INTRODUCTION

In the post modern scenario, modern man’s life and his future remain uncertain in every sphere. Consequently the traditional socio-cultural systems like marriage, family and religion are distorted and the human attitude goes towards deterioration. In this context, the writings of Margaret Atwood (1939- ) a literary giant have created a remedy amidst of chaos by dealing with the problems encountered by a woman in provincial Canada in particular and in the world in general. Canadian literature is an act of faith and its art is inseparably linked with human life. It gets vitalized by virtue of exploring several modes of expression. In the contemporary situation, Canada literature is young and green in its modern phase and offers a congenial atmosphere for identity. As literatures in many nations are concerned with wanderings, quests and pilgrimages of every sort, the literature of Canadian exploration and travel is rich in romance. Being the work of adventures from the British Iles it achieves literary excellence. Since 1959, Canadian Literature has grown and evolved reflecting changes in Canadian society in literary studies. On the lines of great literature and well integrated society, ethnicity has become a recurrent theme reflecting Canada’s multiculturalism. So the character and distinctiveness of English Canadian literary canon of today has its roots in the writings of its pioneers.
Evolving from a group of French and British colonies into bilingual multicultural federation, Canadian literature enjoys an international prestige with its inhabitants of aboriginal people. The period of hundred and fifty years of its process of colonization was set in motion and 1980s and 90s witnessed a remarkable flowering of Canadian Literature in all the genres. The Collections of Smith, a great Anthologist, *A Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943), *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (1967) left a remarkable mark in Canadian Literature.

The direction of Canadian fiction has changed in 1940's by the wide acceptance of two classic novels of Mac Lennan’s *The Two Solitudes* (1945) and *The Precipice* (1948). Among the four solitudes of Canadian Literature, French Canadian Literature is called the First Solitude and W.H. New in *A History of Canadian Literature* (1948) has done a marvelous job of detailing the tap roots and multiple branches of Canada's English and French Literatures. British-Canadian Literature is addressed as the Second Solitude. Writers like Ernest Thomson Seton (1860) Stephen Leacock (1869) made Canadian nationhood as their fictional subject. Jewish-Canadian Literature perceived as the Third Solitude in Canada and it has been continuing to enrich the Canadian identity through the linguistic experience by dealing with the quests of anti-heroes, orphans,
adolescents and immigrants. Native Canadian Literature is the Fourth Solitude is vibrant and thrilling because of its authentic original voices.

There is no doubt that there has been an enormous quantitative expansion in Canadian writing by the writers breakthrough of the narrower patterns of the past, reflecting the themes like identity gender, race, colour, sex, political, economic and cultural issues. But the concept of a Canadian tradition is not easily established. It is neither an abstraction like a sense of identity nor a theme like 'Survival'. The majority of Canadian writers till recent past have shown a continuing interest in the modern era. Above all these solitudes “women’s solitude is represented by Margaret Atwood. She posited the concept of survival, as the survival of Canadians from the invasion of Americans, as the survival of women and survival of Canadian animals from the American hunts men.

English Canadian Literary canon today got shaped fundamentally in its character and distinctiveness through the literary nationalist movement known as the movement of Canadian Thematic Criticism. Since Canada is a unique diverse country with French and British as home cultures, its literature is concerned with place and displacement identifying relationship between self and environs. Reflecting three main parts of Canadian experience, its literature was first recognized politically as an “area to enquire” into the value system of land or to study the distinctive feature of
cultural nationalism. Writers’ emphasis on effects of climate, geography, people’s frontiers life, Canada’s position in the world frequently appears in its literature. Particularly after the Second World War the quest for definition of Canadian identity became a national obsession. The writings of Frederick Philip Grove, Gabrielle Roy and Morely Callaghan’s writings represented the emergence of serious Canadian fiction. Grove’s *Settlers of the March* (1925), Gabrielle Roy’s *Where Nests the Water Hen* (1950) ranked as the most significant works of psychological realism in the history of Canadian Literature.

In the specific context of Canada, the general difficulty of defining a nation is compounded by the striking diversity of Canada’s population and natural landscapes. So the question of national identity becomes particularly compelling because of its much critical and literary discourse. *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995) by Atwood contributed a great deal to justify the search for ‘the Canadian identity’. Its literature is shaped from all periods by its particular social and physical landscape. Legends and tales of Native Canadians were drawn by Richardson and efforts of Victorian missionaries led to the development of literary creativity in English. In order to capture Colonial experience, Catherine Parr Traill and her sister Susanna Moodie modify inherited literary forms but the eminence of the global significance of Canadian
undisputedly belongs to the contributions of Margaret Atwood. She has provided a definite and chronological identity to Canadian Literature with her polemical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972). In less than a decade since her first book of verse appeared she has established herself as one of the leading writers of the country. Her writings extended into wider frames because of her extraordinary intellectual clairvoyance have enabled to see so many human predicaments with lucidity. As the author of over forty works, including over a dozen novels, over a dozen works of poetry as well as collection of essays and reviews proclaim that Atwood is indisputably Canada’s best known contemporary author. From the beginning of her career to the recent publication of *The Year of the Flood* (2009) she has been thrilling her readers with her wit, incisive criticism and complex characters exploring cultural contexts and review key themes. In contrast, in much of her works love and power seem to be intricately connected. Since Canadian Literature reveals a collective victim mentality and Canadians troubled reflection with the wilderness and colonial inadequacy, ‘Survival’ signifies self explanatory continuance to dive or to exist. But the attempts of Atwood’s ‘Survival’ promoted Canada beyond the predictions of the literary world. According to her, ‘Survival’ has been the focus of the energies of the Canadian women in the spectrum of their literature. She adopts a number of strategies for the women characters to ‘Survive’ to
convey that even those who often fail and are able to ascend, they continue to survive with a tremendous zest for life. From the perception of Atwood, ‘Survival’ is an inner freedom that includes human dignity, human warmth and the ability to reach out entire humanity. The notion of survival and its central character has become the victim and is the central image of the nation’s literature because Canadians wanted to liberate themselves from the continuing American influence.

The twentieth century has been Canada’s plenty in fiction writing, and it is remarkable that women writers outnumber the male writers in Canada. Canadian literature soon asserted its nationalism and developed its independent tradition as a literary output arising out of a confluence of the two main streams in English language i.e., British and America, with a unique identity of its own. As a result, Diaspora experience, migration and exile are some of the subjects of late twentieth and twenty-first century Canadian texts. It is pertinent to observe that many authors like Atwood have become international stars and established its intense literary value, popularity and the economics of culture in a great extent. In relation to the women’s self, position, power and politics, women writers of Canada took up the rights, responsibilities, prospects, and problems of women, with the sweeping changes taking place on a global footing.
The Thesis entitled “Interrogating the Omnipotent Victim Position of Women in Margaret Atwood’s Fiction” makes a humble attempt to explore the historical evidence of Canada, with an object to highlight the main aspects of socio literary consciousness of women in the select novels of Margaret Atwood, the most prominent figure in contemporary Canadian Literature as a poet, critic, short story writer and novelist shortlisted for the Booker Prize five times, winning once, a finalist for the Governor General's Award for seven times, winning twice and increasingly been mentioned as a potential candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature. No surprise her fiction has been translated into several foreign languages and become a Canadian, American and international best sellers immediately. Taking the inevitable necessities of life into consideration, she writes in an exact, vivid and witty style in both prose and poetry. While her poetry represents ‘private’ myth and ‘personal’ expression, her novels represent a more ‘public’ and ‘social’ expression. At narrative level, her writings are often unsparing in its gaze at pain and unfairness but they are satiristic jabs at society. It is obvious that Atwood’s typical heroine is a model urban woman, often a writer or artist always with some social professional commitment who fights for self and survival in a society where men are the friendly enemy.
The prime motif and major aspects of her writings are of images, narrative designs, politics, duality, visions, subjectivity, and sexual politics of women. In her fiction she tried to establish that her women are different, who endeavor to be deemed survivors, by refusing to be victims. The thesis confines to five of her major novels: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Hand Maid’s Tale* (1985), *Cat’s Eye* (1990) and *The Blind Assassin* (2005) where the protagonists are forced to endure varying degrees of victimization but an interpretation of the strategies adopted by the protagonists with their consciousness is critically examined within the limited canvas available for expounding the thesis.

The First Chapter entitled ‘Canadian Literary Renaissance’ begins with an introduction to the intellectual atmosphere of her age, and provides a comprehensive study of Margaret Atwood as a feminine writer. The chapter examines the evolution of Canadian literature in relation to socio, economic and cultural circumstances. Works by feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Helene Cixous, and Toril Moi help to illuminate the feminist critics’ interpretation of the victim dichotomy. Two texts, *Survival* and *Second Words* shed light on Atwood’s own thoughts to understand her protagonists more thoroughly. The chapter particularly mentions the literary contributions of Canadian writers in brief and the
themes of Canadian history reflected in their works. It also examines the
contemporary themes and the synthesis of Canadian cultural past and
present. Presenting the credentials of Canadian Literature, the second part
of the introduction presents a brief biographical synopsis of Margaret
Atwood and ends with the proposition of her select works.

The Second Chapter entitled ‘Resisting the Social Myth’ examines
Atwood’s *The Edible Woman*. Through the postures of patriarchy the
dramatization of identity crisis in the soul of the central character
MarianMc Alpin is examined. This serves as a feminist guide in context of
male domination in respect of sexual status. It not only exposes woman’s
victimization but it excels female’s equal claims as an individual in
society. It examines the contemporary themes in a brittle way that in a
consumer society, there cannot be reaffirmation of the society order. But it
gives hope that women can succeed in life irrespective of social
castigation. As an anti-comedy, the novel structures like a journey in
which we get association with male and female acquaintances. The central
theme of the novel is more contemporary and an ironic by rendering of
popular romances of the Harlequin that marriage equals everlasting
happiness. The chapter also examines how a young woman is rebellious
against a modern male domination world and how she develops a
problematic relationship with the items on own plate. It also studies the
dramatization of identity crisis and exposes the ideological constructs confined to women through ironic rendering of popular romances frustration and anxieties in the social system in varying degrees is more contemporary. The chapter addresses the relation of sexes in consumer society and accuses the way men view women as commodities to enhance their social status. Issuing out the biological realities and gender psychology, Atwood raise questions concerning the domination of men over centuries. The chapter provides through illustration of different facets every young middle class White American woman who dreams of being a happy suburban house wife and mother. Atwood identifies modern successful men and women hung between fantasy world and real world mysteriously in order to avoid decorative life where identity and individuality is lost. The chapter criticizes Atwood’s traits of the class image of femininity, contradictoriness of inner-self and subconscious rejection of depressing vision of life. It’s a contemporary comedy of manner where men and women search for true identity, inter-relationships between the various forms in a woman’s life to the larger domination structure of consumer capitalism in Marriage. Atwood’s protagonist in this novel is different from her next novel Surfacing where the unnamed heroine is not equal to Marian Mac Aplin, but an independent creation. The Chapter ends with a note of transformation when Marian consumes her past in the form of a cake to free herself to be a champion of her life.
Chapter Three ‘A Psychological Quest’ analyses the feminine, passive, and a victim complex in *Surfacing* where the unnamed protagonist is terrified of the past of her life, subscribing to self-alienation. The chapter conveys that the knowledge of the meaning of death revealed at the bottom of the lake corresponds to the unconscious half of the protagonist. The textual discourses latent in *Surfacing* illustrates the narrator’s state of primitive consciousness in which each object in the outer world is invented with sacred and personal significance. It explains the Canadian author’s favorite methods of drowning and freezing, for dispatching their victims descent into unconsciousness. In this relation the chapter examines Atwood’s imaginative implications of contemporary schism between conscious and unconsciousness. It also presents the frequent references to mutilation, amputation, anesthesia to show the mechanized reality of the narrator’s past. Her descent in her decent self discloses the poverty of the conventional religious values that she had partly assimilated. The chapter examines the thematic illustrations through a map to a genuine search place where each person confronts his or her personal truth. It reflects the fact that the truth she seeks is already within her which is a non-verbal. Examining the novel, the chapter shows that, the knowledge of the meaning of death at the bottom of the lake corresponds to the protagonist’s unconsciousness joined with her conscious self to form an integral personality. The literal Surfacing of the protagonist from the waters of the
lake in which her father had drowned represent her rising from death to life. The chapter concludes that taboos are everywhere but salvation and redemption are never total and they must be constantly renewed in the present. With this realization the protagonist learns to accept life and decides to return to her own place. Atwood thus created a powerful account of modern civilization and its deceases through the split personality equal to the national and mental illness of Canada in the light of postmodern logistics. It voices a quest for rebirth and transformation because of the impact of Canada’s border relationship with the United States of Canadian consciousness which is equally interpreted as a search for a demining discourse, escaping from the challenges of social order.

Fourth Chapter titled “Demystifying the Body” elucidates *Bodily Harm* as a travelogue that addresses itself to the nature and violence of the victimization of women. The novel shows that in society Bodily Harm is everywhere through the wickedness of men on the one hand and the brutality of the state on the other. The novelists advocate the need for a possible resistance, which can be made in order to turn the individual and national dreams into realities. The chapter examines the protagonist’s loss of faith in what she regards as her primary ability leads her to mistake the external signs on the island of St.Antoine and St. Agathe. Arrested for suspicion she is thrown into prison, she recuperates
with her report age the lives people and actuality of political violence. Her story emerges as a warning against disabling female fantasies of innocence and victimization that displaces woman’s recognition of the dangers of the real life. The protagonist’s diseased body which gets affected by cancer is a metaphor for a malignant world. Her body which is maimed, dismembered and fragmented stands as a testimonial to the depravity of the society which is predominantly patriarchal. Though the ending is ambiguous it ends on the note of hope.

The Fifth Chapter entitled “Subverting the Dystopian” provides a critical elucidation on canon of feminism and the quest for meaningful identity in the novel The Hand Maid’s Tale. The chapter examines how one of the few fertile women in the Gilleadean society of The Hand Maid’s Tale can speak about the negative effects of pollution because she sees how it affected the people around her. The novel refers back to narratives of puritan New England in its constitution of a theocracy where all inhabitants are subsumed in their appointed role. It explores the vision of the writer on the oppression in all its manifestations, both physical and psychological and how power dominates sex. It Endeavour to shed light upon and caution against a horrific social treatment of women. The chapter examines social structure that is rigid, oppressive and misogynistic under the guise of religious salvation. It provides problems and predicaments
which have a universal rather than cultural specific validity. The chapter examines the pattern of oppression in patriarchal power to its logical and nightmarish extreme which destroyed the finest chords of wifehood, motherhood and womanhood. Since reading and writing is forbidden in Gilead, the protagonist challenges the traditional values and refuses to be a silent victim. So she develops her feminist consciousness towards slavery syndrome and triumphs as the author of her own story.

The Sixth Chapter headed “A Microscopic Vision” highlights how Atwood explores the myth of childhood innocence in the novel, *Cat’s Eye*. It is the story of the little girl who got bullied by her girl friends and how she learns to respond to the situations created by them when she grew up. It builds upon the most detailed and perspective exploration of young girlhood, for whom the journey of life helps to see the negative effects of being over whelmed by others. This chapter examines Atwood feminist perspective as a concept of reality, and the issues about women’s role in the society and their emotional, intellectual and social needs are answered and evaluated in the dominant patriarchal discourse. The chapter provides the details of the journey from innocence to self-knowledge with the domestic scene and examines the roles that women play as daughter’s wives, mothers etc, to achieve a changed social order. It has shown the psychological quest for motherhood. As the title of the novel symbolizes
the ‘vision’, the vision of the protagonist helps her to see the victimization of women. The issues like anxieties of a mother, uncomfortable subject of childhood bullying, family, relationships, education are examined in this chapter. Because all these issues are important to mould a person and the psychological wounds that they inflict on later stages of adulthood. Atwood provides the overall vision into the important of the past and past memories and the need to deal with present reality. The chapter intricately examines the childhood female friendship with all the interval strife, emotion and politics that accompany while they grew up.

The Seventh Chapter entitled “Erasing the Fictional Self” examines Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* analytically in the light of postmodern Metafiction. It’s a novel of fictional autobiography of Canadian women. In presenting the reflecting journey back in time Atwood chooses from all the themes and styles of her previous novels. It’s one of the classic Greek tragedy told from the sister’s point of view, explored in the past, set in the tumultuous period between the wars. Embedded in Canadian tradition its focus is on the familial dissolution suffered by a family. The chapter examines the tragedy of a woman sold into a loveless marriage by her bankrupt father to preserve the family’s social and economic standing. It provides the knowledge of death and of the things that death can symbolize through illustrations of Caribbean setting where robbery is greater crime
than murder, because if a man kills a woman it is linked with passion and he is forgiven by the society. The chapter retrieves on the sexual exploitation of women and how they are treated as rentable objects for the pleasure of men. Atwood provides an insight into the life of a bold and subversive life of women which as a warning that, negative innocence is the most appalling characteristic of evil. The concluding chapter attempts to focus on the new woman portrayed by Atwood is still in the process of emerging. In the contemporary world women are aware of their exploitation, so in both modern and post modern thought gender is best understood in the context of identity and difference. To sum up, Atwood’s female protagonists in all these five novels are identical in refusing exploitation and to survive their predicaments. Through a close examination of Atwood’s protagonists, it is clear that they all suffer from fragmented memories of their past, but it is remarkable to note; eventually these characters succeed in procuring knowledge of their place. By gaining possession of this knowledge and by acknowledging responsibility for their victimization these characters are able to become ‘whole’ again.