emphasis on the economic factor borders on the impersonal, the rationalistic and the temporal. Gandhi has delivered a great deal on modern life and modernity. He said that modern man spent most of his energy trying to “steady himself in a hostile and unstable environment. He however had neither the inclination nor the ability to slow down the tempo of his life, be alone with himself look inwards, reflect on his pattern of life, and nurture the inner springs of energy” (Parekh 82). He lived without knowing himself and was tired both physically and mentally. Since he is bored, he seeks entertainment in frivolous things. Gandhi thought that modern civilization had a depressing air of ‘futility’ and ‘madness’ about it and it was nothing but self-destructive. So when Richard Griffen unlawfully takes over the Chase industries and exploits the Chase sisters, the legal heirs of the conglomerate, he is only fulfilling the requirements of a modern, urban society that is materialistic and opportunistic. The unhappy part of it is that while some individuals move with the times (being opportunistic and materialistic), there are others like Laura and Iris who are caught in a time warp.

The characters in The Robber Bride and The Blind Assassin often engage in sexual activity which can be termed as not only promiscuous but even oppressive at times. The gratification that sex gives varies with the person. For some it is a means of intimacy and pleasure. For others it is a source of anxiety and frustration. To some individuals “it is a sport while to others it is an oppressive duty” (Weiten 407). There are various motives for engaging in sex. Hill (1997) has described eight distinct sexual motives:

1. Feeling valued by one’s partner
2. Showing value for one’s partner
3. Obtaining relief from stress
4. Providing nurturance to one’s partner
5. Enhancing feelings of personal power
6. Experiencing the power of one’s partner
7. Experiencing pleasure
8. Procreating

On a related issue, the relationship between sex and love are seen by men and women in fairly different views. Women are more likely than men to associate sex with love and to “romanticize” sexual desire (Peplau 1997). These gender differences transcend sexual orientation, as they are observed in gays as well as ‘straights’ (Weiten 418). In The Robber Bride, the sex that Zenia engages in subscribes to the fifth reason that Hill gave for sex- ‘enhancing feelings of personal power’. Sex is used as a weapon by Zenia to be the prima donna of her circles and she will not stop short of anything but oppression. The vanity that she has developed of herself stems from a strong desire to control her surroundings and the people that inhabit them. Zenia has always been a deprived child.

A painful childhood, accompanied by bitter experiences with a mother who indulges in prostitution instills in her a strong desire to never be “innocent” and “a bystander” (Atwood, Assassin 16). In fact Zenia builds a strong impenetrable wall around her so that none can know the real Zenia with her trauma and hurt. The following paragraph about her would amply sum up her mystique and her magic. “Zenia is full of secrets. She laughs, she throws her secrets casually this way and that, her teeth flashing white; she pulls more secrets out of her sleeves and unfurls them from behind her back, she unrolls them like bolts of rare cloth, displaying them, whirling them like gypsy scarves, flourishing them like banners, heaping them one on top of another in a glittering, prodigious tangle. When she’s in the room, who can look at anything else” (Atwood, Assassin 236). The sexual arrogance that Zenia shows and the sex-games she is involved in are really the sign of a diseased mind. She feels that these tricks that she employs would result in her being talked of in the party circuit, while she slowly manages to hoodwink her female friends as she takes away their boyfriends from them. This sexual arrogance and the sex games that Zenia plays are tacitly approved by society. The men that Zenia seduces find her very mesmerizing and get taken in by her charms. Similarly the women who surround
Zenia find her frightfully attractive and better than all the women they know. Sexual exhibitionism, undue sexual seduction, extra marital affairs and undue use of the woman’s body for commercial purposes are all sanctioned by the society that we live in.

Gandhi was visibly horrified with the ideas of free sex and contraception. To him the idea of contraception was a misnomer in itself. He felt that these methods that were used by people were “like putting a premium upon vice” (Prabhu 284). Gandhi says that these methods only make man and woman reckless. He was also of the opinion that the government by endowing respectability on these methods was only hastening the ‘dissolution of the restraints that public opinion puts upon one’. Gandhi said that it was immoral to escape from the consequences of one acts, “Moral results can only be produced by moral restraints” (Prabhu 285). Gandhi felt that there were no two opinions on the question of birth control. The only method handed down from ages past is self-control or Brahmacharya. Gandhi said that women would have to resist their husbands. If contraceptives are resorted to, frightful results will follow. Men and women will be living for sex alone. As a result they will become soft-brained, unhinged, in fact mental and moral wrecks. All great religions have rightly regarded kama as the arch enemy of man, anger or hatred coming only in the second place. According to the Gita the latter is the outcome of the former. Contraception is only a means by which this urge could be given a vent. Gandhi said that today the entire environment – our reading, our thinking and our social behavior is calculated to subserve and cater for the sex-urge. To break through the coils is not easy. But it is a task worthy of our highest endeavour (Gandhi, India of My Dreams 240).

Gandhi viewed marriage as one of the greatest sacraments and believed in the idea of one man one wife for life, and one woman one husband for life. The sanctimoniousness of marriage entailed a life of self-restraint in the married state. Marriage confirms the right of union between two partners to the exclusion of all the others when in their joint opinion they consider such union to be desirable, but it also confers no right upon one partner to demand obedience of the other to one’s wish for union (Gandhi, Sarvodaya 63). Gandhi believed in the right of both partners to be able to dissolve a marriage if it did not give happiness or if it had something seriously wrong going on in it. Gandhi said that if divorce was the only alternative, “I would not hesitate to accept it, rather than interrupt my moral progress, assuming that I want to restrain myself on purely moral grounds” (Gandhi, Sarvodaya 63). A marriage
which becomes a hitch to either of the partner’s moral progress is a marriage which is worth dissolving. A marriage with an ulterior motive was however never acceptable. The theologians of the twentieth century condemn, even within marriage, in fact especially within marriage, the pursuit of a selfish pleasure incompatible with true married love. They forbid one, during the sexual act, to consider the other partner as simply an object of pleasure, for the other partner is a person whom one must love for himself or herself (Flandrin 162). Gandhi in these matters advocated Swaraj which maybe translated as self-rule and self-restraint and not freedom from all restraint as it has often been construed. Gandhi also advocated the following of Brahmacharya as a means of avoiding lustful feelings coming into a person’s mind. The orthodox as well as comparatively religious section of the Indian population regards Brahmacharya as the supreme means of birth control, and they believe that those who take to any other means of preventing birth control are not pious or truly religious (Paul 73) . Gandhi stressed on the observance of the principle of chastity. He said it was not enough not to look upon a woman or a man with lustful eyes; animal passion must be so controlled as to be excluded from the mind. If married one must not have carnal desire for one’s husband or wife but must consider her or him as a lifelong friend and establish relationship of perfect purity. A sinful touch, gesture or word is a direct breach of this principle (Gandhi, *Ashram Observances* 111).

Zenia uses her body in order to be able control the lives of others. She is as if on the constant ‘prowl’, looking for her ‘prey’ in order to satiate her sense of self. Here we come back to Freud and his age old adage about human behavior. Even thought the adage has been widely criticized by Carl Gustav, Jung and Alfred Adler; it remains almost the most celebrated of all his dictums. Freud said that all human behavior is motivated ultimately by what we could call sexuality. Freud designates the “prime psychic force as libido, or sexual energy” (Guerin et al 128). Xenia appears to fit into the framework of this adage as her actions are based on her sexuality and her manipulation of sex.

Sex is a power game to Zenia and she uses it to be in command of her sexual partners and arm twist her female friends. Her desire to direct others is however resultant of her own inadequacies and one of them is her abject vanity. Vain individuals create a goal that they are incapable of achieving. They desire to be more important and successful than anyone else and this goal is the result of their inadequacies. It is often seen that anyone whose vanity is well marked has little sense
of their own worth (Adler 160). Gandhi believed that there are two things that render a man helpless. One is money and the other is sexual vice. He considered both of them to be poisons. He said that a “snake-bite is a lesser poison than these two, because the former merely destroys the body but the latter destroys body, mind and soul” (Gandhi, Hind 82). Gandhi had sincere views towards sex and made a clear distinction between lust and spiritual love. He said if we believe that indulgence in animal passion is “necessary, harmless and sinless”, we shall desire to give it a free run and then we shall have no power to resist it (Prabhu 289).

Richard Griffen can rightfully be accused of being sexually depraved from the relationships that he keeps and the views that he has towards women and their bodies. He talks of shape of women’s bodies, being ‘pears’ and ‘apples’ to his wife (she knows not a thing about it). He also can spot ‘hair’ and so Iris is very careful to collect all of it after her beauty regimen. He is always surrounded by females and surprises Iris by the amount he knows about women. The attitudes that Richard has towards sex are typically patriarchal and regressive. Iris knows that she has a lack of enjoyment, distaste and suffers because of sex during her first few encounters. However this is considered normal by Richard. Iris says that Richard “was one of those men who felt that if a woman did not experience sexual pleasure this was all to the good, because then she would not be liable to wander off seeking elsewhere” (Atwood, Assassin 246). Richard takes comfort in the fact that Iris has no inclination towards sex and the attitude that he has comes across as dominating and regressive. When he talks about women with pear shaped and apple shaped bodies to his wife, he appears lascivious and cheap.

Iris’s life is directly determined by buttons in many ways. Owing to the Depression of the 1930s, the button factory that made the Chase family rich for two generations rich goes to ruins and her father persuades her to marry a rich businessman, Richard Griffen so that the business could be salvaged. In opting for security, Iris makes a pact “with capital, with parties and new outfits” (Gounelas 686). In fact Iris is weighed down with the button factory even as a girl when after the death of her mother, she is told of revenues, cost and profit with regard to the button factory. She is presented the mantle of the factory by her father, much to her disapproval. She says that even if her father loved her, his love “a talisman of sorts…but a heavy one; a heavy thing for me to carry around with me, slung on its iron chain around my neck” (Atwood, Assassin 106). In fact the Button factory
literally “closes” the fate of Iris. She is more idealistic and prefers to see dreams of
the Bolshevic revolutionary that she and her sister had nursed like two little Florence
Nightingales.

The household of Iris and Richard Chase and their child represents a typical
“modern family” in a new age Canadian society. A modern society is distinguished
by its “elaborate industrial technology, a high degree of urbanization, and a great
amount of geographical and social ability” (Davis 422). As a result of these changes,
the extended kinship bonds have sheered away. Factory production has destroyed the
system of complementary activities within the home by replacing a new division of
labour outside the home. Similarly in The Blind Assassin the new wave of industrial
growth coupled with the Depression and the desire to get quickly rich lead Richard to
exploit Iris.

Gandhi spoke vociferously against the craze for machines and the relationship
that they had with human beings. In fact they were responsible for binding human
beings in chains of servitude. He said that even the spinning wheel was a machine and
he was totally in favour of it. He objected to ‘labour-saving’ machinery that left
thousands of people without work and threw them into the streets to die of starvation
(Jaiju 3). Gandhi said that he wanted to save time and labour not for a fraction of
mankind but for all. He said that he wanted the concentration of wealth not in the
hands of a few but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on
the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour,
but greed. The machine should not tend to make atrophied the limbs of man. The
marriage that they contract is a marriage of convenience. A marriage of convenience
can be defined as a marriage contracted for reasons other than the reasons of
relationship, family, or love. Instead, such a marriage is orchestrated for personal gain
or some other sort of strategic purpose, such as immigration. The phrase is a calque of
French: mariage de convenance - a marriage of convention, or marriage of suitability
(Marriage of Convenience Wikipedia 10 April). Richard Griffen and Mr Chase make
a deal when they seal the fate of the Button factory with that of the future of Iris.
Gandhi was of the view that a marriage is a sacred sacrament that has to be upheld at
all times. There should be no ulterior motive to a marriage. The ideal that marriage
aims at is that of spiritual union with the physical. The true purpose of marriage is
friendship between man and woman (Prabhu 278).
The manner in which Iris’ father tells her, rather pleads with her to marry Richard is both heart breaking and cruel at the same time. Mr Chase puts the onus of saving the business on Iris. “I have to consider the factories as well...I have to consider the business. It might still be saved, but the bankers are after me. They’re hot on the trail. They won’t wait much longer” (Atwood, *Assassin* 231). Iris is the heiress of a large business and she as if holds the golden keys. However she is exploited and never really sees much money. When she goes to the bank to withdraw money, she feels ‘despised’ as she has so little money and “also for once having had so much” (Atwood, *Assassin* 148). She sadly rues that she never actually had any as it were her father and Richard who really owned all the money. She says a few lines later, “But money was imputed to me, the same way crimes were imputed to those who’ve simply been present at them” (Atwood, *Assassin*, 148). Sex and the economic factor are inseparable. The marriage proposal that Mr Chase makes to Richard Griffen is starkly acquisitive and it comes in the backdrop of hard financial times. Gandhi made a clear demarcation between love and possession. Love and exclusive possession can never go together. Theoretically when there is perfect love, there must be perfect non-possession. (Gandhi, *All Men* 166-67).

Conflict exists in the Griffen family but the woman is really not allowed to express her disdain. It is more a case of simmering discontent. ‘Unless couples learn quickly to resolve conflict, the probability is great that the conflict will take a directional form and it will become progressive. Habitual conflict differs from acute conflict in that there is not the same emotional investment in it and it becomes less volatile. Marriages vary widely in the amount of habituated conflict in them and in the amount of conflict they can tolerate. In some there may be very little else. “The dynamics of marital adjustment may be as changeable as the personality structures of husbands and wives, as the interests which they do and do not share, and as the patterns of interaction which led them into marriages” (Leslie 430).

Richard Griffen is a baron in his own field and he runs his business according to his own rules. Mr Chase had a more egalitarian approach towards his workers and even in times of the Depression he tried his best not to lay-off his workers. The callous remark that Richard makes when he made a speech at Empire Club is worth noting. He speaks at the heights of the Depression, in fact on December 5, 1934, amid strikes and arson. Richard says that “the plight of the unemployed was to be deplored, many were idle from inclination, and force should be used against illegal
strikers and outside agitators” (Atwood, Assassin 118). He does not have any compassion towards the factory workers. It is worth noting that even during the time when Mr Chase was the owner of the Button factory, Laura and Iris were looked upon as little aliens by the was workers and their children; even though he was a more humane master. However the mistrust in the workers was widespread and they hated their rich masters. When there was a call for a strike by the factory workers, the workers cursed Mr Chase for stuffing money in the bank and growing fat ‘off the backs of the workers’. “Him and his big house and fancy daughters- those frivolous parasites who lived off the sweat of the workers” (Atwood, Assassin 210).

The class divide is evident and it is economy that divides Mr Chase and his workers. The evils of a capitalist system come up close and the socialist ideal is what the factory workers aspire to achieve at these times. Economic equality is the master key to non-violent independence. Working for economic equality would mean eradication of “eternal conflict between capital and labour” (Gandhi, All Men 168-69). Wealth should not be concentrated in the hands of a few while the rest reel under abject exploitation. Ruskin said in a similar strain that “a mercantile economy signifies the accumulation, in the hands of a few individuals of legal claim upon or power over the labour of others; every such claim implying precisely as much poverty or debt on one side as it implies riches or right on the other” (Ruskin 20).

Laura develops the cunning of a nocturnal animal while under the tutelage of her tutor Mr Erskine. In fact they (Laura and Iris) learn little Latin but a lot of forgery and know how to cheat on their teacher. Iris is only a girl of probably seven or eight and she accuses her teacher of sexually abusing her. She knows that a sexual accusation would be enough to send Mr Erskine away. She says about her teacher just “wants to put his hand up my blouse” and “what he likes is panties” (Atwood, Assassin 169). Laura later confesses that she had lied about the teacher. The little knowledge that Laura has of sex is used to her advantage and she associates sex with trickery and cunning. Sexual harassment has no threshold and Laura is a clear example of overstepping the brink. She learns to manipulate sex at a very early age even though the true ramifications of sex are really hidden from her view. Mr Erskine is naturally sent packing after the incident with Reenie fuming at the audacity of the young man.

Mahatma Gandhi held profoundly relevant views related with the economy of those days and these tenets hold good even today. He rejected every form of
exploitation and held that all human beings are responsible for the welfare of all and sought to lay the basis of a redistribution of wealth that could be consistent with the “sacrificial moral order of the cosmos” (Iyer 9-10). Gandhi believed that any sharp distinction between means and ends was doubtful and unhelpful. This belief of Gandhi confirmed his basic conviction that violence in any form and for any end had to be rejected. Richard Griffen takes over the Button factory on the carcass of Iris’s independence and respect and Mr Chases’ lifetime of labour.

Recessions are periods during which aggregate output declines. It is become usual to categorize an economic slump as a “recession” when aggregate output declines for two consecutive quarters. A protracted and subterranean recession is called a depression although there is considerable difference of opinion among economists as to when a recession becomes a depression (Case 379). The Great Depression of the 1930s affected many countries and layoffs and strikes were a natural backlash. The Depression was an event that affected the lives of most Canadians. It began in 1929, with farmers and small-town tradesmen dependent on farmers saw their lives fall apart. Then it affected the local hardware or feed stores. After this it affected western centres and companies dependent on farmers. This in turn affected industry. Layoffs occurred and then plants began to close. After this there was widespread unemployment. Canadians reacted to the Depression by first putting off major expenditure and then putting off minor expenditure.

They patched clothes and children especially in the hard-hit prairies went around without shoes in summer. There was unemployment first for a few months and then it went on for years. The government too did not have the “theory, the means, or the will to handle the Depression” (Narrie and Douglas Owran 497). In fact “it is at the level of the individual and the family that the bloodless figures of economics turn into a very human story of hardship” (Narrie and Douglas Owran 489). Even in The Robber Bride the pain and the loss of the recession takes a toll. The recession keeps deepening. There are more buildings for sale, there are more closed-out boutiques, and “saleswomen lurk in the doorways of those still open, aiming defeated, pleading stares at the passers-by, their eyes filled with baffled rage” (Atwood, Robber 38). The shiny shops, the mannequins and the glossy streets are no longer “the incarnation of desire”. They look like party trash with crumpled napkins, the “rubble left by rowdy crowds or looting armies” (Atwood, Robber 38).
At another point in the novel Tony talks of her flagging business art ‘Radiance’, the shop where she works. Note the irony in the name of the shop. She rues that she’s down and out. The items on the store shelf are alarmingly full even though it is Christmas time. The only thing that is really selling is a book which is like a pamphlet—"a cookbook, done on grey recycled paper with black-and-white line drawings, a do-it-yourself home publishing effort: Pot Luck: Penny Pinching Soups and Stews" (Atwood, *Robber* 86). The feeling is discomforting and Shanita suggests that the name Radiance be changed to something like ‘Scrimpers’- a name to suit the times, pragmatic, hard hitting and affordable. The accompanying feelings of angst that accompany a Depression are vivid in the personalities of those that are affected by it—here in the characters of Charis and Shanita.

Gandhi did not draw a distinction between economics and ethics. He said that “economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and sinful” (Gandhi, *All Men* 160). He says that economics that permit one country to prey on another country are immoral. The great Gandhian economist JC Kumarappa enumerated five types of economies and then tells us what kind of an economy Gandhi wanted to be established in India. Kumarappa said that there are five types of economies based on division of labour. These are:

1. Parasitic- where there is consumption without production and destruction of source of supplies.
2. Predatory-where there is consumption without production but the source of supplies is not destroyed.
3. Enterprising- where enterprising economy rights are balanced with duties, one produces for consumption and has right to private property.
4. Gregarious- where production is only for own consumption and people live like one family.
5. Service economy-where duty is supreme and none bothers about rights.

Gandhi aimed at establishing a service economy which is called a Sarvodaya economy. This economy will be a blend of ‘productive efficiency’ and ‘ability to subserve the main social requirements’ (Gupta 128-29).

Similarly Richard Griffen’s objectives of taking over the factory and using it to exploit both his wife Iris and sister-in-law Laura amounts to transgressing the line that divides economics and ethics. Richard combines economy and sex as potent weapons to manipulate the psyche of Iris and Laura as well as the workers in the Button
factory. Richard works on the exchange theory in Classical economics. This theory is utilitarian and portrays human beings as rational people who seek to maximize their material benefits, or “utility from transactions or exchanges” with others in a free market that is equally competitive (Turner 270). As individuals are free in the market place and they have access to information, they can ponder on various alternatives and “rationally” select the course that will maximize material benefits. The costs involved are weighed against the material returns and this determines which option will give the maximum payoff.

This is a view of the early utilitarians often criticized because of its divestment from morality and sentiments. However this view endures even today and sets off further studies in sociology, economics and political science. Richard is a perfect example of a utilitarian man who weighs every decision in terms of profit and loss. He does not even tell Iris of the death of her father as it would upset his perfect apple cart. He assumes full control over her and looks at “utility from transactions or exchanges” (200) even at this stage. He coldly tells her “I know I ought to have, but I wanted to spare you the worry, darling. There was nothing to be done, and no way we could get back for the funeral, and I didn’t want things to be ruined for you... Now sit down and buck up, and have your drink, and forgive me. We’ll deal with all this in the morning” (Atwood, Assassin 317). Gandhi was against the utilitarian formula. He said that a votary of Ahimsa cannot subscribe to the utilitarian formula of the greatest good of the greatest number. He will strive for the greatest good of all and die in the attempt to realize the idea. The greatest good of all includes the good of the greatest number but in the case of the utilitarian, he will always be logical whereas the absolutist will even sacrifice himself for the good of others (Gandhi, Sarvodaya the Welfare 4).

Rae Lesser Blumberg developed a theory on gender stratification which elucidates women’s degree of control of the means of production and the distribution of economic surplus. Sexual stratification, Blumberg argues is ultimately decided by the degree to which “relative to men, women control the means of production and the allocation of economic surplus, or in Marxian terms, “surplus value” (Turner 183). Blumberg was of the view that such control gave women economic power that further influenced their levels of political power, prestige and other stratifying resources. In this respect we see that Iris has no control of the means of production and the distribution of economic surplus and hence her power and her prestige do not in any
way increase, in fact there is a perceptible downfall in both aspects after she gets married to Richard Griffen.

Moving to another aspect of the theory of sexual stratification Blumberg says that kinship also influences women’s capacity to gain economic power. Inheritance rules are very important. If a woman can inherit property, then she can exercise economic power. In the case of Iris, she inherits a huge property and a flourishing business, but even then she has no economic power whatsoever. Iris is left nowhere because of the cunning and economic manipulation that Richard Griffen knows how to craft. Without economic power, Blumberg argues, women are “denied honour and prestige, and more important, they have less control over such basic matters as fertility patterns (how many children to have), their marriages (when, if and with whom), their rights to seek a divorce, their premarital sex, their access to extramarital sex, their household activities, their levels and types of education, and the freedom to move about and pursue diverse interests in society” (Turner 185-86).

The considerations here too are economic and hence closely intertwined with the cunning with which Richard takes over Chase industries. Laura comes to know of the cunning of Richard when she goes home after the death of her father. Laura feels that Richard would have wanted to “look over the premises” and stroll about to see that “he’d effectively inherited them” (Atwood, Assassin 322). The more frightening thing is revealed after a few lines and Richard is seen stark naked in his wickedness and ability to manipulate Mr Chases’ business. On probing the reason of the death of her father, Laura finds out that her father drank himself to death after ‘they’ announced the permanent closing of the factories. Here ‘they’ refers not only to Richard but to the collective force of an evil design that he stands for. Probably people had been talking about Richard in hushed whispers because of his cunning, and they were casually referring to him as ‘they’ as if his is a name that no one wanted to mention.

It was quite impossible to think that Richard could plan all this nefariousness all alone. Reenie, the house help said she was sure that this was what killed Mr Chase. Laura is not even aware of the closure of the factories. All the factories that belonged to Laura and Iris Chase were closed down and merged with Richard’s. “It’s all Griffen-Chase Royal Consolidated now”, says Iris to Laura (Atwood, Assassin 323). The so called “merger” is a “clean sweep”. All the jobs are gone and the button factory which was a source of employment is no more. Even the goodwill that Mr
Chase enjoyed as he did not lay off his workers till the end is lost in the rigmarole of the depression and pure capitalist politics. A few lines later Iris regrets that the ‘deal’ was not what it should have been. “I’ve married Richard for nothing, then—I hadn’t saved the factories, and I certainly hadn’t saved Father” (Atwood, Assassin 323). The deal had been made between Mr Chase and Richard. Capitalism has its own vicious cycles. Capitalists live well, but the force that drives them through their “green fuse” is the realization of profits and utilizing these profits to increase their capital base to harvest greater surplus value to be used for greater accrual of capital and so on “ad infinitum in upward twirls of greater and greater exploitation” (Rousseas 11).

It is worth noting that the Button factory caught fire and this is attributed to “arson” during the time of the economic upheaval and the loss of jobs. There also was a gory effigy burning spree in which Mr Chase in a hat and a cigar and Laura and Iris as pink rag dolls were burnt. The clear divide between the owners of the means of production and the producers themselves is evident. Mr Chase and his daughters, because of their wealth amidst poverty and unemployment are seen as architects of a “modernized slave system of medieval feudalism” where there is no respect for the people who produce goods for their capitalist masters (Rousseas 11). There is a clear conflict here between the two parties in which “one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that the first party cares about” (Robbins 504).

Mahatma Gandhi had predicted the doom of any form of extreme capitalism. He believed that equal distribution of wealth was essential for the growth and development of society. Gandhi said that at the root of the doctrine of equal distribution must lie that of trusteeship of the wealthy for superfluous wealth possessed by them. The rich man will then be left in possession of his wealth. He was of the view that economics is untrue which ignores or disregards moral values. “The extension of the law of non-violence in the domain of economics means nothing less than the introduction of moral values as a factor to be considered in regulating international commerce” (Gandhi, All Men 166). Gandhi believed in a society that was essentially socialist in its nature. He viewed society as a great family, living in unity and harmony with capital; not only looking to the material benefit of the labourers but also their moral welfare- capitalists being trustees for the welfare of the laboring classes under them (Prabhu 205). In a notable comment on the Gita, Gandhi elucidates the ideal man or the perfect Karam Yogi: He is jealous of none... without
egotism, who is selfless...who is ever forgiving, who is always contented, whose resolutions are firm... who causes no dread...who is free from exultation, sorrow and fear, who is pure ...who is not puffed up by praise, who does not go under when people speak ill of him...who has a disciplined will (Fischer 50-51).

In *The Blind Assassin* there runs a parallel story of the journey of a blind assassin with a virgin which in more ways than one seems to be the story of Alex and Laura. However we are made to believe that their story is really a different one leading to a different climax. Zyrcon or its former name Sakiel Norm is the kingdom of the Zyrconites. It was a prosperous land with rivers and orchards and groves and “the soil was so rich the heads of grain were said to have measured three inches across” (Atwood, *Assassin* 18). However now it is a heap of stones. Sakiel Norm was known for its weaving. The cloth there “shone like liquid honey, like crushed grapes, like a cup of bull’s blood poured out in the sun.” (Atwood, *Assassin* 23) Here too the economy of Sakiel Norm was based on the principle of exploitation and using of slaves who were little children. This resembles the prevalent evil practice of child labour but there was no law in Sakiel Norm. The evil practice of child labour is a manifestation of economic dysfunction as it makes use of the labour of children without giving them adequate wages. At Sakiel Norm children are exploited and blinded and then they are put into the flesh trade. They really have no exit at all from the entertainment of adults which are all linked to cruel economic considerations which are really economic dysfunctions.

The carpets were woven by slaves who were “invariably children, because only the fingers of children were small enough for such intricate work” (Atwood, *Assassin* 24). The demand of hard labour on these children make them go blind by the age of nine or ten and it is a cruel irony that their blindness was the measure by which the carpet sellers valued and praised their carpets. They traded by saying that so and so carpet blinded fifteen while another carpet blinded twenty children and logically the latter carpet was more expensive than the others. The cruelty of economics does not really end here. Once the children became blind they were sold off to brothels and in this trade there existed no distinction between girls and boys. The touch of these children was so delicate that under their fingers “you could feel the flowers blossoming and the water flowing out of your own skin.” (Atwood *Assassin*, 24) and hence they were in high demand. Some of them became throat cutters as they were so nimble and could not even be heard by their unaware victims.
The Zyrconians mint money at the expense of women and children. Even this so-called advanced modern ‘scientific’ society has its own evil forms of capitalism where society is divided into the capitalists and the labourers. There is a relationship of antagonism that exists between the owners of property and the inventors who are instrumental in creating wealth for the property owners. The Zyrconian society is divided into the ‘have’ and the ‘have nots’. The aristocrats of Sakiel Norm were called the Snifards. They were skilled inventors who carefully guarded their professional secrets. They had invented the crossbow, the clock, the hand pump, the combustion engine and used animals for transport. They control the means of production and hence they also have an undesirable control over the labour force too. Gandhi had talked about the horrors of industrialization and technology long before the two made their extreme manifestations. Gandhi was not against machinery and technology per se but he was against their dehumanizing effects. He said that machines embody a technology which is part of modern science. Speed, scale, noise and glitter are its characteristics. The machine organizes men, materials, energy, and information on a scale hitherto unheard of. It had produced wealth and glitter for a few and poverty and darkness for the rest. “Underlying both creation and destruction, organization and disorganization, lies a common characteristic of modern technology: violence... This uncompromisingly violent nature of the machine seems to be the immediate cause of Gandhi’s position on non-violence” (Raghuramaraju 178-79).

Gandhi said that it was machinery that had impoverished India. He said that it was due to Manchester that Indian handicraft had disappeared. He also said that nature has not provided any way whereby we may reach a desired goal all of a sudden. If, instead of welcoming machinery as a boon, we should look upon it as an evil, it will ultimately go (Gandhi, Hind 83-84). The Snifards dress luxuriously and were connoisseurs of music and played various instruments. They indulged in court intrigues, held magnificent feasts and “fell elaborately in love with each others wives” (Atwood, Assassin 18-19). Duels were fought over these affairs though it was more acceptable for husbands to pretend not to know. Sex is game here and it is even stranger to see that men become cuckolds and they have to be seemingly oblivious. The artificiality of Sakiel Norm’s society is bare and sex and economics are the two ways in which people are exploited and misused. The smallholders, serfs and slaves were called Ygniros. They are shabby and wear grey tunics with one shoulder bare and one breast as well for the women, “who were—needless to say—fair game for the
Sniffard men” (Atwood, *Assassin* 18). The Ygniroids were unhappy with their lives and sometimes they staged revolts which are ruthlessly suppressed. The lowest in the rung of the Ygniroids are the slaves who could be bought and traded and even killed at will. These slaves were prohibited by law from reading, but had secret codes that they scratched with dirty stones. They were harnessed to ploughs by the Sniffards. The Zyrconian society is a typically capitalist society with a few controlling the means of production. At this point of discussion, the views of Gandhi related to education of the masses and suppression of the poor is significant. He felt that significant change in society can be brought about by the poor and they can make significant contributions to the economy of a country. Gandhi did not believe that the capitalists and landlords are all exploiters by an inherent necessity, or that they is an “irreconcilable antagonism” between their interests and those of the people (Gandhi, *All Men* 175).

Gandhi was of the view that all exploitation was based on cooperation, willing or forced, of the exploited. Carrying on this strain of thought, he said that it is a bitter reality that one does not like to savour, but the fact remains that there would be no exploitation if people did not follow the dictate of the exploiter. “But self comes in and we hug the chains that bind us”, Gandhi said in *All Men are My Brothers* (24). Gandhi reiterated his position again and again that the solution to the problem is not the extinction of landlords and capitalists, but a transformation of the existing relationship between the common masses into one that is and untainted. Hence capital in itself is not evil as capital in some form or the other will always be required. Gandhi envisaged an ideal society which is “necessarily highly cultured in which every man and woman knows what he or she wants and, what is more, knows that no one should want anything that others cannot have with equal labour” (Gandhi, *Panchayat* 8). Neither does life in Sakiel Norm nor in Toronto present any such optimistic picture as relationships here are based on power struggles coupled with unequal labour, and not a soul cares about what the other wants. As a corrective to the unethical, greed-driven industrial development, Gandhi suggested the doctrine of trusteeship. He believed that every thing belonged to God and was from God. It was for His people as a whole, not for a particular individual. When an individual had more than his proportionate portion, he became a trustee of that portion for God’s people. Gandhi’s theory of trusteeship had the following principles:

1. Trusteeship provides a means of transforming the present capitalist order to an egalitarian one. It gives the capitalists a chance to reform themselves.
2. It does not recognize any right of private ownership except for the welfare of society.
3. It does not exclude legislative ownership and use of wealth.
4. No individual will be allowed to hold or use his wealth for selfish satisfaction.
5. A maximum limit for income should be fixed just as a minimum living wage must also be fixed.
6. The character of production will be determined by social necessity and not by personal whim, or greed (Gandhi, Sarvodaya 50-51).

Sex in Sakiel Norm is a game for the aristocratic class or the Sniflards. Women are primarily made for sex and they are seen as carnal objects who help in achieving physical satisfaction and bliss. The condition of women in Sakiel Norm is similar to the conditions that women live in in Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale where they are objects of lust and are only meant for procreation. The kingdom of Gilead is in more ways than one like the kingdom of Sakiel Norm. Here women have been relegated to a position of inferiority by those who ordain the social order. Women have always been considered to be second in the rung to men. They have always been considered part of nature because of their reproductive capacity. As a result of this ‘critical devaluation’ of women’s reproductive capacity, women came to be marginalized in matters which related to ‘ordering’ of society. Thus men began to take up the task of defining social order (Herida 38). According to radical feminists, patriarchy is the power of men over women, particularly over their sexual functions. Michel Foucault offers us another way of looking at social control. He dealt with the changing forms of power and their relation to the ‘body’. “The body became the focal point of power and was ‘disciplined’ and trained to function with co-ordination and efficiency” (Hereda 142). Any sociology of the body will thus deal with the nature of sexual and emotional division of labour. Thus the sociology of the body turns out to be importantly a study of the control of sexuality, specifically female sexuality by men exercising patriarchal power (Turner qtd by Herida 45). Women in Sakiel Norm are treated as objects of sex. Males here have completely inverted the essence of sex and in more ways than one have made the experience of sex completely dysfunctional. The intimacy and the purity with which sex is associated in bonds of love are thrown to the wind in Sakiel Norm. A woman is used by men for lust and they are thrown away when they are of no more charm. Sex is a totally defunct experience as it is only associated with cruelty and lust.
In The Blind Assassin this patriarchal domination is witnessed over the body in the deportment of Richard both towards Iris, his wife as well as his sister-in-law Laura. Richard uses sex in order to nefariously keep Laura under his clutches. He promises the release of Laura’s lover Alex in return for continual sex over a long period of time. It is almost like a long term rape in which the victim is promised a precious gift after the act is over. Laura was a fool to believe Richard. While Richard was constantly having sex with Laura, Alex had been incarcerated and he had been subsequently killed. Richard lets Laura know nothing about it and when she does she is completely off the hook. In fact when she commits suicide by “driving of the cliff”, it is her way of saying that she does not want her body to be used anymore by a man who thought that she was a part of his fiefdom. Iris discovers the dark secrets from the old note books that belonged to Laura and she is equally shattered. She can hardly do anything to confront the suave Richard. She can only accuse him of having been ‘besotted’ by Laura, and Richard takes extreme exception to this accusation. Richard combines his financial greed with his political ambitions along with his hunger for sex.

While on his honeymoon, he is quickly repulsed by Iris as she gets sea sick. He prefers to enjoy ‘different company’ as sex and vomit did not go together. He cares the least about Iris and he literally leaves her to perish in her melancholy “I said I didn’t want to ruin his evening and he should go off and socialize, and so he did. The benefit to my seasickness was that Richard showed no inclination to climb into bed with me. Sex may go nicely with many things, but vomit isn’t one of them” (Atwood, Assassin 249). Richard is the prototype of a new age modern shrewd businessman who does not believe in compromising on his aims. He makes Iris the very convenient shade that he constantly hides behind, while constantly sidelining her and treating her as a woman with no feelings and sexual desires. Richard hobnobs with the powerful as he eagerly wishes to be a politician. Thus he along with his sister guards the reputation of the future politician very zealously. The story of his affair, or rather his rape of Laura shatters him as he is worried that the world will know his underbelly.

Margaret Atwood has said in her presentation to the American Booksellers Association Convention in 1993 that in her original story it was The Robber Bridegroom, the story of a “wicked maiden-devouring monster” but she changed it. She wanted a Lady Macbeth like figure as opposed to the white as white Ophelia. She said that if all women were goody good and if they were debarred from expressing
their thoughts they would be deprived of “moral choice, and there isn’t much left for them to do in books except run away a lot” (Atwood, *Assassin* 698). So we have the character of Zenia who is a ‘returnee’ and she does awful things. Atwood has said that *The Robber Bride* is a book with “villainess in it”. In a “novelistic structure based on nineteenth-century symphonies with leitmotifs, Russian dolls-within-dolls, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and boxed sets of gift soaps, we learn about the awful things” (Atwood, *Assassin* 698). All the awful things that Zenia does is reflective of how her dysfunctional childhood experiences, economic depravity and sense of insecurity have moulded her into becoming a reckless, insensitive and dysfunctional human being. She brings chaos wherever she goes and leaves marks there that are indelible.

The economic depravity in the life of Zenia and her mother is apparent in the conversation that Zenia has with Tony. She openly tells Tony that her mother sent her to men who were old and rich so that she could earn by selling her body. The financial times were miserable during the war and the Depression and money just had to be made. Zenia said that it all started when she was five or six or earlier. She said that initially it was not real sex and it was just a lot of ‘feeling up’ and ‘sticky fingers’. The real thing came when she was around eleven or twelve with an old man who did not even have the patience to take off his pants. Zenia very casually says of her mother, “She saved the big bang till I was what she called grown up... She bought me a new dress for the occasion, on the black market too, I guess” (Atwood, *Robber* 241). Zenia was a virgin then, and Tony, after listening to the story hoped that she would have earned a hefty sum from that sexual encounter. It is strange how much of a premium is placed on a girls’ virginity. Gandhi was of the view that it is extremely unfair to have this “morbid anxiety” about female purity. He said that women had no say in the matter of male purity. There is never any talk of women getting anxious about the chastity of the male. “Why should abrogate unto themselves the right to regulate female purity? It cannot be superimposed from without. It is a matter of evolution from within and therefore of individual self-effort” (Gandhi, *All Men* 206).

In *The Robber Bride*, there are a set of interesting friends who are really ganged up psychologically against the common enemy Zenia. Margaret Atwood herself describes them interestingly. She says that “the first one is an ambidextrous military historian, whose specialty is siege techniques of the Middle Ages. The second has psychic leanings, a complex past and a good reason for never eating pigs (Atwood, *Assassin* 689). The third one is a business wheeler and dealing with gambling
tendencies. All of them meet at a restaurant called the Toxique and when they reach the dessert, in comes a fourth woman, whose funeral service they had all attended five years ago. Zenia is the woman and she is the one who brings in all the twists into the story.

In *The Robber Bride*, Zenia is the prototype of a woman on the prowl. She has no education, no affluence and no great reputation in the society that she lives in. However she wishes to control the environment in which she lives as she has long been denied her due by a society that is materialistically gluttonous and morally depraved. It is interesting to note how Zenia describes the rape of her mother by some soldiers during the war. There is the total absence of pain, loss, shame or sorrow. She narrates the incident as though it was a story in the movies. “I think she got raped by a bunch of soldiers or something, but she didn’t tell me” (Atwood, *Robber* 243). A little later she again talks disparagingly of her mother. She says “A woman with no money, on the run from one place to another, by herself-no protection. Women like that was fair game! Or else she had a Nazi lover, some German thug. Who can tell? She was quite a liar, so I’ll never know. Anyway, she’s dead now” (Atwood, *Robber* 243). She is utterly callous, disrespectful and disdainful and it is not really surprising how she looks at all relationships keeping in view all the materialistic parameters that come along with them. She uses her body and her sexual appeal with the objective to control, arm twist and bully her female friends, who ultimately try to run for cover even at the thought of this gorgeous Zenia. In fact even after her death she continues to haunt, mesmerize and frighten her group of female friends. “Tony keeps expecting her to turn up, stroll in through some unlocked door, climb through a window carelessly left open. It seems improbable that she would simply have evaporated, with nothing left over. There was too much of her: all that malign vitality must have gone somewhere” (Atwood, *Robber* 14).

The series of affairs (read sexual exploits) that she indulges in are not just another way of enjoying her otherwise colourless life. She uses sex to exploit the weakness of others and control the emotions of her friends. The series of her sexual games begin with her affairs with men who are closely connected in some way or the other to her “so called friends”, Tony, Charis and Roz. A completely devastating childhood, with a mother prostituting her body in order to support herself and her daughter and all the accompanying feelings of inadequacy while looking at the fortunate lot drives Zenia to a kind of a mania of which probably, even she is unable
to fathom the motives. Zenia in fact can also be studied as a case of Histrionic Personality Disorder. A person having at least five of these characteristics might be considered to have a histrionic personality disorder (Sarason 283-84).

1. Rapidly shifting but basically shallow expressions of emotion.
2. Over concern with physical attractiveness.
3. Inappropriate sexual seductiveness in appearance or behavior.
4. Discomfort when not the centre of attention.
5. Excessively impressionistic speech which lacks details.
6. Intolerance of, or excessive frustration over, situations that do not work out exactly as desired.
7. Apparent view of relationships as possessing greater intimacy than is actually the case.

Zenia definitely has characteristics no 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 8. Xenia also appears to suffer from Narcissistic Personality disorder which is a disorder in which a person is excessively occupied with the self. This disorder has several critical factors to play: an extreme sense of self-importance and the expectation of special favours, the need for continuous attention, weak sense of self-esteem, and lack of caring for others. A person having at least five of these characteristics might be considered to have a narcissistic personality disorder:

1. Grandiose sense of self-importance, exaggeration of personal achievements and talents, and need for recognition of one’s superiority by others.
2. Preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power and beauty.
3. Sense that one’s specialness and uniqueness can be appreciated only by other special or high status people.
4. Need for excessive admiration and attention.
5. Sense of entitlement; expects especially favourable treatment or automatic compliance with personal expectations.
6. Exploitation of other people; takes advantage of them.
7. Lack of empathy for the needs and feelings of others.
8. Often, envy of others or belief that others are envious of him or her.
9. Arrogance; haughty behavior or attitudes.

Of these characteristics Zenia clearly has no 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 in her personality because of which she is clearly able to unduly tilt the scales of attention.
towards herself much to the chagrin of others. She is able to manipulate her relationships with others and she uses sex to be able to gain an upper hand in all relationships with both members of her sex as well as the opposite sex.

Another case in *The Robber Bride* which shows sexual depravity is the case of Uncle Vern. Uncle Vern uses sex to control and intimidate his niece Karen. She is an orphan who’s just lost her mother to a ‘stroke’ which seems dubious from the way in which matters about her are discussed. The girl is around eight years and she has also been presented a bicycle decorated with pink ribbons by her Aunt and Uncle. After a few sentences however, we see how she is being sexually molested by her Uncle who calls her a little girl. The details that Atwood gives when describing the rape, rather the continual sexual harassment is frightening. Raw sex and its manifestation are ubiquitous in the behavior of Uncle Vern. He puts her on his knees and “pulls her higher up onto his lap and encircles her with one of his red arms”. In another instance Karen recalls how Uncle Vern “puts his hand up under her pleated skirts and slides her panties right down, shoving something hard in between her legs from behind. Or he uses two fingers, three. It hurts, but Karen knows that people who love you can do painful things to you, and she tries hard to believe that he does love her” (Atwood, *Assassin* 381). The saddest part of the whole story is Aunty Vern’s lack of support for her niece, or is she too surprised to believe the incredulous behavior of her husband. Her diatribe is vitriolic as well as insecure “You’re exactly like your mother, a liar...Don’t you ever say such an evil thing about your uncle! He loves you like a daughter! ...We’ll just forget you ever said that, dear” (Atwood, *Assassin* 382). The ambivalence that society has toward sexual harassment in the home is blatantly let’s-look-the other-way and the victim is generally made to feel the burden of guilt.

Uncle Vern is a case of a pedophile as he derives sexual pleasure from the exploits with a child. “Pedophilia is the term used to describe a disorder that includes intense and recurrent sexual urges and sexually arousing fantasies involving some form of sexual activity with a child who has not reached the age of puberty” (Sarason and Sarason 267). The sexual preferences and attractions of pedophiles are very specific. A pedophile is only aroused by girls between the ages of 8 and 10. The behavior is generally chronic that continues over a long period of time. In most of the cases the pedophile is someone whom the child knows. Pedophile behavior may take a variety of forms including exposure of the pedophile’s sexual body parts to the child; kissing, hugging and fondling the child in a sexual way; touching sexual parts
of the child’s body or inducing the child to touch or fondle the pedophile’s sexual organs, or attempted or actual intercourse with the child. Uncle Vern fits the bill exactly. In fact when Karen grows older he does not even go near her, even though fear is one of the apparent reasons why he behaves in the manner in which he does later on.

He also has strains of machismo and sadism as he enjoys inflicting pain on Karen while he gloats in the achievement and is even nicer to his wife and to Karen after raping Karen. For some people, inflicting pain and indignity is linked to sexual gratification. Many people incorporate mildly painful acts like biting, nipping and spanking into their sexual routines. However, sadists and masochists often go beyond normal pain and they really cannot enjoy sex any other way. To the sadist, enjoying sex and reaching an orgasm depends on humiliating others and inflicting pain on them. This is often referred to as ‘discipline’ (Sarason 265). He is however afraid to force sex on Karen once she turns eighteen as ‘her eyes have turned to stone’. When she looks at him with her stone eyes, Uncle Vern feels that she is “reaching in through his ribs and squeezing his heart so it almost stops” (Atwood, Assassin 387). Karen really waits for her turn. She knows that she is not old enough to do anything as Uncle and Aunt Vern are in control.

It is believed that one in four Canadian women was sexually assaulted in the year 2000. Fifty percent of all Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of sexual or physical violence. Close to 60 per cent of these women have survived more than one incident of violence (Mukherjee 193). It is also worth mentioning that 69 per cent of women who were assaulted were molested by men that they know. Karen is continuously raped by her Uncle and being raped by a relative is one of the most traumatic experiences. Uncle Vern uses rape as a double-edged weapon to exploit Karen. As she is an orphan, she is financially and emotionally dependant on her Uncle and her Aunt. Karen’s grandmother has left her a farm but as she’s not old enough she does not have a say in these matters. She really has no where to go and is caught on the crossroads of her life at the age of eight.

Children who are abused also learn that “those who love you the most are those who hit you” From here it is an easy step to conclude that you hit those you love. (Baker 109). These words are so similar to the words that Karen says about her Uncle Vern. So Karen is also made to believe that her Uncle rapes her because he actually loves her and Uncle Vern makes her feel so. Baker further points out that a review of
literature by Finkelhor (1983) suggests a pattern wherein the strongest family members victimize the weakest. This is most apparent in the sexual abuse of children, where the most common reported cases are those of fathers victimizing their daughters. A power differential between family members works to facilitate many forms of abuse. Power democracy was one in which the evil idea of exploitation did not exist at all. Sarvodaya was an idea that Gandhi propagated and it was very close to his ideas of non-violence or Ahimsa. He also advocated the idea of economic equality as the corner stone of civil Society. Economic equality is the master key to non-violent independence. He said that disparities in the economic structure would only assist in bringing down the fabric of society. Working for economic equality means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labour. It means the leveling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation’s wealth on the one hand, and a levelling up of the poor on the other (Gandhi, Swaraj 37).

Gandhi advocated strongly the rights of women in a predominantly matriarchal and a matrilineal society. Gandhi did set out the obvious differences that existed in what belonged to a man’s and a woman’s domain. He said that the duty of motherhood requires qualities that a man does not possess. He said that the art of bringing up infants of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race must become extinct. The division of the spheres of work being recognized, the general qualities and culture required are practically the same for both the sexes. However, beyond that he advocated equality in all spheres, lauding on many occasions the benign qualities of women as caretakers and homemakers. Gandhi said that both men and women live the same life and have the same feelings. Each is a complement of the other. He also surmises that over the ages the equations between men and women have evolved to become more tilted in favour of the man.

The continuous domination of women by men has forced her to believe in “the truth of man’s interested teaching that she is inferior to him.” (Gandhi, Sarvodaya 58). Gandhi has said of the place of a woman that she is the companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the minutest detail of the activities of man, and she has the same right of freedom and liberty as he. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his. Gandhi says that this should be a natural condition of things, and not just the result of an education. He also surmised that by merely following tradition and custom, even the most
ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying superiority over women which they really do not deserve and ought not to have (Gandhi, *All Men* 207).

Gandhi said that to him political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life. Political power means capacity to regulate national life through national representatives. True democracy can only be an outcome of non-violence. Gandhi’s notion of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. He also valued individual freedom but he equally professed the social aspect of a human beings life. A human being has risen to his present status by learning to adjust his individualism to the requirements of social progress. Unrestricted individualism is the law of the beast of the jungle. It is important to strike a mean between individual freedom and social restraint. Willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well being of the whole society develops both the individual and the society of which one is a member (Gandhi, *All Men* 183).

Zenia’s relationships with men, rather her sexual encounters with them have the veneer of deep love and concern but below this coating is a mere settling of scores with men who are indirectly concerned in some way to Zenia’s friends. The permanent efforts at being the prima donna of the charmed circle that Zenia inhabits are what moulds her thoughts and fires her strategies for the future. The many escapades that she has, begin and end with a sense of control over situations, thus underpinning her sense of false bravado. Her first encounter begins with West, who is really Tony’s boyfriend, though by that time not any more “Tony has relinquished him, because how could she ever compete with Zenia?” (Atwood, *Robber* 234). In another instance Tony says that there’s Zenia and Tony now, and Zenia and West but there is no West and Tony. Tony sleeps outside the bedroom with both of them inside and there are all kinds of sounds that come out from ‘underneath the earth’.

From here of course Zenia goes on to make it out with a number of men. She does not see age or relationships coming in the way of sexual triumphs. Her next arm candy is Larry, who is the son of Roz; and Zenia is double his age. Charis is surprised; in fact shocked to see Larry with Zenia. She is shaken off her smugness when she spies them. “What is he doing with Zenia right now? He’s bending his face down, Zenia’s own face is reaching up like a tentacle, they’re kissing! Or so it appears” (Atwood, *Robber* 287). Larry is in fact fit to be the son of Zenia but she has never ever slotted herself in a category, which has really given her the leverage to do
as her heart (or her body) tells her to do. Charis feels sorry for Larry but she has no choice but to yield that Larry was a twenty two year old man and he had the strings of his life in his own hands and hence had the right to take all the decisions.

Charis is the next victim at the hands of Zenia and she can never forgive her for stealing “both her future and her past”. Charis was in love with Billy and Zenia knows exactly where it hurts the most. She manages to finally seduce Billy who initially is averse to her overtures. He is always afraid the Zenia would distract Charis, but it turns out quite differently when he gets taken in by Zenia so badly. Billy was crazy for sex and at many times he hurt Charis physically while making love. However Charis is deeply in love with him and is willing to take on everything for his sake. He is slovenly, smokes dope and literatly lives off the income of Charis.

But Charis still loves him and is willing to do anything for him. He never has the patience to wait for Charis to get home. “He would wait at the ferry dock… and grab her even before she had a chance to put the groceries down” (Atwood, Robber 303). Sex was something she could never enjoy and many a times he did things that hurt her like slapping her and pinching her. Charis says “Sometimes it hurt anyway, but since she didn’t mention this, how was he supposed to know about it” (Atwood, Robber 303). She also says that she felt like a ‘trampoline with someone jumping up and down on it’. Sex is used by Billy as if “it was just a sort of nervousness, or boredom because he didn’t have that much to fill up the time; or it might have been the tension of being there illegally” (68). However Charis allows herself to be used by Billy and loves him silly. Zenia seduces him and tells Charis that Billy can’t keep his hands off her. She makes her forlorn friend believe that Billy was only interested in sex, in her ‘ass or some other body part’. She says that the only thing that a man wants from a woman is sex. Charis expects Billy’s baby and he has disdain for the fact.

Zenia does not stop at anyone and the next man she claims is Mitch. Mitch is getting older but he wants women who are younger and younger. He lies to Roz about his work but he goes about his flings. Prior to Mitch, even Roz had affairs with many men and even though she did not particularly like any of them, she really liked the sex (Atwood, Robber 450). Roz knows that Mitch wants her only for sex and money. She is tired of the money she has as it only assists to ensnare Mitch with her. Her father had warned her against Mitch but she refused to believe her father that Mitch was marrying her only for money. Roz however does not even hold her father in much esteem as he was flirtatious and had a mistress and many flings. He had even tried to
flirt with Alma, the managing editor of WiseWomanWorld, under the hotel table. She recalls how money kept coming into their home but it did not necessarily bring in happiness. When she finds out that the money came from gambling, stealing and borrowing, she is completely shattered. Roz gives a lot to charity as that was probably the way in which she felt redeemed. However it is Zenia who ultimately ruins her and her marriage comes to an end. “The end must have been a long time coming. These things are not sudden”, Roz ruminates (Atwood, Robber 540).

Mitch wants nothing but Roz’s money and Zenia wants nothing but the pleasure of having the man that Roz wants, but more importantly the money. She runs away with the money and leaves all stunned. Similarly Billy also lives off Charis and she is a free meal-ticket. So all in all it is either a game of sex or a game of money and people get so badly entangled in it all.

Economic manipulation and sexual aberrations dot the skyline of both the novels under study. Almost all the manipulations centre around these two deciding factors. We see in the course of the novels that many a wonderful life comes to ruin because of individuals using sex and money to the disadvantage of those who appear vulnerable. Gandhi was vociferous in speaking out against the evil of the strong taking undue of the weak through any means, the economy and the body being prime among them.

Thus Gandhi had seen through the apparent glitter of a machine driven modernity which puts lust and greed at its centre. An economy which exploits weaker individuals and sexually traumatizes women can never become a welfare State. Human beings have become powerless in the hands of machines and technology and greed and lust will inevitably lead to moral degradation, and finally the annihilation of civilization. As Mahatma Gandhi said civilization is a mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and body. In doing so we are attaining the goal of good conduct.