

**NEGOTIATING POWER: A STUDY OF SELECTED NOVELS
OF MARGARET ATWOOD**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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Submitted

**In partial fulfilment of the requirement of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Negotiating Power: A Study of Selected Novels of Margaret Atwood” written by Annabel Lalhriatpuii for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in English has been written under my supervision.

She has fulfilled all the required norms laid down within the Ph.D UGC Regulations 2009 of Mizoram University. The thesis is the result of her own investigation.

Neither the thesis as a whole nor any part of it was ever submitted by any other University for research degree.

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DECLARATION

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SEPTEMBER 2021

I, Annabel Lalhriatpuii, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to do the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the Mizoram University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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CONTENTS

CERTIFICATE

DECLARATION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

CHAPTER I **1 - 27**

- **Introduction**

CHAPTER II **28 - 51**

- **Dynamics of Power**

CHAPTER III **52 - 91**

- **The Female Experience**

CHAPTER IV **92 - 127**

- **Negotiation of Power and Emergence of New Identity**

CHAPTER V **128 - 147**

- **Conclusion**

BIBLIOGRAPHY **148 – 155**

BIO-DATA

OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION

PARTICULARS OF THE CANDIDATE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian writer celebrated for her poetry, novels, literary criticism and essays. She began writing at an early age but her first serious literary work, a collection of poetry titled *Double Persephone* was published as a literary pamphlet in 1961 by Hawkshead Press. It made her the recipient of the E.J. Pratt Medal in Poetry. Apart from her literary work, she is also a well-known environmental activist who dedicates much of her time in campaigns to promote awareness on climate change and its impact. Atwood invented and developed the technology which enables the remote robotic writing of documents known as the LongPen. She founded the Unotchit Inc., later renamed Syngrafii Inc. in 2011 in an effort to promote this technology. She is a founding trustee of the Griffin Poetry Prize and Writers' Trust of Canada, a non-profit literary organization that has been founded to encourage the Canadian writing community. This may be regarded as one of her most important contributions to Canadian literature. She was inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame in 2001 for her contributions to Canadian literature making her the first novelist and poet inductee.

Margaret Atwood was born on 18th November 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada to Carl Edmund Atwood and Margaret Dorothy. Her father was a forest entomologist whose research prompted the family to live in the backwoods of Northern Quebec. Atwood spent most of her childhood in the wilderness where she was home-schooled until she finally received formal education at the age of twelve. In 1957, she finished school from Leaside High School, Toronto. By then, she had become an avid reader of literature and was particularly interested in the Dell pocketbook mysteries, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Canadian animal tales as well as comic books. Her interest in myths and fairy tales would later reflect on her work, especially her poetry. She attended and received her undergraduate with a Woodrow Wilson fellowship and master's degree from Victoria College of the University of Toronto and Radcliffe College of Harvard University respectively. She has held honourable positions in the past such as President of the Writers' Union of Canada (1981-1982)

and President of International P.E.N., Canadian Centre (1984-1986). She and her late partner Graeme Gibson (1934-2019) are the Joint Honourary Presidents of the Rare Bird Society within Birdlife International. She is also currently serving as Vice-President of the P.E.N. International.

Margaret Atwood has published a considerable amount of writings which include seventeen novels, eight short story collections, eight children's books, three graphic novels, eighteen volumes of poetry and ten non-fictional books on literary criticism and essays. Apart from these, multiple small press editions including seven poetry collections, four fictional writings, three television scripts, one radio script, five recordings, five texts as editor and one theatrical production has been credited to her name. She is a recipient of numerous awards and accolades for her literary work some of which are the prestigious Man Booker Prize, Arthur C. Clarke Award, Governor General's Literary Award for English-language Fiction, Franz Kafka Prize, National Book Critics and PEN Center USA Lifetime Achievement Awards, Order for the Companions of Order, among many others. Most recently, she was a co-winner of the Booker Prize, formerly known as the Booker Prize for Fiction or the Man-Booker Prize, for her novel *The Testaments* in 2019. *The Testaments*, a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, was published in September 2019. The Booker Prize for Fiction 2019 was awarded jointly to Atwood for *The Testaments* and Bernardine Evaristo for *Girl, Woman, Other*. Since a rule was announced banning joint winners, this was the first time the Prize is awarded to joint winners since 1992. Atwood also became the oldest awardee of the Booker Prize for Fiction. She has also won the prize in 2000 for her novel *The Blind Assassin*. She is one of only four authors who have been awarded the prize more than once since its inception.

Margaret Atwood realized that she wanted to become a professional writer at the age of sixteen. She had already begun writing at the age six. "At four, five, six and seven years of age, I was just writing comic strips, little poems, stories and plays... At sixteen I started writing poetry. I don't know why I wrote; there certainly weren't any role models around." (Hammond 27) While studying at Victoria College, she published poems and articles in the college literary journal, *Acta Victoriana*. Her interest in theatre is also noticeable from her participation *The Bob Comedy revue*, a sophomore theatrical tradition of her college. She had been taught in college by well-known Canadian literary figures such as Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson, and

eventually graduated in 1961. While embarking on her writing career, Atwood also went on to become a lecturer where she took teaching jobs in various institutions such as the University of British Columbia (1964-1965), Sir George Williams University (1967-1968), University of Alberta (1969-1970), York University (1971-1972) and so on. Some of her earlier works were published during this period.

Atwood's first known collection of poetry *Double Persephone* was followed by three more small-edition press publications of poetry collections. These are *Kaleidoscopes Baroque: a poem*, *Talismans for Children* and *Speeches for Doctor Frankenstein* which were all published by Cranbrook Academy of Art between 1965 and 1966. Her first major publication, a collection of poetry titled *The Circle Game* was published in 1964, which was followed by *The Animals in That Country* published in 1968. Her first novel, *The Edible Woman* was published in 1969. The publication of this novel helped establish Atwood as a significant fiction writer in Canada. The next two decades saw a profusion of publications as her reputation continue to grow with the publication of her novels such as *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1980), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993) and *Alias Grace* (1996).

The Robber Bride became a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award in 1994. It was also shortlisted for the James Tiptree Jr. Award. *Alias Grace* won the Giller Prize in 1996 and became a finalist for both the Booker Prize and Governor General's Literary Award in 1997, while also being shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 1997. The novel *Alias Grace* (1996) was adapted into an eponymous six-part miniseries. It premiered on CBC on September 25, 2017, and the full series was released on Netflix on November 3, 2017. *Cat's Eye* and *Oryx and Crake* have also been shortlisted in the year of their publications for the Booker Prize.

The Handmaid's Tale undoubtedly became the most successful among her novels as it earned the Governor General's Literary Award in 1985 and the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987. The novel has also been nominated and eventually became a finalist for the Nebula Award, the Booker Prize as well as the Prometheus Award in 1986, 1986 and 1987 respectively. Atwood continues to enjoy the success of this particular novel which has been made into a film in 1990, a radio show as well as a number of theatrical productions. The most recent major media adaptation of the novel is the television series produced by Hulu bearing the same title which was first released

in 2017. Atwood served as a consulting producer and also made a cameo appearance in the first episode as an Aunt. In the year of its release, the series earned eight Primetime Emmy Awards. The show has been a commercial success and is currently airing the fourth season which premiered on April 2021. Atwood claims that the 2016 US presidential election led to an increase in sales of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The debate over issues that pertain to women's reproductive rights became one of the major grounds that led to a mass hysteria where "pro-choice" adherents believe they were on the verge of losing their freedom to choose. Inspired by *The Handmaid's Tale*, the political action group "The Handmaid's Coalition" was formed in 2017 in response to legislation and actions aimed at limiting the rights of women and marginalized groups. Activists, dressed in red cloaks and white hats as described in *The Handmaid's Tale*, lobby and protest in order to bring awareness to politicians and laws that discriminate against women and women's rights. (Marsh np)

Atwood won the Booker Prize in 2000 and the Hammett Prize in 2001 for her novel *The Blind Assassin* which was published in 2000. It has also been nominated for the Governor General's Literary Award in the year 2000, as well as the Orange Prize for Fiction and the International Dublin Literary Award in 2002. She has often been regarded as a science fiction novelist which is seen from the nomination of her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* for awards such as the Nebula Award and Prometheus Award which are awards that recognize the best works in the genre of science fiction and fantasy writings. The novel, as mentioned earlier, has also won the Arthur C. Clarke Award. She maintains that despite this reputation, she only writes about issues that have already occurred, or has the tendency to occur sometime in the future. However, the publication of *Oryx and Crake* in 2003 establish her as a serious author of the aforementioned genre as it delves into the realm of scientific inventions and the future of humanity as seen from the perspective of science. The novel became the first novel in a series that includes *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013), which came to be known as the MaddAddam Trilogy. She also published *The Heart Goes Last*, a dystopian fiction set in the near-future, in 2015. Although Atwood undeniably excels in the art of writing futuristic dystopian fiction, it may not do justice to label her a dystopian or science-fiction novelist. While publishing her novels, she also publishes numerous books on poetry, short story collection as well as children's books simultaneously. On top of these, she also publishes a number of books on non-fictional

writing such as literary criticism and essays. She has published two important works which are retellings of canonical texts from a different perspective. These are *The Penelopiad* and *Hag-Seed* published in 2012 and 2016 respectively. *The Penelopiad* is a retelling of Homer's *The Odyssey* from the perspective of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, and the twelve maids who were executed. *Hag-Seed* is a retelling of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* from a modern perspective. Her proficiency in the art of writing is well-known but her ability to adapt to new forms of writing is exemplified by her publication of superhero-influenced graphic novels namely *Angel Catbird in 2016*, *Angel Catbird Vol 2 & 3* in 2017 and *War Bears Vol 1 to 3* in 2018.

In 2014, Margaret Atwood was selected to be the first author to contribute to Katie Paterson's Future Library Project. According to the project, manuscripts that may contain poetry, fiction, essays or any other form of art, will be kept concealed in a library which will eventually be published in 2114. The selection has been based on an author's "outstanding contributions to literature or poetry, and for their work's ability to capture the imagination of this and future generations." (Mumford) Atwood submitted the manuscript in 2015 thus effectively becoming the first contributor to the Future Library Project. The title of the book, according to Atwood is *Scribbler Moon*, "And that's the only part of it you will know for 100 years." (Flood)

"I am sending a manuscript into time...Will any human beings be waiting there to receive it? Will there be a 'Norway'? Will there be a 'forest'? Will there be a 'library'? How strange it is to think of my own voice – silent by then for a long time – suddenly being awakened, after 100 years. What is the first thing that voice will say as a not-yet-embodied hand draws it out of its container and opens it to the first page? I picture this encounter – between my text and the so-far nonexistent reader – as being a little like the red-painted handprint I once saw on the wall of a Mexican cave that had been sealed for over three centuries. Who now can decipher its exact meaning? But its general meaning was universal: any human being could read it. It said: 'Greetings. I was here.' (Flood)

Margaret Atwood began publishing serious literature in the 1960s, a crucial decade when "strong waves of nationalism rocked literature, arts and culture in preparation of the centenary celebrations of the Confederation in 1967." (Dutt xxviii)

In the 19th Century, Canada was caught so deeply in the struggles to establish itself as a political entity that little attention was paid to literature. Its writers were still enamoured by British Romanticism, and did no more than copy the structures and ideology of that period in the mother country. (Dutt xxviii)

The attempt to move away from this tradition was at the hands of writers such as Atwood and her contemporaries. The necessity to establish itself politically, and the strife to gain recognition is reflected in the literature of this period where writers explore the idea of a quest for identity. These writers began publishing works that are concerned with being ‘Canadian’ and representations of traditions and identities that particularly belong to their great nation rather than emulating the traditions of the Europeans, particularly the English. Growing up in Quebec during the formative, and perhaps most crucial years, of a search for Canadian national identity, Atwood deeply understands the conflicts that existed within the nation. One of these is pertaining to language and culture. She depicts her troubled nation as “Siamese twins joined at the head, each twin desperate to be an individual, but each caught in the other’s identity.”(Dutt xii) In 1972, she published *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* which can be regarded as a standard introduction to Canadian literature. In *Survival*, Atwood suggests that Canadian literature, as well as Canadian identity, is characterized by the symbol of survival. This symbol is expressed in the omnipresent use of “victim positions” in Canadian literature, including Atwood’s novels.

Atwood’s *Survival* bears the influence of Northrop Frye’s theory of garrison mentality; Atwood uses Frye’s concept of Canada’s desire to wall itself off from outside influence as a critical tool to analyse Canadian literature. (Walter 122)

In her theoretical works, especially *Survival* and her exploration of similar themes in her fiction, Atwood considers Canadian literature as the expression of Canadian identity. She writes, “Canadian identity has been defined by a fear of nature, by settler history, and by unquestioned adherence to the community.” (*Survival* 32) In 1995, Atwood published *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, a collection of lectures which continues to explore the issues that have been presented in *Survival*, particularly the theme of Canadian identity. The quest for identity has always been the focus of the Canadian intellectual community. “The

preoccupation with self-definition and the search for a distinctive Canadian identity has been such a central aspect of Canadian imagination that, it can be said, the discourse on identity is the Canadian discourse.” (Salat xiii) Canadian author Arthur Adamson writes:

It seems to me that a central theme in our literature today is one that expresses a lack of integration, which reveals an inability to achieve whole identity. Our very insistence on the quest for identity itself is an indication of our unease, of our need for assurance. (90)

Atwood’s novels reflect the sentiment expressed by Adamson where this quest for identity is explored through the central protagonists who experience the sense of uncertainty, loss and the need for assurance. Their quest for identity and recognition, and the assertion of their individuality in a male-dominated society are seen in the novels of Atwood.

In an interview with Karla Hammond, Atwood notes that when she first started writing and publishing professionally, “There was no nationalistic consciousness in Canada at the time (1956). It didn’t arise until the mid-sixties. We were taught very little Canadian writing or history in school.” (Hammond 27) In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Atwood asserts that “Canada as a nation can be represented as a victimised individual struggling endlessly against the hostile forces of physical nature and colonial conditions.” (Dutt xxxiv) This aspect is portrayed in Atwood’s novels where she her protagonists can be said to personify the victimised Canada. Her novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, is set in the United States near Boston. In this new-found dystopia, the citizens are forced to become victims of an oppressive regime where all their rights and freedom are relinquished. Meanwhile Canada is portrayed as a safe haven that the Gileadeans yearn for and is seen as the only hope for an escape. To some this reflects her status of being “in the vanguard of Canadian anti-Americanism of the 1960s and 1970s.” (Ackerman) Critics have seen Gilead as a repressive regime and the mistreated Handmaid as Canada. (Nischik 6) According to Ajanta Dutt,

The 1970s when she was writing was very politically motivated, and the relationship between Quebec and the other regions was distinctly strained over constitutional and linguistic issues. This is when the

English-Canadian and feminist traditions in Canadian literature were firmly ensconced. Thus Atwood in her role as poet and novelist has debated consistently men-women relationships and the nationalism sweeping the country. (Dutt xxx1)

Following the publication of her first novel, *The Edible Woman*, Atwood addressed the claim that the novel is a feminist novel by asserting, “I don’t consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism.” (Kaminski 29) She states,

I always want to know what people mean by that word [feminism]. Some people mean it quite negatively, other people mean it very positively, some people mean it in a broad sense, other people mean it in a more specific sense. Therefore, in order to answer the question, you have to ask the person what they mean. (McNamara)

In her interview with *The Guardian*, she said

For instance, some feminists have historically been against lipstick and letting transgender women into women’s washrooms. Those are not positions I have agreed with. (Allardice)

Her discomfort with being labelled “feminist” or the content of her works as “feminism” is justifiable as her novels do not essentially promote feminist propaganda of their time. Her novels neither project the female protagonists as inhumanely superior, nor men completely detestable. While her novels do contain and address important issues pertaining to women and gender roles, the core message of her fiction is that “art is a moral issue, and it is the responsibility of the writer/artist not only to describe her world, but also to criticise it, to bear witness to its failures, and, finally, to prescribe corrective measures – perhaps even to redeem.” (Rigney 1)

In response to social media backlash related to her signature on a 2016 petition calling for an independent investigation into the firing of Steven Galloway, Atwood wrote the op-ed “Am I A Bad Feminist?” for *The Globe and Mail* in January 2018. Galloway is a former University of British Columbia professor accused of sexual harassment and assault by a student. The incident became quite controversial as the writers’ community took opposing sides on the issue. Atwood was one of those who advocated due process in the handling of their fellow writer’s case. Feminist critics denounced Atwood for her support of Galloway. She has been criticized for her

comments surrounding the #MeToo movement, particularly for her assertion that it is a “symptom of a broken legal system.” (“Am I a Bad Feminist?”) She writes,

My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They’re not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn’t need a legal system.

Nor do I believe that women are children, incapable of agency or of making moral decisions. If they were, we’re back to the 19th century, and women should not own property, have credit cards, have access to higher education, control their own reproduction or vote. There are powerful groups in North America pushing this agenda, but they are not usually considered feminists.

Furthermore, I believe that in order to have civil and human rights for women there have to be civil and human rights, period, including the right to fundamental justice, just as for women to have the vote, there has to be a vote. Do Good Feminists believe that only women should have such rights? Surely not. That would be to flip the coin on the old state of affairs in which only men had such rights. (“Am I a bad Feminist?”)

The essay briefly yet precisely describes her views on feminism and women’s rights. It declares her support for equality of the sexes. It also shows her advocacy for women’s reproductive rights and control over their own bodies, an issue that is reiterated in her novels.

Seven of Margaret Atwood’s novels are selected for this study. These are, *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *The Penelopiad* (2005). Six of the selected novels were published between the years 1969 to 1985. They are her first six novels while *The Penelopiad* was published in 2012. *The Penelopiad* is a modern retelling of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Her early novels were written in an era when women’s liberation movements initially began to make significant appearances in the social scene in North America. The changing roles of women at home and at the workplace, and how it impacted them become remarkable aspects in these novels.

While chronicling the physical and spiritual journey of the female protagonists, these novels lay emphasis on these characters' quest for identity in an oftentimes turbulent atmosphere. Power and survival are recurring themes in the selected novels of Margaret Atwood. The struggle for survival is an important motif that correlates to the struggle for power, or the escape from it. The female protagonists are subjected to different kinds of violence and abuse such as verbal and mental abuse, neglect, rape and so on. The study will analyse the manner in which these women cope with these circumstances, and how they face their hostile environment and struggle towards emancipation from these oppressive forces. Love, marriage and motherhood are themes that are common in the novels of Atwood. However, the manner in which these are explored are seldom constructive. They are used in the narratives to highlight and question societal norms and traditional gender roles, ideals that the protagonists come to resist later in their lives.

The Edible Woman is Atwood's first published novel that tells the story a young woman Marian MacAlpin. She holds a decent job at Seymour Surveys and is in a stable relationship with Peter who is a lawyer by profession. The narrative is divided into three parts:

In part one, the reasons for the narrator's problems are revealed and her crisis is hinted at; in part two, the crisis reaches its peak and finally leads to a climax, and in part three, which consists only of a very short chapter, the protagonist starts to hatch plans for a new beginning. (Kribernegg 53)

The first and last parts of the novel are narrated by Marian. The narration shifts to a third-person narrator in the second part of the novel while the protagonist undergoes a mental episode and struggles to make sense of her own life. Unlike the other novels, not much is divulged about Marian's past as the novel is constantly focussed on Marian's present life.

Although her job as a surveyor requires Marian to engage in unpleasant work at times, she does not initially show any sign of discontent towards her profession. She also maintains amicable relationship with her dull colleagues who regularly engage on discussions she has no interest in. She soon gets engaged to Peter who finally proposes after all his male friends got married. Around this time, on one of her job assignments,

she meets Duncan, a college student, who is a random client for a product survey. She begins to develop a friendship with him that eventually ended in a sexual encounter. After her engagement to Peter, the prospect of a marriage and starting a family, which will involve raising children preoccupies Marian's thoughts. She decides to take up the traditional role by leaving her job and stay at home to look after her family. Once she resolves to sacrifice her independence – physically, emotionally and financially, she begins to experience mental instability. She immediately loses her appetite and her body only accepts specific vegetarian diet while rejecting all meat products. The narration of the story is taken over by an unknown third-person while Marian suffers from this mental breakdown. After she overcomes this ordeal, Marian resumes her role as narrator. This narrative shift is symbolic of the power struggle that she personally experiences. The loss of a narrative-voice in the second part of the novel, and her body's rejection of food symbolize the rejection of the dominant ideology that is gradually suppressing her own identity. The dominant ideology being the patriarchal system wherein women are expected to assume their traditional role which will entail the loss of her freedom and independence by subjecting herself to an oppressive authority. The novel ends with Marian's rejection of marriage and in the process reclaims her sanity. Although she does not disclose which direction she is taking, she decides to shift her focus on herself and her interests as opposed to the passive role she plays earlier in the progression of her own story.

The condition of women, and issues concerning women are explored through Marian's interaction with her female colleagues, but more significantly with her flatmate Ainsley and college friend Clara. The themes of marriage and reproductive issues pervade these women's discussions. While her female colleagues embody stereotypical submissive women, Ainsley offer a more progressive and perhaps radical vision of feminism who idealizes single motherhood as the pivot of embodying the strength and ability of women. Clara, on the other hand is a married mother-of-two, and is currently pregnant with her third baby. Clara married early during her college years after being impregnated by her boyfriend, Joe. She laments her role as a mother of young and restless children and feels that she is helpless to change her condition. Her husband appears to be extremely supportive and in fact, does all the chores at home while also working to provide for his ever-growing family. As witnesses of the domestic atmosphere of Clara and Joe's household, Marian and Ainsley give opposing

views. While they both argue in favour of Clara, their dialogue can be seen as a debate on tradition vs. modernity in the context of women's empowerment. Marian applauds Joe for the work he does in looking after his family, including household chores and feels Clara is lucky to have him as a husband. On the other hand, Ainsley feels that Clara is crippled because she relies too much on Joe. Clara's refusal or inability to change, leaves her powerless and voluntarily puts herself under the mercy of her husband. Ainsley believes that in order to shift the power dynamic between the married couple, Clara should pursue a degree and get a job so that she can empower herself.

Surfacing tells the physical and spiritual journey of an unnamed female protagonist who grew up on an isolated island off the coast of Quebec. With limited access to modern amenities and confined unconventional manner in which she was brought up, she feels the pressure to explore the outside world. Upon reaching adulthood, she left her family and island behind and moved to the city. She returned twice. The first time she returned was to bid her farewells to her dying mother at a hospital. She was prompted to return to the island a second and final time upon learning of her father's mysterious disappearance. The focus of the story is on this trip that she undertakes with her boyfriend, Joe and two of their friends, David and Anna. The journey is not only a physical journey for the protagonist, but also a spiritual one because on this occasion, she does not return only to find her missing father, but also her long-lost self. Upon her arrival on the island, she is reminded about her past which is seen in the form of flashbacks. "Nothing is the same, I don't know the way anymore." (10) Through these flashbacks, glimpses of her childhood, her escape from the island and the aftermath are divulged. She explains how she has been denied her dream career by her male boss for being a female artist, which was conventionally inappropriate at the time. She also confesses her past affair with a married man who impregnated her and abandoned her after forcing her to get an abortion. This is an experience that continues to haunt her throughout her life as she continually gets disturbed by ideas and imageries of death and severed bodies. In an attempt to conceal her past trauma, she creates an alternate narrative where she convinces herself and the audience that she is a divorcee and that she has a living child who says with her father. The series of unfortunate events she has experienced in the past encourage her to abandon the abusive society that she has once been a part of by deciding to stay on the

island-isolated, but living life on her own terms, peacefully coexisting with nature as she states, “I re-enter my own time.” (249)

Lady Oracle (1976) tells the story of Joan Foster, who has recently earned success and fame for publishing a feminist novel. As the novel opens, it is revealed that she has fled society by faking her death and living in a rented house in Terremoto. Joan narrates her story, simultaneously relating how she ended up here, and also revisiting her past. Her story is one that is filled with fear, rejection and a quest for acceptance and redemption. Joan was an obese child who was the object of her peers’ ridicule. She confesses that even her mother loathed her. Her father has been absent from her life throughout most of her childhood and resurfaced during her adolescence. During her father’s absence, Joan was abused by her mother which grew worse as she gets older and bigger. Her only solace was found in her aunt, an equally obese adult who was protective and caring towards her niece. Aunt Lou, as she calls her, introduced Joan to a spiritual cult which was both an influence and menace throughout her adult life. After Aunt Lou, unfortunately, dies suddenly, life at home became unbearable as her mother’s abusive behaviour became worse, intensified by her alcoholism and her unhappy marriage. So, Joan decides to flee from home and went to the city. Scared and alone and with no one to turn to, Joan stumbles upon a Polish Count who invites her to his home. Joan follows him home and thus began her life as his mistress. She was not allowed to leave the house without supervision, so Joan begins spending her days in the Polish Count’s library and developed a hobby of writing short stories. She writes these “Costume Gothic” fiction under a pseudonym and sells them. It was her boredom, loneliness and sense of isolation that prompted her to pursue a relationship with Arthur, a young revolutionary she met on one of the few chances that she went outside. She soon moved in with him to his apartment and later married him. She was at first intrigued by Arthur’s revolutionary ideas and his dedication to the causes he and his friends were involved in. However, she soon realized the lack of pragmatism in the ideology that these group of friends indulge in and felt left out and ignored when she did not have ideas to contribute. She also hides the truth about her past including her unhappy childhood, her affair with an older man as well as being a writer of Gothic romance out of fear that Arthur might reject her. Like the unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* she invents an alternate reality in an attempt to find acceptance while she secretly continues to publish her romantic short

stories. Memories about her childhood and her mother's astral body continue to haunt her as she attempts to escape from her troubled and embarrassing past. Joan finally found success when she published her first serious "feminist poetry", elevating her to a celebrity status. However, the happiness that her newfound fame brought was short-lived as her relationship with Arthur gradually start to strain. While she was busy attending parties and addressing the media, Arthur and his friends were also preoccupied with their plan of carrying out a violent revolution. On top of the lack of support for each other's interests, the couple hardly have time for each other, Joan yet again faces another difficult situation. She began an affair with an underground artist by the name of The Royal Porcupine. Although she felt that she had everything under her control, she began to receive blackmail threats from someone who has knowledge about her secrets and is attempting to disclose them to her husband and the public. All these events unfolded rather quickly and knowing that she can no longer control the situation around her, she decided to flee for the final time. With the help of her friends, she faked her own death and went to Terremoto. At the end, she decides to finally take back control of her life by going back to the city to confront her worst fears.

Lady Oracle chronicles the miserable life of Joan, made worse by her own refusal to confront her problems. When she cannot cope with reality, she evades it by inventing alternate realities thereby living her life in fear. The secrets and lies she keeps have a negative impact on her relationship and public image as she finds the burden increasingly unbearable. She ultimately has to lose her husband, friends and career in her attempt to escape reality. However, after losing everything she possesses, she finally came to understand that she has led her whole life trying to live by other people's standards and fit into their "ideal" image of her. She then decides that she needs to undergo a transformation and enter a new chapter in her life, one that is devoid of pretensions and secrets where she will be "organized again." (374)

Life Before Man is a novel the revolves around the lives of three central characters, Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje. Elizabeth and Nate are an unhappy married couple who somehow manage to reside together for the sake of their two daughters. Each of them engage in extra-marital affairs with the other's approval. Lesje is a colleague of Elizabeth in the department of palaeontology at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The novel opens with the revelation of Chris' suicide and the immediate aftermath of the tragedy. He was the lover and colleague of Elizabeth. His

sudden death has a traumatic impact of Elizabeth, who finds herself unable to cope with the loss. The loss leaves Elizabeth amputated, “like a peeled snail” or “like a leg that’s been cut off.” (3) She can neither go to work nor attend to the needs of her children thus leaving total responsibility at the hands of Nate. With the new overwhelming sense of responsibility, Nate is unable to sustain his own extra-marital affair with his partner whom he is compelled to leave. In an effort to escape the unpleasant atmosphere at home, Nate decides to take his children to their mother’s workplace to see the dinosaurs while she was on leave. He asks Lesje to be their guide on this visit. After their initial meeting, Nate and Lesje begins to develop a relationship which escalated into a passionate affair. The discovery of the affair has a chaotic impact in both their lives. Nate, who is currently unemployed, finds himself in a difficult position as Elizabeth uses it as a means to negotiate a divorce agreement - on her own terms. Lesje who recently finds out that she is pregnant, urges Nate to leave his family to be with her. Meanwhile, Lesje’s live-in boyfriend does not take the news well and as a means to get revenge, rapes her before leaving her. The affair thus renders each central character in a vulnerable position where they all struggle to emerge for dominance.

Rennie Wilford’s plight *Bodily Harm* begins with her mastectomy, but does not end there. The amputation of her breast develops a feeling of fragmentation and insecurity which makes her feel cut off from her own self. Published in 1981, the novel tells the story of a young woman’s journey towards self-acceptance and power.

Rennie was born in Griswold, a small town whose inhabitants’ adherence to religious and traditional values is well known. She escapes the town as soon as an opportunity arises and moves to the city. Rennie is a journalist who works as a reporter for a magazine. Her diagnosis of breast cancer and eventual mastectomy marks the beginning of her undoing. The loss of her breast results in a loss of identity as Rennie feels that she has lost a part of her body which defines her as a complete woman. Feeling insecure and isolated, she pushed her boyfriend Jake away and began relying and seeking affection from the doctor who performed the operation, Daniel. “When Jake moved out, naturally there was a vacuum. Something had to come in to fill it.” (39) The affair with Daniel did not last as he is a married man who refuses to leave his wife. Around the same time, an intruder enters Rennie’s apartment, leaving a coil of rope on her bed. Rennie feels that her safety and privacy has been compromised. With

all the pressures she was facing at home, she decides to take a business trip to St. Antoine to write a travel piece on the supposedly peaceful and tranquil island. Like Joan in *Lady Oracle*, Rennie's decision to escape the harsh conditions at home by taking a trip did not prove to be a solution to her problems, but a proliferation of it. However, her experiences on the island gave Rennie the chance to confront her own issues and thus she leaves the island with a new empowered identity.

When Rennie arrives on St. Antoine, she finds herself in the midst of a political campaign for the upcoming local election. Her profession as a journalist, and as a young female solo traveller makes her an easy target for the politicians and their campaigners to manipulate. While candidates such as Dr. Minnow and Ellis want to influence Rennie to write reports to expose the corruption of the current administration, their opponents want to get her off the island so that she will not interfere in the election. While some inhabitants think she is a spy, others who feel an impending revolution take advantage of her naivete by manipulating her into smuggling firearms. Thus, Rennie unknowingly becomes the centre of attention from all corners. Although she has been warned to stay away from the internal matters of the political movement that was going on, Rennie finds herself embroiled in the midst of it, ultimately landing her in jail. The harsh conditions she faces in prison give her the opportunity to finally confront her fears and insecurities, prompting her to prioritise herself for the first time since her surgery. The central theme of the novel is the struggle for power which is explored through the protagonist Rennie. Man's hunger for political power as well as her own personal struggle for power are two concurrent themes that run throughout the novel.

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel that was published in 1985. The novel is set in a fictional state called Gilead which is supposedly situated in modern-day United States. The current government has been overthrown and a theocratic form of government is established in its place. It is a totalitarian state where citizens are stripped of their rights and power is concentrated in the hands of a few leaders who are known as Commanders. The story is narrated by Offred who describes the harsh realities of life under the new regime.

In the Republic of Gilead, the society is structured in a hierarchical system where specific roles are accorded to members of different ranks. In this futuristic

society, infertility is pervasive and hence a few viable women, called Handmaids, are assigned to have babies for the Commanders whose wives are mostly sterile. Offred, the narrator and protagonist of the novel is also a handmaid who has been assigned to a new Commander.

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. She has only one function: to breed. If she deviates, she will, like dissenters, be hanged at the wall or sent out to die slowly of radiation sickness. (*The Handmaid's Tale* np)

The subordination of these women is evident from the manner in which they are named. Offred, for instance, whose real name is not known and is no longer relevant in the new society, is derived from the name of her master, Fred. The name itself signifies that she belongs to Commander Fred and she has no identity independent of that. Although the handmaids play a vital role in the repopulation of Gilead, they are victims of what may be called sex-slavery as well as verbal, physical and mental abuse of the jealous wives of the Commanders. As mentioned, their sole purpose is to breed and failure of which results in abandonment to the colonies where they are basically left to die.

Surveillance is an important tool employed by the government in order to ensure that Gileadeans conform to the laws. Execution is carried out to those who dissent or refuse to obey authority. The dead bodies are then displayed publicly to prevent future defection. Spies, known as “Eyes” are employed to monitor the behaviours of members of the other ranks, particularly the handmaids. Although escape from the regime seems virtually impossible, the protagonist refuses to give up the hope of reuniting with her family. As the novel progresses, she finds out that there are others who are actively striving to attain freedom from the regime. So amidst the fear and uncertainty, she awaits for that moment as she calmly endures the “unjustness and brutality” (296) of the present.

The Penelopiad is a novella that was published in 2005. Written for the Canongate Myth Series, this book is a retelling of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. In the “Introduction” to the book, Atwood states that her decision to rewrite the myth aims to pose two questions: “what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?” (xiv) The original tale tells the adventures of Odysseus in the aftermath

of the Trojan War. In Atwood's version, the story is told from the perspectives of Penelope and her twelve maids. The novel begins with Penelope's statement: "Now that I'm dead I know everything." (1). She continues,

This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true. I know only a few factoids that I didn't know before. It's much too high a price to pay for the satisfaction of curiosity, needless to say. (1)

Penelope's statement declares that the tale is told in retrospect where events of *The Odyssey* are re-examined. *The Penelopiad* chronicles Penelope's upbringing and her journeys, as well as her life in Ithaca. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is a minor character who is best known for her wit and fidelity. Atwood gives Penelope and the maids an opportunity to tell their story by constructing a narrative which revolves entirely around them. The story is divided into three phases consisting of Penelope's childhood and her life in Sparta, her marriage to Odysseus and life in Ithaca, and finally the afterlife in Hades. Penelope is the daughter of Icarius, the Spartan King in Greek mythology. She had an unhappy upbringing as a consequence of two unfortunate reasons: Icarius' desire for a baby boy and a prophecy that reveals the overthrow of his throne by his own daughter. In a desperate attempt to maintain his throne, Icarius drowned Penelope when she was a young girl. However, ducks came to her rescue and she was safely returned to her home. The incident convinced Icarius that he could not evade the prophecy. His remorse over his inappropriate actions made him become extremely protective towards his daughter. Penelope asserts that her mother neglected her and distanced herself from most matters concerning her daughter. As she came of age, Icarius was compelled to arrange a marriage for Penelope with Odysseus after the latter cheated his way to win her hand. Thus began her life in Ithaca as the wife of Odysseus.

As a young, inexperienced and physically unattractive bride, animosity arises between Penelope and her mother-in-law over Odysseus soon after her arrival to Ithaca. Penelope's misery continues to grow as her husband, the only person with whom she shares a bond with, soon left the kingdom to fight in the Trojan War. During the absence of Odysseus, Penelope gave birth to Telemachus. Odysseus failure to return even years after the war was over, prompted several men to seek the hand of

Penelope so that they can take over the kingdom. These men, known as the “suitors” compete with each other, and also conspire against Odysseus and Penelope in their attempt to grab power. Penelope is remembered for her wit and faithfulness to her husband because of the manner in which she handled these suitors, and her ability to outwit them. Penelope is served by a number of maids in the palace. Among these girls, she has twelve favourites who helped her take care of the suitors. These twelve maids employ various means to entertain the men while preventing them from harming Penelope. Unfortunately, they were all executed, along with the suitors by Odysseus and his son Telemachus, as they were regarded as traitors conspiring against the King. In *The Penelopiad* these twelve maids are given the chance to justify themselves and vent their anger which is mostly charged towards Penelope. Their anger towards Penelope stems from their conviction that Penelope is an accomplice to the King and his son. Therefore, they continue to stalk her in Hades, looking for the truth and refusing to let her rest in peace.

As a prolific writer who has established herself as a prominent figure in Canadian literature, Atwood has intrigued a number of critics and scholars who have studied her works from varying perspectives. These include psychoanalytical, ecocritical and feminist studies of her works but are not limited to these areas. While some scholars focus on her use of language and modernist themes, studies on Atwood’s novels as crime fiction and science fiction can also be found. Her novels, particularly *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* have garnered interest among scholars and have been the subjects of a number of such scholarly analyses. However, the present study attempts to look into the aspect of power based on the Foucauldian concept and how it is relayed in the seven novels selected for analysis. Despite the prominence of the interplay of power in her novels, it is apparently an overlooked matter considering the amount of research that has been done on her works. By situating the selected novels within this theoretical premise, this study is an attempt to fill that gap by locating various aspects in which power is seen and explored in these novels.

Atwood’s early novels were written and published in an era when the Feminist Movement was in its formative years in North America. The publication of *The Edible Woman*, for instance, “coincided with the rise of feminism in North America.” (*The Edible Woman* x) In the 60s, 70s and 80s when these novels were published, the role

and position of women in society underwent considerable changes. Women have become more independent, physically and financially, as compared to their predecessors. However, the transition was gradual and despite becoming more independent, women did not have real power within or outside the domestic spheres. As the narratives progress, the condition of these women are slowly uncovered. Behind the seemingly nonchalant façade, these women are stuck in unsatisfying careers, strained romantic and familial relationships. The protagonists' strife for New Womanhood which entails the elimination of gender stereotypes and conformation to traditional gender roles comes in conflict with their assigned traditional roles, which they have been indoctrinated with since their childhood. The attempt to break away from tradition often result in mental breakdown as in the case of Marian in *The Edible Woman*. By depicting the everyday life of these women, Atwood brings to surface the challenges and predicaments that these women experience. The resolution to challenge dominant ideologies that suppresses their voice becomes a significant component in understanding the negotiation of power in the novels.

Power and its various manifestations are recurrent themes in the novels of Margaret Atwood. Her preoccupation with the concept predates the first novel she published, *The Edible Woman*. According to Shannon Hengen, "Atwood's concern with ideas of power is witnessed first in the subject of her unfinished Harvard Ph.D. thesis, 'Nature and Power in the English Metaphysical Romance of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.'" (127)

The issue of power as a phenomenon defined by broader social structures runs throughout all of Atwood's writing, particularly in those works published during and since the Canadian cultural awakening of the 1970s. (Hengen 16)

Following *The Edible Woman* Atwood published a poetry titled *Power Politics* in 1971 which explores the idea of power in relation to gender politics. *Power Politics* presents the complexities of the relationship, and the struggle for power between the two personae in the poems. "Through these poems Atwood shows how power struggles color everything we do, turning even our most sacred activities into deadly manoeuvres that, finally, destroy both sides." (Grace 63) The same idea is found in Atwood's novels where she explores "power politics" through the experiences of her

fictional characters. Power is a concept which is ambivalent and expansive. Defining the nature and manifestations of power as depicted in the novels becomes a challenge as it is not always overtly depicted in all the novels. Power is manifested in the selected novels in various ways encompassing the physical and psychological, as well as political and personal. Violence, coercion and threats, the use of surveillance and manipulation in order to exert control and ensure conformity are common threads that run in the novels. Pilar Somacarrera posits in “Power politics: power and identity” that power, according to Atwood, “circulates like a kind of energy and permeates all relations within a society.” (Howells 42) In “Notes on *Power Politics*”, Atwood wrote:

We would all like to have a private life that is sealed off from the public life and different from it, where there are no rulers and no ruled, no hierarchies, no politicians, only equals, free people. But because any culture is a closed system and our culture is one based and fed on power this is impossible, or at least very difficult...So many of the things we do in what we sadly think of as our personal lives are simply duplications of the external world of power games, power struggles. (7)

By presenting the existing discourses on power, the primary focus of this study is to analyse the negotiation of power as seen in the selected novels. The term negotiation is defined as “an interpersonal decision-making process by which two or more people agree how to allocate scarce resources.” (Kim 799) In this sense, it involves the participation of two or more people to negotiate power. Within the context of the present study “negotiating power” denotes the process of questioning or challenging societal norms or ideologies that promote repression of the female characters in the selected novels. These women seek to subvert the power dynamics through discourse by employing various strategies.

The aim of this study is to show that the selected novels of Margaret Atwood are discourses on women’s negotiation and subversion of power. In an attempt to establish that, the study will focus on analysing the dynamics of power, highlighting its various manifestations by situating the novels within relevant theoretical frameworks. French theorist Michel Foucault postulates that in modern societies, power is exercised through ideas of truth and knowledge by processes of disciplinary regimes and normalisation. By normalising ideas which are traditionally accepted,

hierarchies continue to exist in society in which women become subjects in the social power structure. Feminist ideas that address this notion will be incorporated in this study. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir presents a historical analysis of women. Beauvoir's central idea in the treatise, as H.M. Parshley puts it, is that-

...since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men... and further that this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics but rather by strong environmental forms of education and social tradition under the purposeful control of men... a condition that not only has limited their achievement in many fields but has also given rise to pervasive social evils and has had a particularly vitiating effect on the sexual relations between men and women. (9)

In *The Dialectics of Sex: A Case for Feminist Revolution*, Shulamith Firestone traces the origin of women's oppression and asserts that it begins in the family. In that sense, family becomes a unit where these gender roles and traditional ideas are taught and encouraged. In Atwood's fictional world, the assertion of traditional gender roles and ideals limit the freedom and "power" of the female characters. Varied forms of 'surveillance' are employed to monitor women to ensure that these women conform to these assigned roles. While claiming that women, particularly the central protagonists are subjects of oppression, it would be wrong to assert that the novels portray the conflict between individual men and women. It is important to understand here that the conflict is not only between these opposite sexes but certain female characters are also seen as medium of 'normalisation' thereby accentuating and contributing to the continuation of the aforementioned social norms. In addition, what can be ascertained from analysing these novels is how the protagonists themselves lose sovereignty over their own bodies by their own submissiveness and passivity. Taking these perspectives into consideration, rather than merely highlighting personal conflicts, the study attempts to show how these female protagonists resist the "oppressive system" and destabilize structures that bring about their oppression. With the understanding of their limitations, these women begin to see and present themselves as helpless victims through the narratives. The attempt to conform to these societal norms, while also trying to break free from these restraints give rise to conflicts in the protagonists manifesting itself as mental breakdowns. The study will

analyse and highlight how these “victimised” women subsequently resolve their issues and gain agency.

Margaret Atwood’s novels deal with the politics of gender and women’s experiences in a male-dominated world. Her female protagonists are non-conformists who defy gender roles by refusing to adhere to the norms of society. In order to subvert their subordinate position in society, these female protagonists undergo many unpleasant experiences that involves physical and mental hardships and innumerable losses. Atwood’s novels highlight the unequal gender structure that exists in a patriarchal society in which women are victimized, oppressed and ruined. She criticizes the social system that assigns fixed roles to the sexes. Through her protagonists, Atwood tries to highlight the state of turmoil that these women are caught in as a result of the conflict between social conditioning and their rejection of traditionally assigned roles. By exposing the silent and hidden operations of patriarchy and confronting its politics, Atwood portrays an accurately bleak reality for women in society.

Atwood’s protagonists are predominantly female and therefore the novels are presented from the perspectives of these female characters. These protagonists assume the role of narrators and therefore their worldview and ideas remain central to the narratives. The present study gives importance to the narrative technique employed in these novels as they are inherent to the interplay of power. These novels are narrated in a non-linear manner which convolutes the narrative at times. The interweaving of the past and present, and the change of narrative voice is characteristic of the selected novels. This technique can be seen as a means to highlight the position of the protagonist in relation to the power dynamics.

Despite her reluctance to label her works as “feminist”, Atwood’s novels have been of interest to feminist scholars and literary critics and have often been analysed through the lens of feminism. Although the present study seeks to highlight and analyse the condition and status of women, it does not adhere to any particular radical feminist stance that attempts to completely overthrow patriarchy, or subjugate men in any sense. Rather, it tries to bring out elements wherein the female characters, despite their circumstances, assert their individual rights to equal space and opportunity. Therefore, their struggles within the power structure and their pursuit for freedom,

empowerment and recognition are explored through themes that are relatable to women across the world.

The novels selected for this study has been written within the vast timespan of three decades. Therefore it is apparent that a lot of social changes have taken place between the publication of each novel, wherein lies the intricacy of this study. These changes impact the themes and focus of each novel. The present study observes and identifies these changes, which become significant in the interpretation of the selected novels. By probing women's issues in the selected novels of Margaret Atwood, this study attempts to examine the dynamics of power, and how these dynamics shape and influence the narratives. Atwood's protagonists in the selected novels are women who also assume the role of narrator. Through their stories, the protagonists present the world they inhabit and the trivial matters that concern their daily lives.

The present study incorporates theoretical works of Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, among many others, whose ideas on power and gender relations have been utilised in order to analyse Atwood's representation of power in the selected novels. The ensuing chapters will attempt to put forward the theoretical basis that the present study is grounded upon. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Michel Foucault's treatises on "power", Shulamith Firestone's power theory as well as her treatise on feminism titled *The Dialectic of Sex: A Case for Feminist Revolution* will be reviewed. In an attempt to situate the selected narratives within the theoretical framework, focus will be given on the identification of power, and the struggle that ensues, as seen in the selected novels of Margaret Atwood.

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CHAPTER II

DYNAMICS OF POWER

Power is a concept that has been of interest to socio-political thinkers for a long time and attempts have been made to define power in various ways. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), an English philosopher, well-known for his work *Leviathan*, believes that power is a person's "present means...to obtain some future apparent Good." (Read 505) German philosopher Max Weber (1864-1920) believes that society is divided into a hierarchical structure based on three components, namely class, status and power. Taking these into account, he defines power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance." (Kim 800) Power is an aspect that is intrinsically present in all social relations. According to the definitions given above, it is a function that may be exercised by an individual or a group of individuals in any given society. The ability of an individual to influence another individual, or the government's control over its citizens may come under this broad definition. The capacity to influence the actions of others can either be carried out by force or without the use of coercion.

Power, according to Hannah Arendt is "the human ability not just to act but act in concert." (44) She holds the view that for power to manifest, it takes the coordination and involvement of two or more persons. This definition gives power a positive and productive attribute rather than an oppressive measure as it is defined as a collaborative act. Power is not an entity but rather put into existence through social relations. Arendt's view also suggests that power is present in any given relationship where a given party influences the actions of the other by various means in which both parties are willing participants.

In their treatise on power titled *The Bases of Power*, sociologists John French and Bertram Raven, classify the bases of power into five types, namely: positional power, reward power, coercive power, referent power, and expert power. (613) According to their classification, positional or legitimate power is also known as authority of a governing body. Government's authority over citizens may be cited as

an example. Reward power is the use of rewards in order to influence people's compliance. Coercive power is the use of threats and punishments in order to achieve one's goals; referent power may mean personal power or charisma of an individual and one's ability to influence others may rely on how others perceive them; expert power comes with one's knowledge of a subject or subjects which in turn influences others. According to Chris Barker:

Power is not simply the glue that holds the social together, or the coercive force which subordinates one set of people to another, though it certainly is this. It is also understood in terms of the processes that generate and enable any form of social action, relationships or order.
(10)

Power is a concept that is recurrent in Michel Foucault's theoretical work. In his essay "The Subject and Power", Foucault states that his objective in conceptualizing power "has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects." (777) In effect, the theme of most of his works is "the methods with which modern civilization creates and controls human subjects, through institutions such as hospitals, prisons, education, and knowledge; corollary to these investigations was Foucault's examination of power, its execution and distribution." (Habib 151)

According to French thinker Michel Foucault (1926-1984), "Power is a relation, it isn't a thing. It's a relation between individuals, a relation which can direct or determine another's behaviour." (Medeiros) He states,

In other words, when we see what power is, it is the exercise of something that can be called 'government' in a broad sense. One can govern a society, a group, one can govern a community, a family, one can govern someone. When I say "govern someone", it is simply in the sense that one's behaviour can be determined according to strategies by using a number of tactics. (Medeiros)

Foucault is interested in the 'governmentality' approach to power which sees human participants as 'docile bodies'. Power itself, in Foucault's approach is not intrinsically destructive, but rather a means to make structural expression of a complex strategic

situation in a given social setting. He writes, “If we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others.” (150)

Foucault rejects the conventional notion of power, deriving from the development of monarchic power, which is seen as strictly restrictive and repressive as it “overlooks precisely what makes power so effectively and accepted.” (*History* 85-86) He maintains that new methods of power operate not “by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control.” (*Habib* 152-153) He holds the opinion that power exists in social relations and it “is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” It is “simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities.” (*History* 93) When defining power, Foucault does not necessarily deny nor equate power with absolute authority but maintains that power also operates “below.” This means that power is not just the authoritative act of enslaving or ruling over a particular individual or group of individuals by coercion, but there is also the possibility of upward thrust. In other words, it exists in all forms of relationships in every strata of society. It also implies that the concept is not limited to the exertion of influence by an external force but is rather the dynamic that defines social relationships.

Power, in whatsoever manner it manifests, does not go unchallenged according to Foucault who states, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet...this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” (*History* 93) Resistance is an essence of power as mobilise power relations. Regardless of how oppressive the systems of power may be, there is always a possibility of resistance which can take various forms. His idea that power relations can only occur when the “docile” subject is in a position to question or resist, becomes a significant aspect in the analysis of the novels of Margaret Atwood. In the novels, which will be further analysed in the chapters that follow, the protagonists’ complacency in regards to repressive social practices and traditions impact their freedom and individuality. Their attempt to conform to social norms, despite their ability to resist and challenge these norms lead to their continued subjectification. Their resolution and reaction to these forms of oppression that ultimately changes the power dynamic further substantiates Foucault’s conception of power relations.

Margaret Atwood's preoccupation with the theme of power is reflected in her literary writings, as well as lectures and interviews. In her works, power relations are either subtly or overtly explored through her characters' experiences. In 1971, she published a book of poetry titled *Power Politics* in which she discusses power in relation to gender dynamics. In the poems, she introduces two personae who are in a relationship but "they are lovers full of fear. They are contemporary lovers, approach-avoidance lovers" who are constantly battling for dominance. (Wood 31) She explores similar themes in *Surfacing*. The novel highlights the theme of power from the perspective of an unnamed female protagonist. Her unfinished Ph.D. thesis titled "Nature and Power in the English Metaphysical Romance of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" was an attempt to study the theme of power politics through the nature of good and evil. Shannon Hengen believes that this idea formed the basis of her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. She denotes, "Atwood's interest in nature and power, good and evil, vis-à-vis, the particular kind of novel she describes as 'metaphysical romance' persists in *The Handmaid's Tale*." She further states,

Atwood's interest in the play of meaning between concepts of nature and power is of course not limited to *The Handmaid's Tale*. The narrator of *Surfacing* (1972) seems on a kind of quest for understanding of the interplay between those two terms, as do the speakers in much of Atwood's poetry, especially in the volume *Power Politics*. (154)

The exercise of power through established frameworks of human relationships occur in Atwood's major works. She is known for pushing conventional boundaries through her writings, experimenting with various themes that were quite ahead of her time. By exploring themes such as sexuality and women's reproductive issues through her heroines, Atwood gives an insight into the society of that era. Taking into account the aforementioned definitions and ideas of power by various thinkers and philosophers, the chapter highlights the dynamics of power in the selected novels of Margaret Atwood, and how power is negotiated by the characters in the novels.

Margaret Atwood is intrigued with the notion of power and therefore many of her writings are depictions of negotiations for power. Her notion of "power" is not strictly confined to a particular definition, but is rather exhibited in various forms. Power plays an indispensable part in the function of society. It characterizes social

actions and mobility and is thus an integral aspect of human societies. Since novels portray various aspects of human behaviour and interactions, the study of power becomes quintessential in the understanding of how different institutions of human relationships work. Throughout history, social changes have occurred and will continue to occur. These social changes are a result of negotiations of power. A close examination of Atwood novels show how power operates at all levels, encompassing all forms of human relationships.

Margaret Atwood states, “Everytime you act you’re exercising power in some form.” (Graeme Gibson 15) She goes on to say that despite a person’s inability to predict the consequences of one’s actions, the ability to act or react to a situation itself is an act of power.

...you cannot predict the consequences of your actions entirely. You may hurt someone, but the alternative is closing yourself up in a burrow somewhere and not doing anything ever at all. (Gibson 15)

The passive-submissive roles that the protagonists play denies them power and make them victims of oppression. For instance, Marian’s predicament in *The Edible Woman* is a consequence of her “evading, avoiding, running away, retreating, withdrawing” instead of confronting and taking action about the current circumstance causing her to lose her sanity. By accepting that she is a victim, she is reduced to a mere object. Atwood states,

If you define yourself always as a harmless victim, there’s nothing you can ever do about it. You can simply suffer... Only if you stop identifying yourself as a victim, you know, fated by powers that be, can you act. (14)

The key to power, according to Atwood is overcoming victimhood. Catalysing the transformation from this state of victimhood to a powered state involves unpleasant physical and spiritual journeys mostly instigated by the protagonists’ successive failures.

Manifestations of power such as violence, oppression and resistance are common themes in Atwood’s novels. The projection of violence in the selected novels depict the relationship between those in power and the rest that are subjected to their

control. In other words, violence is used by the former to wield their power over the latter. Foucault terms the struggle against the exercise of “uncontrolled power over people’s bodies” as power effects. In Atwood’s fiction, the female characters are often seen as victims of physical abuse where they become subjects to those who are in a position to exercise destructive forms of power. In her novels, she employs various strategies to show that harm lies in power relations themselves. Several of Atwood’s texts, in the words of Jackie Shead “demonstrate the dangerous tendency of power to confer immunity on its possessors.” (15) Lora’s account of her past in *Bodily Harm* where she claims she is beaten by her stepfather, and the abuse she endures in the hands of the guards while being jailed showcase the power relation between Lora and the perpetrators of the abuse. She says that her stepfather “hit me because he could get away with it and nobody could stop him.” (114) However, she retaliates by tormenting his cat and these actions “demonstrate the effect of a hierarchy where violence is transmitted down the pecking order.(Shead 15) She also feels that the prison guards served her undercooked food and salty tea, in addition to being manipulated into having sex with them, “because they can.” (280)

The opening scene in *Life Before Man* reveals the death of Chris, the lover and colleague of Elizabeth, one of the three central characters Elizabeth. Chris shot himself on the head with a shotgun, blowing up his head in the process. It is revealed later that the immediate cause of his suicide was Elizabeth’s refusal to leave her children to elope with him. When Chris realizes that he does not have the power to control Elizabeth’s decisions, despite persuading Elizabeth on multiple occasions to leave her family for him, he decides to erase himself from the picture. The morbid incident and the events that led to the suicide continue to influence the actions and feelings of both Elizabeth and her husband Nate, who went to identify the dead body. The suicide not only bring an abrupt end to the illicit affair between Chris and Elizabeth, but changes the dynamic of the interrelationships among the major characters in the novel. Prior to the suicide, Nate and Elizabeth have been in an open relationship where they both engage in extramarital affairs and made an agreement to spend a day of the week each with their lovers.

Let’s be reasonable about this. We have to know we can depend on each other at certain times. She took Thursdays, he took Saturdays

because it was the weekend and Martha wouldn't have to get up early the next morning.”(27)

The arrangement made by the married couple prior to Chris' suicide renders a sense of equality between them where they both take turns to fulfil their domestic responsibilities. However, the death of Chris causes an imbalance and disrupts the agreement made by the married couple. Unable to focus neither on her work nor her household duties, Elizabeth relies on Nate to take care of all domestic activities while she isolates herself in her room. The increasing pressure of responsibilities on Nate, and Elizabeth's fragile mental state exacerbates the already strained relationship between the two. Emotionally disturbed by the image of the “headless horseman,” and the feeling of guilt, Nate feels that it is inequitable to continue his affair with Martha, their former housemaid. His ego is also threatened when he ponders how Elizabeth will compare his gallantry to Chris, and regard him the weaker of the two due to his inability to do something bold as what Chris did.

It isn't his fault that Chris blew his head off with a shotgun. A shotgun: this sums up the kind of extravagance, hysteria, he's always found distasteful in Chris. He himself would use a pistol. If he were going to do it at all. What gets him is the look she gave him when the call came through: At least *he had the guts. At least he was serious*. She's never said it of course, but he's sure she compares them, judges him unfavourably because he's still alive. Chickenshit, to be still alive. No balls. (7)

His lack of self-esteem and the need to assert his identity is what prompts him to pursue Lesje. His affair with Lesje is a phase in his life that escalates his dilemma and ultimate self-destruction.

In modern societies, the police are the civil force of a state, and are responsible for the prevention and detection of crime. They are also responsible for maintaining public order and ensure people's safety. But in *Bodily Harm*, their actions threaten individual liberty. They use their position to extort money from tourists, and carry out “justice” through violence. There is a scene that Rennie encounters where the mute beggar is brutally beaten by the police. The man is “punished” by the police because he “was hanging around the hotel” and “they don't like people bothering the tourists.

It's bad for business.”(147) Unable to defend himself through speech, he cannot vindicate himself and succumbs to the punishment until he falls unconscious. Paul later tells Rennie that the sight they witnessed is how justice is carried out in St. Antoine, “Up north they lock them up, down here they just beat them up a little.” (147)

Bodily Harm is an accurate representation of man's hunger for power and his strife to grasp power by all means. Atwood uses the election as a backdrop to explore this motif where the candidates and their associates employ various strategies including threat, violence and manipulation, to exert their influence in St. Antoine. The struggle for political power and Rennie's personal struggle for empowerment are two threads that concurrently run in this novel.

Despite showing no physical appearance, Ellis is a prominent character in *Bodily Harm* who is an embodiment of corruption by political means. After the British left their former colony of St. Antoine, administration falls in the hands of Ellis and his associates. When Rennie visits St. Antoine, the region was heading for their first democratic election. Dr. Minnow, a candidate for the election whom Rennie meets on her flight to St. Antoine, informs her of the corrupt practices of Ellis. Ellis allegedly uses his political influence for personal gains by hoarding all the development funds for himself. Besides, he also withheld the relief fund that came from the “sweet Canadians” for rehabilitation due to the recent earthquake that caused immense catastrophe in the region. Dr. Minnow tells Rennie,

Trouble happens when the people have nothing left to lose. Ellis knows this. He is using the foreign aid money from the hurricane to bribe people. (134)

Dr. Minnow's allegations here paints a clear picture of the power of money and wealth. Ellis abuses his power by using the people's money to acquire votes. In a country where sixty percent of the population is under twenty with “seventy-percent unemployment” (134), poverty becomes a major crisis and people no longer afford to keep their integrity intact. Bribery is common. Guns are smuggled by bribing officials as in the case of Lora's “parcel.” the rich and powerful have all the devices to exploit the lower class, just as Ellis does to his people.

As for the people, many are afraid of him and the rest admire him, not for his behaviour, you understand, but because he can get away with it. They see this as power and they admire a big man here. He spends their money on new cars and so forth for himself and friends, they applaud that...If you have nothing you are nothing here. It's the old story, my friend. We will have a Papa Doc and after that a revolution or so. Then the Americans will wonder why people are getting killed. They should tell the sweet Canadians to stop giving money to this man. (134)

Freedom of the press is also eliminated because in St. Antoine "there is one paper only and Ellis has bought the editor." (135) The other candidates fear that he will win the election through unfair means and are desperately trying to prevent such outcome by smearing his name and reputation. On the other hand, Marsdon, the campaign manager of Prince, is preparing for a revolution by obtaining guns. The guns are smuggled to the region with the aid provided by Paul. Critical of the current administration under Ellis, Marsdon and his associates resolve to resist the impending outcome of the election by using violence and threat to acquire control over the region and are determined to do so at any cost.

At the election, Dr. Minnow wins majority and is expected to form a coalition government with Prince's team. But both Minnow and Prince are executed which caused unrest in the island. As a result of the murders, an upheaval is coordinated by Marsdon, and emergency is declared in St. Antoine. Rennie is withheld and later arrested and thrown into prison with Lora in as she is accused of being a spy. The two women are denied justice and the reason for their imprisonment is not even properly explained to them. Defenceless and uncertain of their future, they suffered cruelty in the hands of the prison guards who repeatedly rape Lora in exchange for bare necessities. Rennie is a "lifestyle journalist" and her power to bring attention to the corrupt practices of certain political leaders in St. Antoine becomes a threat to them. So they have to silence her by threatening her with her life to prevent her from writing a report about the current political condition of St. Antoine. The government's attempt to forcefully suppress her voice as well as any other dissent voices by imprisonment and execution is an extreme manifestation of power.

Michel Foucault believes that power is inextricably linked with knowledge and truth. In other words, power operates on truth and knowledge. Truth, according to Foucault “induces regular effects of power.” (Power 131) He further denotes:

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and make function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131)

In the context of the present study, it is seen in the transmission of knowledge relating to discourses on gender roles. These traditionally accepted roles that are assigned to women such as wife and mother and qualities such as submissiveness, sensitivity etc., are ideals that women are expected to conform to. These are stereotypes that are attributed to women and this tradition unfortunately still continues. However, with the social changes and developments in place, it becomes increasingly difficult for modern women to confine themselves within these fixed boundaries. This results in conflict where women begin to question their roles and status in society and demand changes which is seen in the Women’s Liberation Movement in the mid-twentieth century in the West. In the novels, the female protagonists do not simply reject these traditional norms but more importantly by rejecting, they raise the concern about the lack of power and authority that conforming to these roles entail.

“Resistance” to the current social order in the form of a revolution, a military coup, is what led to the formation of the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic totalitarian society in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The army overthrew the democratic government by executing the President and members of Congress:

It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time.

Keep calm, they said on television. Everything is under control.

I was stunned. Everyone was, I know that. It was hard to believe. The entire government, gone like that. How did they get in, how did it happen? (182-183)

Although civil unrest has been experienced for a while, the shift in power following the executions was so abrupt and spontaneous that people wonder what was actually going on around them. Failure to understand the current events and uncertainty about the future puts life at a halt. With the sudden shift in power came unprecedented legislations and civil liberties begin to disappear progressively. With a repressive state power in order, individual rights and freedom are gradually limited so that the few men in power could grasp more power. At a point when life becomes unbearable for the powerless, it is also the belief in the possibility of a resistance against the totalitarian regime that gives hope to Offred, a hope that she will one day be free.

...there must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there, taking care of things. I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light. There must be a resistance, or where do all the criminals come from, on the television? (115)

In Gilead, power is vested in the hands of the Commanders, a few members in the elite class. The rest are kept in the dark.

This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the centre, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.

Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers any more, and the university is closed. (33)

As the regime tightens its grips, the authority of the Commanders cannot be questioned and they have the absolute power to persecute dissidents without proper trial. Execution of dissents take place on a daily basis and their corpses are hung on a wall for all to see to prevent opposing views. Victims include doctors, professors and homosexuals who refuse to adhere to the law. Some are banished to the colony to die.

Hence, the condition of life for the rest of the population becomes continually unfavourable which in turn increases the chance of a cataclysm.

Upon his return to Ithaca, Odysseus brutally murdered the Suitors with the help of his son Telemachus in *The Penelopiad*. After spending years at war and sea, Odysseus secretly returned to Ithaca and disguised himself in order to find if he has traitors. He puts his finesse with weapons on display by gathering the “traitors” and killed them.

Odysseus - still in the guise of a beggar – watched while Telemachus set up the twelve axes, and then while the Suitors failed to string his famous bow. Then he got hold of the bow himself,

...he shot Antinous in the throat, threw off his disguise, and made mincemeat of every last one of the Suitors, first with arrows, then with spears and swords. (125)

The Suitors are his former aides and courtiers whose “betrayal” infuriates him. The execution also serves as a warning “to discourage any further defections.”(126-127) This is a strategy, also found in *The Handmaid’s Tale* as mentioned earlier, often employed by despotic leaders to evoke fear and ward off dissenting ideologies.

Odysseus and Telemachus hacked off the ears and nose and hands and feet of Melanthius the evil goatherd and threw them to the dogs, paying no attention to the poor man’s agonized screams. (126)

Odysseus and Telemachus do not stop the rampage here, but go on killing twelve of Penelope’s most loyal and closest maids. The maids flirt and sleep with the Suitors in order to protect Penelope, but their deeds are merely seen as proof of their guilt of treason. The hanging scene in *The Penelopiad* signify the imbalance of power in society, and the flawed system of justice that deprives the lower class of justice. Despite spending their entire lives serving the Queen, and risking their own safety in the process, they have no power or status, and therefore no rights and their lives are regarded as expendable.

He forced the girls to haul the dead bodies of the Suitors out into the courtyard – including the bodies of their erstwhile lovers – and to wash

the brains and gore off the floor, and to clean whatever chairs and tables remained intact.

...he told Telemachus to chop the maids into pieces with his sword. But my son, wanting to assert himself to his father, and to show that he knew better – he was at that age – hanged them all in a row from a ship's hawser. (126)

Atwood's representation of power politics are often seen within the framework of hierarchical social structures based primarily on class and gender. The interrelationship between people at different levels of the social structure, such as the relationship between men and women, children and adults as well as the upper and lower class, poignantly reflects the interplay of power, or the lack thereof. In her novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Penelopiad* the struggle is conspicuous as society is basically presented in the form of binary opposites, namely, the haves and the have-nots. The disparity between the maids and the royals in *The Penelopiad*, as well as the interrelationship between members of the royal family is a projection of the dynamics of power and an unjust system of government where the lower class are exploited. In *The Edible Woman*, there is a rigid hierarchy based structure at Marian's workplace. The top class constitutes of a group of men who occupy the top floor of the office. The protagonist is uncertain of what these men do as they do not interact with them. Regardless, they are still the ones in 'power' who dictates what their subordinates do. Marian sits in the all-female second tier as a surveyor. Most of the work in the office is done by these women who have no freedom in their work. At the lower most tier in the hierarchy are men and women who are at the beck and call of their superiors. Marian's position in her workplace and the structure mentioned here shows the social reality where career choices are limited or demarcated on the basis of gender.

The Handmaid's Tale is another example of unequal class distribution. Atwood claims that "the book is an examination of character under certain circumstances, among other things. It's not a matter of men against women." For Atwood, the "fight" is rather against the system that seeks to exploit certain classes of people rather than individual men. The novel is "a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime."

(Mervyn Rothstein np) Atwood dismisses the popular approach to the text as a feminist dystopia where all women are victims of oppression and violence. Under the totalitarian regime, men are also victims of oppression and many of them do not have power over women, especially the Wives of the Commanders.

The Handmaid's Tale has often been called a 'feminist dystopia', but that term is not strictly accurate. In a feminist dystopia pure and simple, all of the men would have greater rights than all of the women. It would be two-layered in structure: top layer men, bottom layer women. But Gilead is the usual kind of dictatorship: shaped like a pyramid, with the powerful of both sexes at the apex, the men generally outranking the women at the same level; then descending levels of power and status with men and women in each, all the way down to the bottom, where the unmarried men must serve in the ranks before being awarded the Econowife. ("Haunted by *The Handmaid's Tale*)

Although Atwood explains how men are not exempt from oppression in Gilead, her statement above also shows that gender equality does not exist in Gilead. The classification of society is strictly based on gender and class and there seems to be no upward movement in the social hierarchy. However, failure to carry out one's respective duties have tragic consequences. The novel is a critique of a totalitarian system of government where a few men in power exploit the rest of the people. It seeks to highlight the power-struggle that exists in such form of dictatorship and how the oppressed class attempts to gain agency through various means. The novel also proves how extreme repressive forms of power encourage resistance. Atwood draws inspiration from George Orwell's dystopian fiction *1984*. Coincidentally, *The Handmaid's Tale* was written in 1984, the year in which Orwell's 'dystopia' takes place. In an interview, Atwood confesses that while writing the novel, she makes it a rule to write only about things that was already happening at that period in time. Therefore, the novel is a representation of the society that was seen and experienced by the author.

In Atwood's novels, children are not exempted from the power struggle and in fact, they play significant roles in highlighting this aspect in the novels. The antagonism between the adults and children project the interplay of power and

resistance in the novels. Children are often portrayed as victims of verbal and mental abuse, neglect, and often aggressively coerced to follow stern religious practices. In Atwood's novels such as *Lady Oracle*, *Bodily Harm* as well as *The Penelopiad*, the protagonists share a common experience which is a traumatic childhood. Shulamith Firestone believes that women and children are deemed equivalent in patriarchal society and are always mentioned in the same breath. (72) She feels that they have a special tie and that "the nature of this bond is no more than shared oppression." (72) She hints that this is due to their shared lack of significance in decision-making as well as their lack of physical strength. Their existence is vital for the parent to exercise indoctrination but apart from that, there is no denying that they are marginalized.

The description of the childhood of Penelope and the twelve maids in *The Penelopiad* lays bare the abuse suffered by the female characters during childhood. For instance, Icarius' attitude towards her daughter is a matter of great concern because as a father, he is expected to love and protect his child at all cost. But his decision to kill her instead of losing his throne suggests that for him, retaining his crown is paramount. His unwillingness to surrender his power to his heir shows his selfishness and hunger for power. Likewise, the safety of young innocent children is sabotaged when the twelve maids were snatched from their parents at a very young age. The upper class exercise hegemony over the weaker sections of the society in order to retain their power and authority over the latter. The twelve maids however, manifest their refusal to submit themselves wholly by displaying certain inappropriate behaviour hence attempting to subvert the authority of the ruling class in a subtle manner. Thus the relationship between those in power and those who are oppressed is clearly seen in this narrative.

The use of children as a means to acquire wealth and power is further reiterated in Chapter 6. In her discourse on the politics of marriage, Penelope says,

Marriages were for children [who in turn] were vehicles for passing things along, [such as] kingdoms, rich wedding gifts, stories, grudges, blood feuds. Through children alliances were forged; through children, wrongs were avenged. To have a child was to set loose a force in the world. (20)

She further states, “Under the ancient customs, the huge pile of sparkling wedding loot stayed with the bride’s family in the bride’s family’s palace. Perhaps that is why my father had become so attached to me after having failed to drown me in the sea: where I was, there would be treasure.” (22)

Elizabeth and Nate’s children in *Life Before Man* are also used as tools for negotiation by their parents. Despite the couple’s claim that their children are the reason that prevents them from separation, the latter are hardly recipients of affection nor attention. Atwood writes,

Society has always said, ‘You have to preserve marriage for the sake of the children. ‘I’ve never really bought that one. But on the other hand, when breakups start happening on a large scale, you have to think of the consequences. We may be producing a lot of isolated, self-protective, narcissistic children. (Ingersoll 125)

The main concern of Elizabeth and Nate is their own selves. The children are aware of the breakdown of their parents’ marriage, and worse, the sadness they exhibit as a result of their failed relationships outside their marriage. In other words, they are forced to maturity as witness a grave change in the family dynamics. Unable to voice their plight, they suffer in silence masking their trauma with “normal” dispositions.

She can see them, they can see her. They know something is wrong. Their politeness, their evasion, is chilling because it’s perfectly done.

They’ve been watching me. They’ve been watching us for years. Why wouldn’t they know how to do it? They act as though everything is normal, and maybe for them it is normal. (5)

As a child, Elizabeth suffers abuse in the hands of her aunt. Unable to revolt against her sole guardian, she quietly endured until she finally gets the opportunity to marry Nate. One of the reasons she chooses to marry Nate was partly as a means to settle the score with her aunt who disapproves of Nate. Atwood explains, “She had a bad relationship and she got locked into a struggle with her aunt...She’s ruthless in her dealings with other people, but then people have been ruthless in their dealings with her. Violence begets violence.” (Ingersoll 125)

The female protagonist of *Lady Oracle* has a traumatic childhood. In *Lady Oracle* the young Joan Foster is constantly taunted and tormented by her mother for her obesity. The latter does not seem to hide her hatred and disdain for her daughter, causing a strain in their relationship which resonates throughout the story. The mother's attempt to instil an extremely stern religious values in Joan backfires and results in the latter pursuing a mystical sect. Joan eventually runs away from home as she can no longer tolerate her mother's abuse which intensifies as she grows up.

While the hostility between adults and children seem to project children as powerless victims of oppression and the adults as the perpetrators of verbal and mental abuse, children are also capable of committing the same to other children. Most of the child characters seen in Atwood's novels are not innocent and guilt-free and are capable of committing cruelty against their peers in order to assert themselves. The story of Joan's childhood is that of a "traumatic childhood filled with shame, pain and defiance." (Howells 66) As she endures a turbulent relationship with her mother at home, Joan seeks acceptance and belongingness among her peers. Unfortunately for her, she becomes a target of bullying and harassment when she became a Brownie. Desperate in her attempts to become a member "the club" which consists of girls she admires, she takes on daring tasks assigned by the girls to prove her worth. It was when the other girls become aware of Joan's desire to be their friend that they betrayed her trust and start committing cruel acts towards her. These girls, Elizabeth, Marlene and Lynn, wielded their power by bullying Joan. They would often tie her up and leave her in the ravine as prey for the "bad man", a villain who kidnaps and tortures little girls according to the Brownies. Despised by her mother, Joan is certain that she has no one to defend her even if she raises complaints, she is unable to retaliate and suffers in silence. She expresses her despair over the repeated harassment in the following words:

Sometimes, when they'd left me alone in the darkness and cold, I would stand there almost hoping that the bad man would really come up out of the ravine and do whatever he was fated to do. That way, after I'd been stolen or killed, they would be punished, and they would be forced to repent at last for what they'd done. I imagined him as a tall man, very tall, in a black suit, heaving up out of the snow like an avalanche in reverse, blue-faced and covered with ice, red-eyed, hairy-headed,

with long sharp teeth like icicles. He would be frightening but at least he would be an end to this misery that went on and seemed as if it would go on forever. I would be taken away by him, no trace of me would ever be found. Even my mother would be sorry. (59-60)

Joan had somehow managed to free herself each time and gets home safely until one particular evening when the three girls tied her up again and she gets stuck till it was dark. It was on this occasion that a man, believed by young Joan to be the “bad man” turns up, untied her and offered to take her home.

But suddenly my mother was hurrying down towards us...she was enraged...she wrenched me out and slapped me across the face.

...

At this point, the man interceded. He explained how he had found me tied up and how he had untied me and offered to see me home... She phoned up the other mothers, full of moral indignation, and that was it for Brownies. (63-64)

But she claims that her mother “used this incident as an example of my own fecklessness and general lack of wisdom.” (64) Nevertheless, it was this ultimate event that finally change the dynamics between the girls. Her refusal to admit her fear for the “bad man”, and her determination to avoid crying emancipates her from the wicked clench of her “friends”.

As mentioned earlier, power is manifest in all aspects of human relationships. Human relationships such as friendship, courting and marriage, as well as workplace relations between colleagues, or an employee with his employer are some few examples of the premises in which power is exercised. It would not be wrong to assert that all forms of human interactions result in either a conscious or unconscious exertion of power in one form or the other. In *Bodily Harm*, Rennie becomes an easy target for the natives because she is a lone female traveller. Dr. Minnow, Lora and Paul throw themselves at her in the guise of “chance” meetings. Separately, they each try to win her trust and friendship as they want to take advantage of her. Their untiring efforts led Rennie to engage in tasks which ultimately result in her fighting for survival.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes traditional forms of punishments and the birth of modern prison. Modern society, he argues, is a “disciplinary society” which means that power is largely exercised in various institutions through disciplinary means. He speaks of disciplinary power in two ways, repressive and normalization. Repressive power is the means of using violence or force by the police or other governmental agents to exert influence. Repressive state apparatus is clearly seen in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Once the army gained control, they slowly took away the rights of the citizens and began to form a dictatorial form of government. “That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn’t even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn’t even an enemy you could put your finger on.” (183) After the army formed a theocratic dictatorship, they began to implement repressive measures:

Things continued in that state of suspended animation for weeks, although some things did happen. Newspapers were censored and some were closed down, for security reasons they said. The roadblocks began to appear, and Identipasses. Everyone approved of that, since it was obvious you couldn’t be too careful. They said that new elections would be held, but it would take some time to prepare for them. The thing to do, they said, was to continue on as usual.

The Pornomarts were shut, though, and there were no longer any Feels on Wheels vans ad Bun-dle Buggies circling the Square. But I wasn’t sad to see them go. We all knew what a nuisance they’d been. (183)

What is remarkable in this scene is the passiveness of the people. Censorship of pornography and free speech were accepted and no one raised concern when their rights were taken away, gradually but steadily. In this sense, they are willing participants by allowing the new government to exercise control over them.

Of the aforementioned repressive institutions, prison is a means by which the government regulates the behaviour of criminals and is a form of exercising power by those in authority. On the other hand, normalizing power aims at influencing people to conform to societal norms through non-coercive means. The individual makes his own choices to adhere to the values and moral codes of his society. While saying that

it is a non-coercive measure, the individual may have already been conditioned by the value system of a given social structure which could influence his choices. Institutions such as schools, family, hospital may come under this category.

Normalization, a process through which power is internalized by the subjects, is an aspect recurrent in the novels of Atwood. Rennie and Joan's mothers in *Bodily Harm* and *Lady Oracle* respectively, are agents of this normalization process. Since the protagonists' childhood, the mothers try to instil conventional patriarchal ideas which could condition their thought process at a later stage.

Surveillance, a common thread that runs in the selected novels is an effective means of exercising power. In his treatise on prison in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault examines the idea of the panopticon, a form of institution where surveillance of inmates can be done without the latter knowing who or when they are being watched. Power, according to Foucault, is exercised through surveillance, monitoring as well as other forms of regulation of people's lives. The general idea behind the panopticon is to monitor the behaviour of the prisoners who think that they are constantly under observation. Its aim is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power." (201) Although the panopticon, in its traditional sense, is not used, there are many ways in which the concept is still being enforced in society as it is proven to be an effective means to regulate the behaviour of people. This concept known as 'Panoticism' is a significant form of exercising disciplinary power where the inmate "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication." (200) Foucault states,

Disciplinary power... is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is their fact of being constantly seen, of being always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. And the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification. In this space of domination,

disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially by arranging objects. The examination, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification. (145)

Atwood employs varying methods of surveillance in her novels to highlight the aspect of power in human relations. Foucault argues that surveillance is self-regulatory and thus control is internalised. He believes that “Visibility is a trap.” (*Discipline and Punish* 200) In the novels, the knowledge that they are constantly being watched, or followed creates fear and vulnerability in the protagonists, impacting their actions and also limiting their ability to undertake various tasks. It “regulates” and influences the behaviour of the individuals who are under surveillance.

The landlady in *The Edible Woman* constantly keeps an eye on her tenants which she justifies as a means to “protect” the innocence of the young girl she lives with. The actions of her tenants Marian and Ainsley are controlled by her preying eyes and restricts them from the freedom they feel they are entitled to *Lady Oracle* deals with similar ideas. Joan, the protagonist has a troubled past as an obese child and author of costume Gothic fiction. Her mother contributes to most of the unhappiness she felt as a child. After she leaves her mother, the fear of being seen by her mother makes her feel uneasy and scared at times. Her mother’s spirit eventually visits her which terminates her fears temporarily. Joan recognizes her vulnerability in being an object of scrutiny when she first attended a religious service at Jordan Chapel (Molly Hite, 127). In *Lady Oracle*, Joan states:

I read two of the hymns at random. One was about a joyous boat ride across a river to the Other Side, where loved ones were awaiting. The other was about the blessed spirits of those who’ve gone before, watching o’er us for our safety till we reach the other shore. This thought made me uncomfortable. Being told in Sunday school that God was watching you every minute of every hour had been bad enough, but now I had to think about all those other people I didn’t even know who were spying on me. (115)

Ashamed of her past, Joan creates an alternative past for herself, based on pretensions and secrecy in order to hide her real self: her obesity during childhood, her quasi-religious involvement, her relationship with her family, her affair with Paul and also

her career as an author of Costume Gothic stories. Her biggest fear is the revelation of the truth about her life. But soon she realizes that she has been pursued by an unknown stranger who keeps track of all her 'secret' activities. She comes to discover that her past is on the verge of being revealed which forces her to flee society and fake her own death.

Bodily Harm opens with the scene where Rennie finds two policemen in her apartment. An unknown intruder has entered her apartment and left a coil of rope on her bed. The fear and anxiety Rennie feels as a result of this intrusion is one of the reasons. In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, handmaids are put under constant surveillance. In order to prevent inappropriate behaviour and defection, the Commanders employ spies to watch over the handmaids. Since the handmaids do not know who these "Eyes" are, they have to conform to the law to avoid punishment. This kind of surveillance instil fear in the minds of the handmaids which makes governing easier for the Commanders.

Atwood's novels reveal the dynamics of power which is explored through the protagonists' relationships. Her novels employ a series of events and situations to show that physical and mental violence, and other forms of subjection and oppression stem not from individuals but is rather the impact of a "warped social structure, so that malfeasance appears to arise from the occupation, rather than the occupier, of power roles." (Shead 16) In most novels, power is seen as a coercive and destructive force, and takes on its terminal forms such as oppression and subjugation. Since the novels are seen from women's perspectives, they focus on women's roles in society where the narratives emphasize on their problems. However, power interplay in the novels is not limited to these destructive forms and is sometimes seen as a positive force that enables self-governance as well as the potential for empowerment. These dynamics reinforce the centrality of power in the novels of Margaret Atwood.

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CHAPTER III

THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE

Margaret Atwood's protagonists are predominantly female with varying experiences. Her novels present a worldview from the perspectives of these female characters who narrate their stories. This chapter highlights the experiences that uniquely pertain to women in order to present an understanding of the dilemmas that affect their daily lives. By examining these experiences, women's position in the power structure of society and the means by which they attempt to gain agency can be understood. The preceding chapter presents the theoretical framework with regards to the concept of power, and locates the novels within that premise. The present chapter, on the other hand, analyses specific gender related themes as witnessed and experienced by the female characters in the selected novels.

The female protagonists in the selected novels of Atwood are women who belong to the middle class, with the exception of Penelope. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope is the daughter of King Icarius, and is later married to the mythical King Odysseus. The other female characters in the selected novels are young urban women who are mostly financially independent. But the problems that these seemingly independent women face are deeply rooted to the social system and the traditional gender roles that they are expected to conform to.

Atwood's novels depict power struggle in different forms. Themes such as love, marriage and motherhood, and issues pertaining to women's reproductive rights, including pregnancy and abortion, are pervasive in these novels. Apart from this, their struggle to harmoniously balance work and domestic life, all the while trying to adhere to societal norms become a constant conflict in the lives of the protagonists. In order to properly understand the novels in light of the power discourse, it is necessary to thoroughly discuss these aspects and to uncover the underlying messages that these narratives contain.

Women have been quite passive, taking into consideration historical writings across the world, with the exception of a few who have managed to draw attention to historians. Their portrayal in literatures across the world bears the same example.

Either they are confined to domestic work and did not engage in tasks that would earn them recognition in society, or their contributions have been deliberately ignored by writers. The plausibility of the above can only be left to speculation. However, modern feminist thought and movement question this notion and the assertion of women's identity and power has become one of their central tenets. In order to feel a sense of belonging in the society, they no longer afford to be passive spectators of men's accomplishments, but have to actively participate in the workings of the society. The novels selected for the present research are published within a wide span of forty years and the selection has been deliberately done in order to trace the development as well as examine the changes that take place in the ambit of women's movement.

Prior to the publication of Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, there has been a dearth of Canadian literature, especially novels. As a result, there was a lack of major traditions in the realm of fiction writing. Most of the existing literature at that period were composed by male authors. Atwood, along with writers like Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy are among the few who made enormous contributions towards the growth and popularity of the 'Canadian novel'. When asked if she encountered any particular problem as a woman writer, shortly after the publication of her second novel *Surfacing*, Atwood replies,

I don't think they are typical. At the time I started writing, [it] was such a freaky thing in itself and since very few men were doing it either, it wasn't that I was a woman who was writing that people found peculiar, it was that anybody at all was writing...and in a frontier society what is important is work and building houses and bridges and things like that. And writers are viewed as irrelevant and redundant. Men writers overreact to that and define writing as a really male thing to be doing. And if you're a woman doing it, that really threatens their position. (Ingersoll 10)

She further states,

Back in the days when you were supposed to pay attention to the diapers and the washing of dishes, I was a threat to other women's life positions. Now I get made into a kind of hero, which is just as unreal.

It makes me just as uncomfortable. It's turning me from what I am as a writer into something I'm not. (Ingersoll 11)

The portrayal of women in fictional works is of interest to many scholars and the accuracy of their representation has been a subject of debate for quite a long time. In their study of Victorian fiction, Gilbert and Gubar are of the view that women have always been portrayed in novels either as “angel” or “monster”. According to them, women are either portrayed in novels as either virtuous, incapable of committing any crime or seductive, manipulative, and evil and often regarded as “mad”. Neither of these two binary characterizations are accurate portrayals but rather, this kind of representation of women reduce them to mere objects. Atwood once wrote,

My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn't need a legal system. (“Am I a Bad Feminist?”)

The above statement is reflective of Atwood's characterization of women in her novels who falls not just within but between the two mentioned categories.

In her lecture on ‘women and fiction’ titled “A Room of One's Own”, Virginia Woolf examines how women are situated in literary works. She puts forward three plausible description of “women and fiction”,

The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all the three are inextricably mixed together...But when I began to consider the subject...it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. (5)

Here, Woolf explains the difficulty of trying to understand, let alone give an explanation to the title ‘women and fiction.’ The subject matter, content and implications of it is extremely vast and limitless that there can be no fixed definition. She decides to subscribe to the third definition but says that this too does not bring out the core essence of it. This explains the insufficiency of attempting to limit women's

fiction to a fixed corpus. This chapter is significant in that it presents a detailed analysis of the experiences of the female characters in Atwood's novels, thereby presenting a clear purpose of the aforementioned discourse.

In works such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, as well as other texts, Foucault presents a theory of power which feminists have used to explain aspects of women's oppression. In her book *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* which is a study to bridge the Foucauldian concept of power, with that of feminism, Lois McNay writes,

Foucault's idea that sexuality is not an innate or natural quality of the body, but the effect of historically specific power relations has provided feminists with a useful analytical framework to explain how women's experience is impoverished and controlled within certain culturally determined images of feminine sexuality. Furthermore, the idea that the body is produced through power and is, therefore, a cultural rather than a natural entity has made a significant contribution to the feminist critique of essentialism[.] (3)

However, there are limitations to Foucault's power discourse when incorporating his ideas to women's studies. One of these is the "gender blindness" of his theory. "Foucault's analysis does not pay enough attention to the gendered nature of disciplinary techniques on the body and that this oversight perpetuates a 'gender blindness' that has always predominated in social theory." (33) This supposed 'gap' will be filled by feminist theories to address gender specific issues.

According to Marxist feminists, society is divided into two classes based on gender where men as a privileged class controls the means of production whereas women form the lower class of society. From their standpoint, society is divided into hierarchies where the dominant class are the male and women are victims of male oppression. Women on the other hand are merely objects to satisfy the physical, emotional as well as the economic needs of the men who are at the top of the pyramid. A classic example of gender-based class division is *The Handmaid's Tale*. In Gilead, the society is broadly divided into different classes. The uppermost or the elites, consists of the Commanders who are all male members of this newly formed society. All forms of administration and power falls into their hands and basically the society

is governed by a few men. Below them are the Commanders' wives. Although these women are better off than the rest of the women from the lower classes, they have no real powers and are merely falls into this group for the sake of being the wives of the Commanders. Then comes the Aunts and the Angels or the Eyes. The Aunts are those in charge of training and grooming the young women who would later become handmaids to the Commanders whereas the Angels or the Eyes work for the Commanders as guards and spies respectively. The Handmaids come under these groups of people. The main purpose of a handmaid is to bear children for the Commanders. In other words, they are concubines who live in the houses of their masters. Since most of the wives of the Commanders are sterile and can no longer bear children, the handmaids carry out that purpose for them. The handmaids are assigned new names such as Offred, Ofglen and so on which suggests that they belong to a certain Commander. The replacement of their names itself suggests that their identity no longer matters in the regime, but they are merely seen as properties of the Commanders and their existence matters only in relation to their masters. Below the Handmaids are the servants who act as cooks and cleaners in the Commanders' houses. Although they do most of the manual work within the domestic area, they are better off than the Handmaids in that they are at least free to talk and move about in the society. Moreover, they are not reduced to sex slavery which puts them in a higher pedestal than the handmaids.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is not only women who are oppressed, but men of the lower class are devoid of power and are employed merely as executioners of the Commanders' regimes. However, it is the handmaids who are the most oppressed group in the society. They do not have the freedom to socialize with other members of the society. They are forced to live in the house of their Commanders, bereft of any kind of luxury. They lack the freedom to choose what they eat or wear. On the other hand, wives of Commanders are often jealous of those handmaids who are able to produce and they are subjects of mistreatment and abuse, both mental and physical. Alone, with no friends or family, and absolutely no one they can trust, there is no escape from the abysmal conditions that they are forced to undergo. This inequality and imbalance of power leads to the subjugation of women who become the exploited class in the society. Women as a minority class in society are often neglected and the failure to have proper representation in government result in them being denied justice.

Shulamith Firestone believes that the oppression of women begins in the family. She substantiates her claim by going back to Roman history where the term is derived from.

The term family was first used by the Romans to denote a social unit the head of which ruled over wife, children, and slaves – under Roman law he was invested with rights of life and death over them all; *famulus* means domestic slave, and *familia* is the total number of slaves belonging to one man. (Dialectic 74)

Thus, family becomes a social organization where all rights, power and authority is concentrated in the hands of the male head of the household, and the rest of the family are subjected to his rule. The modern nuclear family in patriarchal society is based on this model where men has absolute authority over his wife and children. Firestone writes,

...the power hierarchies in the biological family, and the sexual repressions necessary to maintain it – especially intense in the patriarchal nuclear family – are destructive and costly to the individual psyche. (Dialectic 72)

Joan's unhappy childhood and upbringing is exemplary of the oppression that begins in the family. Her father's absence during her early childhood prompts her mother to assume the role of the family head. Her mother's uncompromising behaviour towards Joan makes life unbearable for the latter who eventually flees from home. But the oppressive measures that Joan's mother enforced upon her as a child continue to haunt her throughout her life until she reconciles with her mother's "astral" body that visits her in Arthur's apartment. As an obese child, she becomes the object of disdain for her mother which extends to her peers. The constant tortures and abuses she endured as a young girl thwarts her mental development leaving her emotionally unstable and dependent.

Women's oppression stems from their biological functions. Feminists like Beauvoir and Firestone are of the view that women have been oppressed due to their biological functions. Firestone believes that women's childbearing capacity make her both unique as well as powerless and is therefore the cause of her oppression by

saying, “The heart of woman’s oppression is her childbearing and childrearing roles.” (72) Atwood’s novels deal with women’s issues that emanate from their “biological functions.” Pregnancy and the impending childbirth or abortion are issues that remain central to the selected texts. The female protagonists are constantly put under pressure due to this factor that threatens their careers, independence and identity. Clara in *The Edible Woman* epitomizes this aspect. Despite having a decent education, she is unable to secure a proper job. Her marriage and repeated pregnancies hinders her from achieving anything worthwhile in life. She loses the ability to have an independent lifestyle. Busy in her role as a wife and mother, she forfeits the opportunity to be self-sufficient and thus she is physically and financially dependent on her husband justifying Firestone’s claim that “...it was woman’s reproductive biology that accounted for her original and continued oppression, and not some sudden patriarchal evolution.” (73) While Marian is unaware of the interplay of power in the relationship between the married couple, Ainsley sees and understands that Clara is willingly allowing herself to be oppressed by Joe by refusing to manoeuvre her situation and reclaim herself.

Beauvoir affirms that,

The devaluation of women [under patriarchy] represents a necessary stage in the history of humanity, for it is not upon her positive value but upon man’s weakness, that her prestige is founded. In woman are incarnated all the disturbing mysteries of nature, and man escapes her hold when he frees himself from nature...Thus the triumph of the patriarchate was neither a matter of chance nor the result of violent revolution. From humanity’s beginnings [men’s] biological advantage has enabled the males to affirm their status as sole and sovereign subjects; they have never abdicated this position; they once relinquished a part of their independent existence to Nature and to Woman; but afterwards they won it back. (*Second Sex*)

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* women are classified into different groups based on their reproductive ability. The few remaining fertile women became handmaids and are being reduced to concubines whose sole purpose is to produce children for the Commanders. These handmaids are groomed and eventually forced to conceive and

produce children, hence incapable of making reproductive choices. Sterility earns them the label “unwomen” resulting in the banishment to the colonies. These unfortunate women are banished from Gilead and sent to the colonies to die under harsh conditions. Obstinance makes them “Jezebels” who serve men at brothels. Although the Commanders’ wives belong to the upper class in Gilead and enjoy a number of privileges and advantages, they do not hold much power beyond the domestic realm. Mostly sterile, these women rely on the handmaids for a chance at motherhood.

According to French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, sex and gender are two different aspects. While sex is determined by birth, she argues that gender is a cultural construct. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes “One is not born a woman, but becomes one.” This implies that culture and society shape and condition individuals. So culture, in a way, is responsible for bringing about the oppression of women. But at the same time, it provides an arena for the oppressed to negotiate their state of dominance. As Rivkin and Ryan state,

Culture is both a means of domination, of assuring the rule of one class or group over another and a means of resistance to such domination, a way of articulating oppositional points of view to those in dominance. (*Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 1025)

This further affirms that the subjugation of women has its roots in culture. In patriarchal societies, attitudes toward a male child and a female child are different. Society imposes gender roles and the lack of flexibility to cross this abstract boundary, especially represses women who are confined to domestic life. While young boys are taught that strength, courage and bravery are qualities he must grow up with, girls are taught obedience and femininity in that same vein. While boys acquire myriad outdoor skills, girls are told to behave so that they may end up with a good husband as marriage is the proper goal for them. In traditional societies, there is no life beyond the domestic realm for women. This is clearly depicted in *Bodily Harm* where Griswold is represented as a centre of these traditional notions. Griswold is a tiny town where the protagonist Rennie was brought up. She tries to dissociate herself from Griswold by passing ridiculous jokes about the folks living there. Here, girls are taught from an

early age that submissiveness, decency and femininity are virtues that they must uphold.

If you were a girl it was a lot safer to be decent than to be beautiful. If you were a boy, the question didn't arise...Clothes could be decent or indecent. Mine were always decent, and they smelled decent too[.] (55)

Recalling her childhood days, she hints at an indoctrination of the said gender beliefs by saying,

My grandmother worshipped my grandfather...When I was little I thought of him as a hero...I wanted to be like him, but after a few years at school I forgot about that. Men were doctors, women were nurses; men were heroes, and what were women? Women rolled the bandages and that was about all anyone ever said about that. (56)

The above passage is an indication of the gender-based distinction in terms of professions where men hold higher positions and are revered in society whereas women are only capable of working for and under men. Rennie sees these as being outdated and harmful for individual progress. "Griswold, she hopes, is merely something she defines herself against." (18) Her protestation of traditional roles is seen in her own words,

All I could think of at that time was how to get away from Griswold. I didn't want to be trapped, like my mother. Although I admired her – everyone was always telling me how admirable she was, she was practically a saint – I didn't want to have a family or be anyone's mother, ever; I had none of those ambitions. I didn't want to own any objects or inherit any. I didn't want to cope. (58)

Love and marriage, according to feminists, are institutions that have become corrupted, hence becoming areas in which women are exploited. Love, according to Firestone, is not altruistic and is the pivot of women's oppression. (126) It is "the final opening up to (or, surrender to the dominion of) the other." (128) Although she believes that in the true sense of the term, love is supposed to have a positive connotation, it becomes "complicated, corrupted, or obstructed by an unequal balance of power." (130) Simone de Beauvoir says, "The word love has by no means the same

sense for both sexes, and this is one cause of the serious misunderstandings which divide them.” (135) Since the attitude towards love is not the same for men and women, it becomes a platform that magnifies gender inequality. The breakdown or failure of human relationships is a typical theme in Atwood’s novels. As the female protagonists reject their role as “submissive wives” or mothers, marriage no longer serves its traditional purpose. The rejection of the old values and absence of definite replacement creates dilemma resulting in the failure of marriages and relationships.

A common aspect of the novels is the protagonists’ failure in establishing stable relationships with people around them. Not only are her protagonists unable to have successful marriages or relationships with men, they are unable to form close bonds with other women or members of their families. In other words, these women are alienated from society. In a society that views women as inferior, women often experience conflict with not only their male counterparts, but also with other women for survival. In many of Atwood’s novels, relational aggression among women is prevalent. During most of her childhood, Joan is surrounded by female characters whose cruelty contributes to much of her physical and emotional trauma. Meanwhile, the male characters such as her father and the stranger who rescued her in the ravine are seen as benevolent and kind. In the novels, women often pose as tools to bring about the downfall of other women. For instance, in *The Penelopiad* it is Eurycleia who points out the maids that have been “disloyal” to the King Odysseus that ultimately lead to their execution. On top of that, she narrates the events to Penelope with “gloating pleasure”. When Penelope expressed “displeasure” and asked her which of the maids have been murdered, she replies,

‘Only twelve,’... ‘The impertinent ones. The ones who’d been rude. The ones who used to thumb their noses at me. Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks and her cronies – that lot. They were notorious whores.’ (127)

In her study of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* Alanna A. Callaway argues that the power structure of Gilead “critiques the feminine roles that support and enable the repression of women”, thereby amplifying the disunity of women. (Callaway iv) Patricia F. Goldblatt too, states that in Atwood’s fictional world, “it is not only men but also women as agents of society who betray.” (“Reconstructing” 277) These statements suggest that men alone are not responsible for the misery of women, but

conflicts arise among women due to jealousy, ideological differences and the strife for dominance.

Joan, is a young girl when she discovers the power of betrayal by members of her own sex. For years, she passively succumbs to their games. (277)

Despite being told to be fearful of men, especially men who are strangers, Joan's discovery here contradicts the cautionary tales of her mother.

In Atwood's novels, relationship between mothers and daughters, female colleagues, etc. are often toxic. Helene Cixous believes this is the impact of patriarchy. In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", she writes,

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove. (878)

The strained mother-daughter relationship between Joan and her mother in *Lady Oracle* exemplifies Cixous' theory. The mother's attempt to mould Joan into an ideal woman results in her mother resorting to ridicule and abuse of her own daughter.

This infighting among female characters highlights the abuse of authority by those in power against the others who are inferior to them. Atwood's novels address and deconstruct the traditional notion and portrayal of women in literature as stereotypes having similar thoughts and ideals when in reality, women are individuals with the tendency to have varied goals and opposing views.

The protagonist in *Surfacing* experiences failure in almost all the relationships that she has, including her family. She admits that her best friend, whom she refers to as "my best woman friend" is Anna whom she has known for merely two months, (7) which implies that she has never had a real friend in her life. Her recollection of her past as well as her present affirms it. Likewise, Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* fails to

establish a steady relationship with anyone except her aunt. Unfortunately, her aunt dies which leaves an enormous void in her life. Struggling with obesity since childhood, she is loathed by her own mother and finds happiness only in the presence of her equally obese aunt, Louise K. Delacourt. Adulthood does not bring her any fortune in terms of relationships. The same can be said about all the major characters in the selected novels who find themselves in the same situation. Thus, these women are depicted as loners, who have no one to defend them but themselves.

The traditional role accorded to women by patriarchal culture is being a good wife and mother. Her function is to “provide the society with children” (446) as well as to “satisfy a male’s sexual needs and to take care of his household.” (Beauvoir 447) Whereas men are perceived as a complete individual and socially independent, women are thought to be incomplete beings and dependent on men. As such, the “appropriate” approach to study women is by situating her in this traditional role. In patriarchal societies, subjugation of women does not occur because of an individual male or a specific group of males, but rather, the society as an institution is conditioned to oppress women.

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution. (Beauvoir 445)

When she travels back to her childhood town, the unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* pretends to be married. Similarly, Rennie in *Bodily Harm* does the same thing on her way to St. Antoine. The notion that women are vulnerable without men and that at their age ought to be married and are safer in the company of their husbands, force them to lie about their marital status in order to avoid further scrutiny. For the time being, they have to put themselves in that role as it made their tasks easier. Such is the condition of women in a patriarchal society where once she reaches a marriageable age, she loses her individual identity and has to surrender her identity completely to her husband.

Marriage, for women is a selfless sacrificial act wherein she submits her whole self to the altar of this institution. In Atwood’s novels, marriage and motherhood are

not depicted in a flattering light where the protagonists seem to reject this traditional role. Atwood's protagonists are mostly women belonging to the middle class and are notable for their defiance of social norms. Marian in *The Edible Woman* is engaged to Peter. She understands that by getting married, she has to sacrifice her career which she is willing to do so initially. But the thought of losing her independence physically, emotionally and financially began to have an adverse mental impact on her. The fear of losing control over her 'self' eventually forces her to call off their wedding.

Despite mentioning earlier that lower-class men too can be victims of inequality, a vast majority of Atwood's characters are women, and the protagonists of the selected novels being predominantly female, this research incorporates feminist theory in order to explain the gender-related issues involved in this study. It is an attempt to examine the roles and functions of these women in a power structure. These novels depict the condition of women and their philosophies of life under different circumstances. Most of the novels selected for this research were published during what may be referred to as the second-wave feminist movement. They reflect issues such as sexuality, reproductive rights, family and workplace related issues, which are major components of the movement.

An important issue regarding women's rights is also discussed in the novels, which is women's reproductive rights. Pregnancy, childbirth, abortion or forced reproduction are issues that are quite pervasive in the novels. Clara's successive pregnancies seem to take its toll on her. Her friends, particularly Marian asks if she take contraceptives to prevent her pregnancies. Clara replies that she has not taken them, but that she will give a thought about it and "be on the pill" to prevent future unwanted pregnancies. This conversation is significant because it raises the issue of women's reproductive rights. According to Section 179 of the Canadian Criminal Code, a federal law passed in 1892,

Everyone is guilty of an indictable offense and liable to two years imprisonment who knowingly, without lawful excuse of justification, offers to sell, advertises, publishes an advertisement of or has for sale or disposal of any medicine, drug or article intended or represented as a means of preventing conception. ("History of Family Planning in Canada")

In a country like Canada, where abortion and contraception were illegal prior to the publication of this novel, it is quite controversial to have an open discussion about the use of contraception.

By 1960, the birth control pill was available in Canada, although doctors could only prescribe it for therapeutic and not for birth control reasons. After years of effort, the section of the Criminal Code making it illegal to advertise or sell birth control was finally removed in 1969. Decriminalizing contraception gave all Canadians the right to prevent pregnancy (and to protect themselves against sexually transmitted infections) without engaging in criminalized behaviour. The same legislation also decriminalized some abortions under extremely restricted conditions. (“History of Family Planning in Canada”)

The approval of birth-control pill in 1960 transformed the lives of women. It gave rise to sexual revolution and women’s liberation movement which changed the status-quo of the male-dominated society. It also gave women the power to control their own body by preventing unwanted pregnancies, which in the feminist sense of the phrase, impacts their mental, physical and economic development.

The issue of women’s reproductive rights, particularly contraception, is mentioned in Chapter 9 of *Surfacing* when Anna asks the protagonist if she is “on the pill?” (99) The protagonist “looked at her, startled. It took me a minute, why did she want to know? That was what they used to call a personal question.” (100) The novel was written in an era when abortion and contraception were illegal in Canada, and the topic itself a taboo. From the protagonist’s reaction to the question posed by Anna, it is obvious that the issue of women’s reproductive rights were hardly openly discussed. However, what can also be deduced is that despite its legal stance, women are not only aware of its presence, but also have access to it. And perhaps due to the fact that it is illegal, proper research on the improvement of the contraceptives was impossible which result in a number of side effects in the ones that were available. For instance, Anna gets “a blood clot” in her leg while the protagonist has a problem with her vision. She says, “Things were blurry. They said it would clear up after a couple of months but it didn’t.” (100) This issue is quite significant to the study of gender relations. Despite women suffering the effects of the birth-control pills, men like Anna’s

husband David ignores the sufferings of their partners and exert their power by forcing them to use these pills, endangering the lives of the women.

Abortion is a theme that pervades throughout the novel. The unnamed protagonist is haunted by the abortion that she had undergone in the past. She recounts how in the past she fell in love with a man and accidentally got pregnant. Unfortunately at the same time she found out that he was married. So her partner suggests that she have an abortion in order to save his reputation, leaving her powerless and defeated. Both the pregnancy and the abortion were, for the protagonist, things that she feels she has no control over and were rather imposed on her by her partner. Although he professes his love for her, the protagonist leaves him and ever since, the concept of love becomes a blurry idea. She lost the ability to trust anyone which robs her of a healthy happy future with a real husband. Besides, as a result of her abortion, she suffers from trauma which continues to haunt her throughout the novel. Images and ideas of death, which is an important sub-theme in the novel, remind her of the abortion she has undergone and she feels she has to pay penance for the crime that she has committed. In *Life Before Man* Lesje contemplates abortion when she realizes she is impregnated by her married lover. “She could have an abortion, stop time. She knows it's easier than it used to be.”(300) The thought of giving birth to an illegitimate child in a society that disapproves it puts her career at risk:

Will they ask her to leave? Resign. She doesn't know. A pregnant palaeontologist is surely a contradiction in terms...She will be an unwed mother. (300)

In addition, the complex nature of her relationship with Nate and the uncertainty of their future troubles her.

And what will Nate do, what will she do? It's hard to believe that such a negligible act of hers can have measurable consequences for other people...She can't tell whether he will be delighted or angry or despairing; possibly, considering his feelings about his two other children, he will be all three. (300-301)

As opposed to the above novels where abortion remains central and is an option however difficult it may have been for the protagonists, *The Handmaid's Tale* explores

the idea of forced pregnancy and childbirth. In this novel, handmaids are forcefully made to conceive and produce children for their masters where neither contraception nor abortion is an option. The ability to conceive and give birth to a healthy baby is quintessential for their survival as Offred puts it, “I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance.” (153)

The Edible Woman, the first novel by Margaret Atwood, was published in 1969, “four years after it was written and just in time to coincide with the rise of feminism in North America.” (x) It is often regarded as a product of the feminist movement that took place around the time of its publication. However, Atwood argues,

Some immediately assumed that it was a product of the movement. I myself see the book as protofeminist rather than feminist; there was no women’s movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965. (x)

In her Introduction to the novel, Atwood briefly mentions the plot of the story while describing the position of women in her contemporary society, and asserting her ideas through her heroines. She writes,

It’s noteworthy that my heroine’s choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning: a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it. But these were the options for a young woman, even a young educated woman, in Canada in the early sixties. It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed. In fact, the tone of the book seems more contemporary now than it did in, say, 1971, when it was believed that society could change itself a good deal faster than presently appears likely. (x)

Atwood firmly believes that feminists have not yet achieved their goals in fighting for their rights. Speaking about the current status of the feminist movement in the west, she also states,

The goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we’re living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole subject. (x)

The novel *The Edible Woman*, according to Atwood is an anti-comedy.

In your standard 18th century comedy you have a young couple faced with difficulty in the form of somebody who embodies the restrictive forces of society and they trick or overcome this difficulty and end up getting married. The same thing happens in *The Edible Woman* except the wrong person gets married. And the person who embodies the restrictive forces of society is in fact the person Marian gets engaged to. In a standard comedy, he would be the defiant hero. As it is, he and the restrictive society are blended into one, and the comedic solution would be a tragic solution for Marian. (Ingersoll 12)

The Edible Woman depicts the everyday life of two female characters, the protagonist Marian and her flatmate Ainsley. These two characters present a contrasting worldview. Not much is discussed about their past or their background, but the narrative is focussed on their present experiences. What can be seen is that they both belong to middle class families and have come to the city to find better opportunities. As already mentioned, these two women have little in common and have differing opinions as well as goals for their future.

The first part of the novel introduces the main characters, their personalities, and also describes their career and relationships. While Marian holds a decent, respectable position at work, and takes her work very seriously, Ainsley dislikes her job nor is she bothered too much about the future. It is pointed out in the novel that Ainsley is just a few months younger than Marian but looks much younger than her age which is representative of their mental capacity. While Ainsley leads a carefree life, Marian acts as the adult figure who is responsible for the well-being of her flatmate. Ainsley holds a temporary job in an electric toothbrush company as a tester of defective electric toothbrushes (3). She dislikes her job but keeps working there because her duty is less rigorous and financially safe. She aspires to work at an art gallery “even though they don’t pay well: she wants to meet the artists” (3). She can be deemed irresponsible in her actions and towards the end, she gets entangled in the mess that she herself has created. She is a feminist who according to Marian “had been decidedly anti-marriage,” (41) and is deeply affected with the notion of “femininity”.

Twenty-six year old MacAlpin works at Seymour Surveys. There is a rigid hierarchical structure at her workplace in which the uppermost tier is occupied by men and no woman holds a position in that hierarchy. Their office is situated at the top floor of the building which implies the patriarchal power that exists in their workplace. The next tier, in which the protagonist holds a position as a clerk, mostly consists of women. These women carry out most of the work that the company does, from developing questionnaires, testing food, customer service etc. But they do not have the authority to make decisions for the company, but it is the men upstairs who do that. The lowest tier consists of a collection of both sexes who carry out menial tasks for their superiors. Men with skills belong to the uppermost tier while women can reach only the second tier. Men and women with no skills end up in the lowest tier.

Another important female character is Clara, a high school friend of Marian whom she still keeps in touch with and visits occasionally. Clara gets pregnant and marries her college boyfriend, and is seen as extremely busy and tired because she keeps having children at rapid succession. She has a supportive husband who does much of the chores at home and also cares for the immediate needs of their small children, all the while holding a job to sustain his ever growing family. Clara does not withhold from expressing her contempt about her lot. These contrasting characters refute the stereotyping of women and aims to show that every woman possesses a unique identity, and is independent from the other. And as an individual, they each have their unique problems and ideals and therefore their quest for power and identity varies from one other.

One of the most important issues dealt with in the novel is that of marriage. Marriage as an institution is where power politics come into play. In the words of Isabel Huitt, *The Edible Woman* presents a universal theme which is “concerned with the devouring and consumption of another person in marriage and love and suggests that perhaps people who allow themselves to be eaten deserve their fate.” (61) The dichotomy between traditional and progressive views on marriage is seen through the characters. Marian is in a serious relationship with Peter who is a lawyer by profession and, according to her, “pragmatic” and a perfectionist, apparently having an OCD. On the other hand, Ainsley does not take her relationships seriously and is merely looking for an eligible ‘sperm donor’ so that she can have the perfect offspring. She is

determined to become a single parent but however, by the end of the story, she elopes with one of the narrator's acquaintances while the narrator separates with her fiancé. While Marian is willing to sacrifice her career eventually, if she gets married, so that she can take better care of her household, Ainsley sees it as a means of women's subordination which is one of the main reasons she is critical of it. While Marian is more or less conventional in her views regarding this issue, Ainsley has an interestingly contrasting idea. But interestingly, by the end of the novel, these two characters embark on journeys that contradict their earlier views.

Although it has already been established that she is not interested in getting married, the reason for her disbelief in the institution of marriage is substantiated in Chapter 5 when Marian takes her to visit Clara, her long-time friend. After seeing their chaotic domestic life, she is shocked by the mess that Clara is currently stuck in. Although she agrees that Clara is a failure, she puts the blame on her husband, Joe. In her opinion, Joe is accountable for Clara's failure because he is refusing to let her take responsibility in her life. When Marian argues that "Joe is marvellous...He does just about everything for her! Where would Clara be without him?" (42) Ainsley replied, "Precisely", implying that Joe's refusal to let Clara take control of her own life is a form of oppression and detrimental to his wife's development. Ainsley's discourse brings the power struggle into play. The husband's dominion over his wife prevents the latter from accomplishing her goals. The only means by which Clara can bring her life back in order was to question the status quo and reclaim authority and make decisions on her own. In other words, she has to fight for her own independence and deny her husband the authority to control her. Ainsley suggests that Clara complete her degree or at least do something with her life instead of just relying on her husband to run all the errands. Clara's weakness is seen here as the very means that makes way for her oppression. Clara's predicament and Ainsley's suggestion are echoed in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* where she describes the condition of women like Clara, saying:

It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity,

the firm core of self or “I” without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive. (as quoted in bell hooks 2)

Contrary to Ainsley’s opinions, Clara has no intention of getting herself back in shape, physically nor emotionally. She seems to enjoy seeing her husband do all the work for her, at the same time complaining and whining about her mischievous children. Her passivity and refusal to move forward in life literally causes her to feel stagnant, powerless and miserable. She is also a perfect specimen of women whose future are destroyed by childbirth, a theory propounded by Shulamith Firestone in her treatise *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. (1970)

According to Firestone, women are oppressed because they belong to that class in the gender hierarchy who suffer the inconvenience of pregnancy and childbirth. She believes that these aspects hinder their capacity in society. Clara exemplifies this kind of character by projecting herself as incapable of working, let alone carry out domestic chores because of her pregnancies.

While contemplating Clara’s prospective, Ainsley is struck with the idea that single parenthood is more advantageous. The following day she announces to Marian that he is going to have a baby. When Marian probes her further, she goes on to say that she has decided to have a child out of wedlock claiming, “The thing that ruins families these days is the husbands.” (42) But the problem for Ainsley is that she does not have a lover by whom she can conceive this child. Besides, she does not want any random male to impregnate her. She is looking for a specific male with healthy genealogy so that her baby can inherit the gene. She decides to look for a partner and finally she is able to “seduce” Leonard Sank, Marian and Clara’s former classmate. After discovering her pregnancy, and her plot behind it, Len does not seem at all happy about it, and persuades her to have an abortion. As she refuses to follow his request, Len is enraged that he has been taken advantage of, and dragged into a situation that he does not want any involvement in. Thus, the relationship between the two became hostile. As a result of the failure to compromise, a struggle for power arises between these two characters. They both want to emerge victorious thus they resort to the only alternative left, which is to destroy each other. To make matters worse for Ainsley, her excitement about her success in her goal became short-lived when she attends a prenatal counselling where she is informed of the damaging facts relating to children

of single parents. She is finally compelled to face the consequences of her impulsive decisions as the fear that her child will suffer from the psychological impacts of the lack of a father figure became too overwhelming. However, she comforts herself that she will find a solution to it.

Another issue where the women initially had differences of opinion is on the issue of marriage. Clara abruptly marries Joe after learning that she is pregnant with his baby. She does not question or ponder too much on the consequences it may have on her future. In that sense, it can be said that she submits to patriarchal convention by accepting that marriage is the right thing to do. Marian too, in the beginning feels that she ought to get married at some point in her life. When Peter proposes and they get engaged, there was a discussion on her career. But she agrees to compromise her career and become a homemaker thus adhering to societal norms of the day. However, she often doubts herself and her instinct took control where she eventually escapes marriage and decides to start over, with an uncertain future. Marian has nothing to worry about in terms of financial stability. But having to sacrifice all that she has achieved in the past, including her independence, her power looms heavy upon her. The prospect of transferring her power to the hands of Peter drives her insane, literally and metaphorically. Since her engagement with Peter, she loses her ability to control her body and displays abnormality. She regains normalcy only after she breaks things off with Peter by the end of the story.

Ainsley is the most radical among the female characters in *The Edible Woman*. She is first introduced as being anti-marriage. She strongly argues, as mentioned before, that it is marriage that kills Clara's potential. However, she ends up eloping with a stranger she just met at the end of the novel. From the aforementioned perspectives, it can be deduced that there clearly is a conflict between marriage and women's empowerment. As marriage, in the traditional sense, implies submission to men and compromising women's future in order to start a family. Most women, as seen in the novel, are not willing to give in to this system that limits their creative potential and financial independence.

Surfacing, one of the more well-known novels of Atwood was published in 1972. Like, *The Edible Woman*, it is a novel about a woman's search for identity.

Atwood hints that it is a “ghost story”, (Ingersoll 12) not in the conventional sense but rather in her style of writing. The story is narrated by an unnamed female protagonist who grew up on an island in the former French territory of Quebec. The narrative is told in the ‘stream of consciousness’ mode. Fragmented as the life of the narrator, it bounces back and forth from present to past. The novel begins with the statement, “I can’t believe I’m on this road again,” (3) implying that the narrator is undertaking a journey which is both spiritual and physical in nature. The word “again” here signifies that she is revisiting her past. In this novel, the narrator revisits her childhood home when news about his father’s strange disappearance reaches her. On her way, she notices a number of changes in the landscape, and the influence of modernity but more importantly, as the story progresses, the narrator undergoes a massive change.

During her childhood, the unnamed protagonist lives an idyllic life on an island where she lives with her parents. She later leaves the cabin and moved into the city where she finds a job and lives with her boyfriend in Toronto. Currently the protagonist works as a “commercial artist, or, when the job is more pretentious, an illustrator.” (*Surfacing* 62) She initially pursued being a “real artist” but her boyfriend at the time told her to “study something I’d be able to use because there have never been any important woman artists.” (63) Women, back then, did not have the liberty to pursue careers of their choice because they were expected to follow certain limited paths. The protagonist succumbed to this patriarchal notion and “went into Design and did fabric patterns” (63) instead of becoming a real artist and has been stuck in it ever since. She insists, “It isn’t my territory but I need the money.” (63) In addition to taking a job which it not her first choice, she also has to conform to her boss, Mr. Percival’s ideas. She is not given the freedom to exercise her creativity despite being an “artist” and has to “compromise” her art for the sake of keeping her job. She has no authority over her own self, and has to be forcefully influenced by external male authority.

The protagonist’s mother suffers from mental instability resulting from the “death” of her brother. She died after the protagonist left the island. She is survived by the narrator and her father. Although the protagonist has already decided to leave her past behind, she is compelled to go back to her childhood cabin on a quest to find her missing father. She is accompanied by her boyfriend, Joe, as well as their friends, Anna and David. Despite her reluctance to revisit her past, the journey proves to be a

pivotal one as it is emancipatory. They stayed on the island for a week looking for her father. When the search proves futile, they decide to go back to the city as they were also running out of supplies. While they were preparing to head back to the city, she is informed that her father's body has been recovered from the waters. Their stay here on the island is significant as it reveals the true nature of the four friends, as well as the power struggle that exist between them.

The women in *Surfacing* are reduced to mere objects and property of men which echoes the sentiments of the era in which it was written. They have no identity unless in relation to their male partners. Most of the women in the novel that the narrator comes across, are passive characters who do not have any distinct contribution. The lack of identity is represented by the narrator who is not assigned a name in the novel. Moreover, as seen in Chapter 3, the women on the village that they went had no names. They were all referred to as "Madame" as "none of the women had names then." (29) This symbolises the subordination of women and their lack of significance the society.

As mentioned earlier, the narrative continuously shifts from present to past and vice versa. Memory plays an important part in the construction of the narrative as it is crucial in understanding the identity, or the lack thereof, of the narrator.

I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I'll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it, the ones who could help are gone. (*Surfacing* 90)

Despite proclaiming the above statement, the narrator invents her own past in order to overcome the reality of her present. By her own admission in Chapter 2, she "had a good childhood." (17) She was brought up on a secluded island during the Second World War, cut off from the rest of society.

...it was in the middle of the war...bombs and concentration camps, the leaders roaring at the crowds from inside their uniforms, pain and useless death, flags rippling in time to the anthems. But I didn't know

that till later, when my brother found out and told me. At the time it felt like peace. (17)

She also states, "...my family was, by reputation, peculiar as well as *anglais*." (21) Although her parents did their best to protect their family from the war and its effects, the protagonist later gets exposed to the world of patriarchal oppression and became subjected to mental abuse.

Both her parents are non-religious and discouraged her to take part in it.

When I started school myself I begged to be allowed to go to Sunday School, like everyone else; ...My father didn't approve, he reacted as though I'd asked to go to a pool hall: Christianity was something he'd escaped from, he wished to protect us from its distortions. But after a couple of years he decided I was old enough, I could see for myself, reason would defend me. (*Surfacing* 66)

She later admits that she did not last long at Sunday School (89) and abandons God and religion altogether.

Religion is an important theme in novels like *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood once stated that she went to Catholic school. She is acquainted with the Bible and its teachings but chooses to be an agnostic for various reasons. Her characters are seldom religious and are not particularly drawn towards Christianity. In her novels, religion often becomes a subject of ridicule and scorn. Christianity in particular, rests on the belief in one God who is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. Adherents believe that God controls all beings and people who are obedient to God will go to heaven after they die. However, the concentration of power and authority in the hands of God is difficult to accept for the protagonists. Hence, they attempt to subvert this notion by abandoning religion altogether. In the theocratic society of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, religious extremism is projected as an agency of all evil. The few elites abuse their power in the name of religion.

In *Surfacing*, the protagonist's parents decide to live on the island was so that they can impose their own ideology on their children and protect them from the influence of the society. In other words, they feel the need to transfer power from the state to themselves, bring their children up by their own ideals. But the failure is seen

in the life of the protagonist who somehow escape this regime in search of freedom from her parents' influence. The protagonist finds a lover and later leaves her parents and decides never to come back because she feels that they would never approve of her affair and neither would they understand the pregnancy nor the abortion.

...they never forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce; I don't think they even understood the marriage, which was surprising since I didn't understand it myself. What upset them was the way I did it, so suddenly, and then running off and leaving my husband and child, my attractive full-colour magazine illustrations, suitable for framing. Leaving my child, that was the unpardonable sin; it was no use trying to explain to them why it wasn't really mine. (32)

The protagonist pretends that she is married in order to protect herself from the persecution of the society that is intolerant to women who lead the kind of life that she has led. In other words, sexual promiscuity in women is an unforgiveable act. Women are perceived as incapable of living on their own and their status is defined by that of their husbands. Especially in the era and region that the protagonist lives in, marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal of women. When she goes back to the village to find her father, she meets Paul, a former companion of her father who asks her, "Your husband here too?"(24) The question posed here has a serious misogynistic undertone and implies that an unmarried woman would be incapable of undertaking the aforementioned task of finding a missing person. He adds, "a man should be handling this." (24) In order to avoid further confusion, she pretends that she is married saying,

My status is a problem, they obviously think I'm married. But I'm safe, I'm wearing my ring. I never threw it out, it's useful for landladies. I sent my parents a postcard after the wedding, they must have mentioned it to Paul; that, but not the divorce. It isn't part of the vocabulary here, there's no reason to upset them. (24)

She goes on saying,

I'm waiting for Madame to ask about the baby. I'm prepared, alerted. I'll tell her I left him in the city; that would be perfectly true, only it

was a different city, he's better off with my husband, former husband.
(24-25)

She has to pretend having a husband and a baby, despite having none in order to save herself from the onslaught of judgements and condemnations from society. What is evident from the above statements is that as long as people know she is married, everything falls into place. She has no identity on her own but her "husband" is her form of protection and shield. People become inquisitive and ask all sorts of inappropriate questions when they find out women are single. Like the protagonist, her friend Anna too, understands this and so in order to avoid awkward unsolicited conversations in social meetings, she would simply introduce herself as "David's wife". (*Surfacing* 70)

The relationship between Anna and David is worth mentioning because of the attitude of David towards his wife, which in turn portrays the society at large. It clearly depicts the condition of women in the domestic sphere. The couple have been married for ten years when the narration takes place. Although the marriage has lasted a decade and they seem compatible, the truth is that their marriage is fraught with infidelity and abuse. David is disrespectful towards his wife and uses derogatory language to address her. He simply wants her "to look like a young chick all the time," (156) and Anna has to put on make-up all the time. If she fails to please him, he would hurl verbal abuse towards her, which usually end up with him sleeping with another woman just to spite her. She told the narrator,

He's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I'm never sure...He likes to make me cry because he can't do it himself. (*Surfacing* 156)

She adds, "Sometimes I think he'd like me to die...I have dreams about it." (*Surfacing* 157) Atwood explores the breakdown of marriage in many of her novels. This breakdown stems from the exploitation of women in marriages.

Like *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle* begins with a loaded statement:

I planned my death carefully, unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. (3)

The statement summarises the whole life of the narrator and also foreshadows the events that she is about to narrate with an element of bleakness. *Lady Oracle* tells the story of Joan Foster. The narrative begins with Joan fleeing from society as she attempts to come to terms with her self. She tells the story of her own past from her obese unhappy childhood up to the present where she explains the events that eventually force her to fake her own death and hides in Terremoto. As the memories of the failures and trauma of her childhood, young adulthood and recent adult past seem to pile up and destroy her, she feels it has become unbearable and decides to fake her own death and live a life of anonymity in a foreign land. Despite fleeing her home and living alone in a distant village, she continues to be haunted by her past while also suffering from fear and loneliness until she finally come to terms with herself at the end of the novel.

As a child, Joan Foster was obese and was the object of ridicule among her peers. For her, trying to fit in to the society is a constant struggle she has to endure. Joan vividly describes her strained relationship with her mother who loathes her. The only companion she has is her aunt. As she grew up, she became extremely self-conscious and struggled to find an identity. As a young adult, she became the mistress of a count whose library became an inspiration for her to write gothic romance books. She publishes these stories in secret which generate income for her marking the beginning of her financial independence. Despite her consent to live with the count due to her naiveté as well as her longing for acceptance, she soon feels that she is no less than a captive in this relationship, literally and metaphorically. It did not take long for her to realize that she is being coerced into this loveless relationship out of fear of the count's retribution. On one of the rare chances that she gets out of the house, Joan met a radical activist-cum-journalist and lives with him. At first, she was fascinated by the hectic lifestyle she experiences with the revolutionary. She also feels a sense of purpose and meaning in her life that she has never experienced before. Her creativity also surges and is able to finish a novel. She submits her manuscript which gets accepted by a renowned publishing house and attains momentary fame during this period. This phase in her life is remarkable in the sense that she is finally able to break free from the chains of her banal past. For once in her life, she is finally able to take control of her life, and steer it the way she envisions. At the same time, she loses interest in the work of her boyfriend and his acquaintances as she does not really

support the causes that they fought for. She soon gets bored and begins to feel quite insignificant in this new household. She is dragged back to her the state of hopelessness and misery of her past. Her boredom and the search of excitement leads her to another relationship where she makes a disastrous decision and starts having an affair with ‘the Royal Porcupine’, an underground artist who collects dead animals and displays them in his basement apartment. She is attracted by his unusual lifestyle and the lack of commitment that this persons expects from her. Joan’s decisions, especially pertaining to relationships, are influenced by her passionate yearning for thrill and significance.

Life Before Man is told from the perspective of three central figures, Lesje, Nate and Elizabeth. The narrative shifts simultaneously from the first-person to third-person narrative. Lesje and Elizabeth are co-workers in the department of Palaeontology at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Meanwhile, Nate and Elizabeth are an unhappily married couple who continuously have extramarital affairs. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is made aware of the suicide of Elizabeth’s lover, Chris and the effect it has on her family. Lesje lives with her boyfriend and is known to be passionate about her work. Although she works with Elizabeth, she has never been really close to her. Her life took a sudden turn when she receives a phone call from Nate, Elizabeth’s husband. They soon begin an affair that shattered their respective relationships.

The three central characters, like all other characters in Atwood’s novels, belong to the middle class in society. They have no noteworthy characteristics and in a way, are quite relatable for the general public because their struggles are the struggles that any middle-class individual suffers from.

The story opens with Elizabeth lamenting over the loss of her lover, Chris who shot himself. She says,

I don’t know how I should live. I don’t know how anyone should live.
All I know is how I do live. I live like a peeled snail...I want that shell
back, it took me long enough to make. (3)

She admits that she feels crippled by this loss. She feels hopeless but refuses to mourn. The emotion that she feels is anger and resentment at the cowardly act of

suicide committed by Chris. The narrator then goes on to say that Elizabeth has been taking leave from work for quite a number of times and that she needs to put up some courage in order to keep her job. Despite the emotional turmoil Elizabeth is presented as a character with the strength to overcome challenges that come her way. She is the bread-winner in her family. Nate, her husband, is a carpenter who engages himself in occasional odd jobs but does not earn a reliable sum of money. Not only is he unable to provide for his family, he is not even self-sufficient and therefore has to borrow a certain amount of money from Elizabeth from time to time. Society's gender-bias is depicted in the presentation of the couple. While Elizabeth is frowned upon and her affair with Chris becomes a scandal, which eventually reduce her to a recluse, the same does not apply to Nate. Nate on the other hand is presented in a sympathetic manner, which is how he is perceived by society.

The epigraph inscribed on the introductory page of *Bodily Harm* is an excerpt from John Berger's *Way of Seeing*. It reads,

A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a women's presence...defines what you can or cannot do to her. (7)

The above quote defines the current state of affairs regarding gender relation. *Bodily Harm* depicts the life of Renata Wilford, known as Rennie. The central theme of this novel is the struggle for survival in a ravenous race for power. In the novel, the protagonist Rennie is a journalist who writes travel pieces for magazines. Currently, she is assigned to write a travel piece on a Caribbean island, St. Antoine. Like other protagonists in the selected texts, Rennie is constantly haunted by memories of her past, especially those that concern her breast cancer and her relationship with her former boyfriend, Jake. The story begins "the day after Jake left." (11) On this fateful day, she learns that a mystery man has broken in to her house. The fear of this unknown intruder, his motive, and the apprehension of another intrusion makes her anxious and restless. Fortunately, she has the opportunity to escape when she is assigned to write a travel piece which requires her to stay in St. Antoine. Hoping to leave her anxiety and troubled life behind, she heads to the Caribbean island only to find herself in a worse situation. During her stay, she undergoes a number of trials and embroils herself in the chaos of the revolutionary war that was taking place. Despite being careful not

to get caught up in the politics and the people of the land, she soon finds herself in the midst of it. She realizes when it is too late that she is being taken advantage of by a number of people who are active participants in the ongoing political upheaval.

Like the unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing*, Rennie is met with the question “You have a husband? ...Perhaps he will join you later?” (31) while flying to St. Antoine to which Rennie answers, “Not with me.” (31) She gives this appropriate response to ward off unsolicited advances as well as to avoid further interrogations. The prospect of a female travelling alone in an unknown territory is considered inappropriate, and dangerous. She is considered weak and incapable of defending herself without a male chaperone. Rennie too, becomes a target of manipulative characters during her stay in St. Antoine. She has to endure harsh weather, food and the lack of myriad luxuries she gets at home. As soon as she arrives in St. Antoine, she lands herself in a political battlefield where everyone vies for power. As a lone female tourist, and a journalist, she becomes an easy target for the natives who desperately try to take advantage of her. While some like Dr. Minnow, Paul and Lora make attempts to get her support, others especially Marsdon are not too keen in having her in their midst. Dr. Minnow, whom she first met on a plane to St. Antoine, is a candidate for the upcoming election. He wants Rennie to write about the corrupt practices of Ellis and expose his exploitation of the poor of the land as well as his abuse of the foreign funds for hurricane relief that the region gets. In a firm but gentle manner, he is trying to use Rennie as a medium to propagate his political propaganda. His attempt to assert his power over Rennie does not go unnoticed by others when Paul and Lora soon step in. In the guise of a chance meeting, Paul introduces himself to Rennie. Paul is an American who does business in the Caribbean. Owning four boats, he is involved in illegal trade including smuggling of marijuana and guns to the region. Lora, a former lover and an associate of Paul, throws herself at Rennie and later blackmails her to pick up a smuggled gun package from the airport. Rennie is a “nice” person and despite her self-proclamation that she trusts no-one, she is quite agreeable, refusing to turn people down. Her perception of her own self is put to test in St. Antoine. Her naiveté leads her to her own destruction.

Rennie was born and brought up in Griswold, Ontario. It is a small town characterised by strict moral values and conservative ideals. “Decency” was an ideal that was taught to children, especially girls, in Griswold. As already mentioned in the

earlier part of this chapter, her desire to leave Griswold entails her yearning for freedom from the constraints of the society that restricts her from developing as an individual. In Griswold, she feels she has no control over her own life. She is a powerless adherent, by force, of a number of societal values she does not really believe in.

It is revealed in the novel that Rennie had breast cancer and has undergone mastectomy. The breast being a significant part that makes a woman wholesome, the removal, in addition to other issues, creates a crisis and a feeling of fragmentation in her life. It makes her feel as if she has lost her identity, causing a strain on her relationship as well as how she looks at her own self. This loss continues to haunt her throughout the story which manifests itself in various ways. From the onset of the novel, Rennie is plagued by a trauma that results from her mastectomy. She suffers from a lack of self-esteem due to the removal of her breasts, a symbol of her femininity. This crisis gradually impacted her relationship with her boyfriend. Her failure to embrace her new image reduced her into an emotional, weak and dependent being. She becomes needy and clings to her doctor for approval and sympathy and eventually begins an affair with him. Rennie is unable to put her life back together at this stage because she sees herself as a victim of circumstances. Despite the misfortunes that await in St. Antoine, it was this trip that finally motivate her to get her life back on track.

Towards the end of the novel, an upheaval occurred wherein Rennie, accused as a spy, ends up in jail with Lora. Bereft of proper amenities, the two women open up about their lives. In the meantime, the prison guards took advantage of the helpless women. Lora trades her body for sex with the guards, who she is familiar with, in exchange for cigarettes, chewing gum and a comb. The depravity of those who hold power is clearly exemplified in this scene where the guards exploit the weak and helpless women by demanding sexual favours in exchange of basic needs.

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) which was published in 1985 is perhaps the best known novel of Margaret Atwood. Its popularity resurges with the release of a Hulu series in 2018 of the same name. It is unquestionably the best example among Atwood's novels where power politics is overtly manifest. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in the future in America known as Gilead. In this

theocratic society, women are stripped off their rights and administration falls into the hands of a few male elite class. It is a dystopian fiction, or a “speculative fiction” as the author labels it. Through a reading of the novel, it can be understood that the protagonist, who has been leading a peaceful life with her husband and a young son, was captured and forced to become a handmaid of Fred, one of the leaders of Gilead. She is assigned a new name, Offred, which means that she belongs to Fred, a Commander in the Gilead society. The erasure of their names itself indicates the loss of their individual identity and the new nomenclature reduces them to mere objects. Unlike some of her novels in which gender relations are expressed more subtly, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel about power and a blatant representation of the oppression of women in a society characterised by religious extremism and abuse of power.

The Penelopiad (2005) is a novella published in 2005 which retells Homer's *Odyssey* from the perspective of Penelope and other female characters. These female characters were denied a voice in the original tale and end up being persecuted. In order to fully understand the narrative, it is necessary to have some knowledge about *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey* as Atwood alludes to these epic poems and the story basically takes off from these texts. In other words, Atwood attempts to fill the gaps in Homer's texts by composing a new narrative in order to give her readers a new perspective on the said Greek myth.

Atwood contends that Homer's *Odyssey* is “not the only source of the story.” According to her, “...a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another.” Therefore she claims that she has “drawn on other material other than *The Odyssey*, especially details of Penelope's parentage, her early life and marriage, and the scandalous rumours circulating about her.” (xiv) Atwood's modern rendition of the tale depicts the hardships endured by Penelope, the wife of the ever-absent Odysseus, and the life of her twelve maids who were eventually executed.

In Homer's account of *The Odyssey*, Penelope – wife of Odysseus and cousin of the beautiful Helen of Troy – is portrayed as the quintessential faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy. (xiii)

...Shrewd Odysseus!...You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarus' daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of

her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope.’ (xi)

Left alone for twenty years when Odysseus goes off to fight in the Trojan War after the abduction of Helen, Penelope manages, in the face of scandalous rumours, to maintain the kingdom of Ithaca, bring up her son, and keep her suitors at bay, simultaneously. When Odysseus finally comes home after enduring hardships, overcoming monsters and sleeping with goddesses, he kills her suitors as well as twelve of Penelope’s maids who were her only companions and confidantes.

...he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare...so the women’s heads were fast held in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long. (xi)

In *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood has chosen to give the narration of the events to Penelope and her twelve hanged maids, probing what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was actually happening in Ithaca. The story begins with Penelope’s powerful proclamation, “Now that I’m dead I know everything.” (1) This implies that she is currently speaking from Hades, a place where dead people go, according to Greek mythology. She then goes on to narrate her life on earth, her upbringing and the unknown truth about her husband, Odysseus. The novella is divided into 29 chapters where Penelope and the twelve maids tell their story simultaneously.

Penelope is the daughter of Icarius, King of Sparta, and a Naiad. As a result of her father’s visit to an oracle who tells him that his daughter was going to weave his shroud, animosity arises. Her father’s fear of being overthrown, and losing his power to his daughter results in a sinister plan by the latter to stop the prophecy from happening. Technically speaking, the thirst for power is imminent since the birth of Icarius’ successor. Icarius began to hatch a plot to kill his own daughter so that she may not live long enough to weave the shroud. He finally throws her into the sea so

as to drown her, but ducks came to her rescue and pulled her out to shore which earned her the nickname “Duck”. The horrifying incident suggests the father’s desire for power and the extreme extent he is willing to take in order to maintain his throne. However, Icarus began to change his attitude towards his daughter once he realizes that his daughter is more or less indestructible and dotes on her, which causes suspicion in Penelope’s mind. Regardless of how affectionate he was towards her, Penelope was in constant fear of her father’s motives and she always felt that he might suddenly do something to harm her. This fear and anxiety prompts Penelope to develop a defence mechanism whereby she refuses to have intimate relationships with none of the people she comes across. Icarus’ attempt to retain power and the means he employ to remain in power, defines Penelope’s strange upbringing. The subtle negotiation for power between these two characters has always been present since her childhood. To add to her woe, her mother does not seem to care about her and she never had a good relationship with her during her early years. According to her, her parents were the reason she finds it difficult to trust anyone throughout her life. Despite her royal parentage, she claims that she does not have fond memories of her childhood due to the lack of love, affection and attention she received from her parents.

As Penelope narrates her story, the maids too have their own story to tell, regarding their childhood and upbringing. In contrast to Penelope’s royal lineage, the maids were daughters of “...poor parents, slave parents, peasant parents, and serf parents.” (11) They have been stolen or snatched from their parents and made to work in the palace and were neither given proper food nor clothing. They were forced to work from dawn to dusk and were deprived of proper sleep. Their predicament brings to light the class struggle in which the lower class are crushed by those in power.

When Penelope marries Odysseus, they adhered to the tradition of staying in the bride’s palace for some time. But when they finally decide to head home to Ithaca, Penelope is not given a warm and affectionate welcome by her mother-in-law, Anticlea. Although the latter tries to hide her sense of hostility towards her son’s wife, it becomes quite obvious for Penelope that she is not liked by her husband’s mother. It seems that both these women want to have Odysseus all to themselves and thus, they see each other as competitors which result in animosity between the two. Penelope, who was only fifteen years old when she married, and homesick too, finds the situation unbearable. Her life in the palace of Ithaca is miserable, especially when her husband

leaves to fight in the Trojan War and confesses that she cries most of the time during her husband's absence. The rivalry between the two women can be seen as a subtle reflection of a struggle for power wherein these characters attempt to gain influence over Odysseus, the heir to the throne of Ithaca.

Penelope's dilemma intensifies when the "suitors", men who seek her hand in marriage, begin to appear and multiplied in numbers. As Odysseus has been absent for years, many people start to think that he has died in the war and that he was never coming back. The hunger and quest for power is evident in the attitude of the suitors who want to marry his widow in the hope of acquiring his wealth and power. Penelope's refusal to succumb to the onslaught of the suitors shows her immense strength and endurance in the face of adversity. These suitors employ all means to persuade Penelope to accept their proposal for marriage. They resort to savage means and even go to the extent of fighting among themselves, and conspiring against Penelope in order to acquire her husband's position which by no means they would acquire naturally. Defenceless and left to her own device, Penelope has nothing but her wit to save herself from these suitors. In this novella, the author sets Penelope against the world, where everyone is her enemy.

As these suitors begin to grow in numbers, they became quite ravenous and out of control. As they live in a patriarchal society where men exert their power and superiority over women, these suitors have no respect for Penelope. Her husband's absence leave her vulnerable against such advances. They persistently urge Penelope to choose one of them as a husband as it seems unlikely that Odysseus will return. Penelope, the faithful wife, refuses to betray her husband but at the same time, finds it impossible to keep them at bay. It was the maids who came to her rescue. In order to protect Penelope, the twelve maids have to appease the suitors by sleeping with them.

Helen, famously known as 'Helen of Troy' is a significant character in *The Penelopiad*. Despite her popularity, she is seen only from the narrator's perspective in which the former draws comparisons between them. Apart from her physical beauty which she is famous for and which, the narrator too admits, she is often shown in a negative light. Helen is the cousin of Penelope. She is believed to be the daughter of Zeus and Leda who later married Menelaus. The Trojan War is believed to have been a result of her elopement with Paris of Troy. Unlike Penelope, she has the ability to

exert her influence by her beauty, the only positive quality that she possesses. She is well aware of her beauty and is able to manipulate others through it. The portrayal of Helen clearly indicates the objectification of women in a patriarchal society where women are regarded merely a means to satisfy men's sexual desires.

If Penelope is the protagonist of the story, Helen is definitely the antagonist as she is instrumental in causing most of the sufferings endured by Penelope throughout the narrative. Chapter 11 of the text *The Penelopiad* is titled "Helen Ruins My Life". In this chapter, Penelope recounts the various ways in which Helen "ruins" her life. She explains why the Athenian war was fought and how Helen was responsible for the deaths of so many people. "The part of the story she enjoyed the most was the number of men who'd died in the Athenian war: she took their deaths as a tribute to herself." (60) She also says,

...if Helen hadn't been so puffed up with vanity, we might all have been spared the sufferings and sorrows she brought down on her heads by her selfishness and her deranged lust.

As cousins who are of royal lineage, the two are often compared by men within and outside of their family. Helen is older and is well-known for her beauty. According to Penelope, she is quite promiscuous and vain. On the other hand, Penelope is not remembered for her beauty but rather for her intelligence and fidelity. But in a society like theirs where women are seldom consulted in policy-making, physical beauty was more preferable, which is why Helen seems to acquire more power than Penelope and the latter feels inferior to the former. Odysseus has sought Helen's hand in marriage in the past but lost her to Menelaus. He eventually marries Penelope who was the "second best".

Penelope's resentment towards Helen reached its peak when Helen "run away with a prince of Troy." (61) As the news reached them, she said, "I repressed a desire to say that Helen should have been kept in a locked truck in a dark cellar because she was poison on legs." (63) As a repercussion of her infidelity, the Trojan War has to be fought. As Odysseus has to take part in it, he has to leave his young wife and infant son, Telemachus to join the war. Penelope says,

I was devastated at the thought of having to stay in Ithaca without Odysseus. Odysseus spent twenty long years away from home. What joy would there be for me, alone in the palace? By alone you will understand that I mean without friends or allies. There would be no midnight pleasures to counterbalance the business of Eurycleia and the freezing silences of my mother-in-law. (63)

The passage above clearly proves Penelope's sense of alienation and her devastation over the thought of having to spend life without her husband in a place where she does not feel loved or accepted. The real challenge for Penelope comes when the administration and caretaking of the palace suddenly falls into her hands. Her mother-in-law died "sickened by an excess of waiting, convinced that Odysseus would never return." (68) She adds that her mother-in-law blamed her for Odysseus' misfortune. Her father-in-law soon "lost interest in palace life" and left for the countryside to look after a farm that he built. Bereft of prior experience, Penelope struggles to keep the place in order and confesses that she "had to learn from scratch." (69) She states,

My policy was to build up the estates of Odysseus so he'd have even more wealth when he came back than when he'd left – more sheep, more cows, more pigs, more fields of grain, more slaves. I had such a clear picture in my mind – Odysseus returning, and me – with womanly modesty – revealing to him how well I had done at what was usually considered a man's business. (71)

But she clearly indicates that she will not get credit for all this hard-work that she has done. But rather these would be done "On his behalf, of course. Always for him." (71) This is a strong indication of the subordination of women. Women are merely objects to achieve certain goals, but they are seldom rewarded or, to say the least, appreciated for their contributions in their homes and elsewhere.

Throughout her life, Penelope has to deal with rejection, resentment and competition in order to survive. As already mentioned before, she was resented by her own parents since her childhood. She later marries Odysseus whose first choice for a wife was Helen. She is given a cold treatment by her husband's family. In a way, she is alienated by the rest of the characters in the story. The only people she could exert

her influence upon were the maids. But they too, constantly tease her and try to manipulate her. Her own son, Telemachus refuses to obey her and would rather have his own way than take her advice.

“Atwood’s representations of gender explore the social myths defining femininity, representations of women’s bodies in art, the social and economic exploitation of women, as well as women’s relations with each other and with men.” (Callaway 1, *Women Disunited*) From the analysis of Atwood’s novels, it can be ascertained that she is deeply affected by issues that concern women which surpasses both the personal and political. Issues pertaining to women’s reproductive rights, in particular, is one of the most significant themes dealt with in the selected novels. This is a relevant theme for the present study because it provides the basis for an analysis of women’s struggle for power. In most societies, women are regarded as weaker and has no authority in the working of the society and their decision is often more or less ignored. The only authority which they have is limited to themselves and their bodies. However, the sovereign power that they have over their body too is questionable because they do not have to authority to decide on matters related to reproduction. Atwood subtly brings in this discourse in her novels and use it as a means to negotiate the current discourse on power.

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CHAPTER IV

NEGOTIATION OF POWER AND EMERGENCE OF NEW IDENTITY

While the preceding chapter highlights the manifestations of power by analysing the experiences of the female characters, this chapter focusses on the means by which they negotiate power. Power is an ambiguous concept in terms of its manifestations in Atwood's novels. A close examination of the novels show that the female protagonists experience alienation, identity crises, disillusionment and disintegration as a result of their lack of power and inability to hold autonomy over their own selves. Their attempts to reclaim power and the various means by which they try to gain agency is the central focus of this chapter. In order to subvert power, the protagonists have to undergo physical and psychological transformations. This process helps them rediscover and reconcile with their own selves and emerge with new identities that deviate from the conventional ideas of womanhood where they finally establish themselves as independent individuals. The strategies these women employ to negotiate power vary from novel to novel and as such, the outcome of the negotiation and the newfound 'identity' differ from one protagonist to the other. The female protagonists strive for individuality by defying gender stereotypes and refusing to conform to societal norms that restrict their freedom and independence. This chapter examines the themes of survival and resistance by highlighting narratives where the protagonists survive, resist and reject established social institutions. The negotiation of power in the form of resistance result in the emergence of a new identity whereby the protagonists ultimately subvert power and reclaim control.

History records ample evidences of the suppression of women including the denial of the right to vote, work or own property. Traditionally, as Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex*, their role is limited to being a wife and mother and have no purpose beyond the domestic realm. The suppression of their voice gives rise to what is now known as the feminist movement. The movement which formally began in the onset of the twentieth century elevates into a number of movements. In his book *Modern*

Literary Criticism and Theory: A History, M. A. R. Habib describes the cause of the feminist movement in the following statement:

For most of this long history women were not only deprived of education and financial independence, but also had to struggle against a male ideology condemning them to virtual silence and obedience, as well as a male literary establishment that poured scorn on their literary endeavours. Indeed, the depiction of women in male literature – as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures – was an integral means of perpetuating these ideologies of gender. (Habib 43)

Arguing that this struggle gave rise to feminist criticism, he further writes, “It was only with women’s struggles in the twentieth century for political rights that feminist criticism arose in any systematic way. Since the early twentieth century feminist criticism has grown to encompass a vast series of concerns; a rewriting of literary history so as to include the contributions of women; the tracing of a female literary tradition; theories of sexuality and sexual difference, drawing on psychoanalysis, Marxism, and the social sciences; the representation of women in male literature.” (Habib 43) Modern feminist theory lays emphasis on eliciting social justice and impacting changes that will bring about women’s liberation and the actualization of women’s rights both within and outside the home. Although modern women enjoy more rights and liberty as compared to their predecessors, patriarchal societies are structured in a way that continue to associate women with their traditional roles which is distinctly portrayed in Atwood’s novels. The problem of assigning these roles to women is that it limits their capacity to have financial independence and also prevents them from pursuing anything beyond their domestic purposes.

In her essay “A Room of One’s Own”, Virginia Woolf writes, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction[.]” (Woolf 6) In the context of this study, the statement can be interpreted as the need for space and financial independence for women to exercise their creative freedom. Written in 1928, the essay addresses the problems faced by women in a patriarchal society where most women are denied jobs and artistic freedom. In Atwood’s novels, the protagonists are often artists who are unable to fulfil their dreams for various reasons including sexism and

gender discrimination at home and their workplace. For them to experience freedom and power, they ought to have artistic freedom where they can create art to the best of their ability without restrictions. The unnamed protagonist's inability to pursue a career in art in *Surfacing* because she is being told "there have never been any important woman artists" (*Surfacing* 63); or Joan's secretive publication of "costume Gothic" novels suggest the existence of the mentioned suppression. In this light, artistic freedom equates not only emancipation from traditional roles but also acquisition of power.

On her experience as a female writer, Margaret Atwood states:

Many of us, in my generation at least, ran into teachers or male writers or other defensive jerks who told us women could not really write because they couldn't be truck drivers or Marines and therefore didn't understand the seamier side of life, which included sex with women. We were told we wrote like housewives, or else we were treated like honorary men, as if to be a good writer was to suppress the female. (Curios Pursuits 144-145)

Here, Atwood talks about the earlier years of her career as a writer when there was still a dearth of fiction published by Canadian women. This is the dilemma in which her protagonists are stuck in. However, she goes on to say that with the passage of time, women writers start gaining recognition and the prejudice have gradually declined. In continuation of the statement above, she says,

Such pronouncements used to be made as if they were the simple truth. Now they're questioned. Some things have changed for the better, but not all. There's a lack of self-confidence that gets instilled very early in many young girls, before writing is even seen as a possibility. You need a certain amount of nerve to be a writer, an almost physical nerve. (Curious Pursuits 145)

Six of the seven novels selected for this research were published between the years 1969 and 2005. The last book, *The Penelopiad* which is a retelling of *The Odyssey* came out in 2005. Her works capture the zeitgeist of the eras in which they were written and they encapsulate the social and cultural ethos and changes that have

developed between the publications of the novels. Although the author debunks the claim that her works are autobiographical on several occasions, the difficulties she faced for her career choice as a writer have been mirrored in a number of her novels.

I escaped from academia and bypassed journalism – which was the other career I considered, until I was told that women journalists usually end up writing obituaries or wedding announcements for the women’s page, in accordance with their ancient roles as goddesses of life and death, deckers of nuptial beds and washers of corpses. Finally I became a professional writer. (CP 24)

The rampant sexism, stereotyping of women and the repressive nature of patriarchal society are also seen wherein marriage and motherhood are seen as the only alternatives for women. This often results in conflict with the female protagonists who wants to have a career, especially in the arts which is not considered viable for women. Back in the day, Atwood claims women had to choose between marriage and a career, but deciding against marriage was also deemed unacceptable. This is reflected in most of the novels, especially *The Edible Woman* which was published in 1969. This dilemma and the possible outcome of the ultimate choice made by women is explored through the character of the protagonist Marian, as well as her two female friends, Clara and Ainsley. Noting the changes that have taken place, she writes in 1979 in an essay titled “The Curse of Eve – Or, What I Learned in School”:

College education for women was justified, if at all, on the grounds that it would make women into more intelligent wives and better-informed mothers. Authorities on women were usually men. They were assumed to possess that knowledge, like all other knowledge, by virtue of gender. The tables have turned and now it’s women who are supposed to possess that knowledge, simply by birthright. (CP 24)

The women in the selected novels of Margaret Atwood are those that are denied power. Although patriarchal society by its nature systematically suppresses women to hold power and autonomy, the novels tend to emphasize the protagonists’ own role in denying themselves power due to their passivity and refusal to challenge the social systems. Despite being the subjects of the novels, the narratives are revelations of their marginalisation. In order to transition from the margin to the centre,

or to put it in other words, from a state of powerlessness to that of empowerment, the heroines have to go through a number of transformations. While subversion of power is seen within the plot of the novels through various themes, the narrative technique employed in the novels also play a significant part in highlighting the mode of subversion.

In her study of contemporary Canadian women's fiction titled *Refiguring Identities*, Coral Ann Howells state that the emphasis often falls on "...women's counter-narratives to discourses of patriarchal authority in the home, the importance of maternal inheritance, and women's revisions of traditional narrative genres, which they reshape for their own purposes." (Howells 2)

When it comes to questions of refiguring identity, inevitably different novelists follow different agendas, depending on a range of factors. There is always the gender issue that conditions women's relation to culture and history, but there are often powerful issues of ethnicity and race, sexuality, migrancy, expatriatism, or indigeneity, through which identities are constructed and reconstructed. All these writers raise the question of how much of anyone's identity is authentic and dependent on inheritance, and how much it is performative, subject to circumstances, and so redefinable in different contexts. As the black British critic Stuart Hall says: 'Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past' – and I would add, within narratives of the present as well. (Howells 2)

In Atwood's writing, power is often seen through the political and cultural aspects that encompass gender. Carol P. Christ ponders that man's attitude towards nature and the destruction of the environment as seen in novels such as *Surfacing* are also embodied in her texts. On this issue, the traditional identification of women and nature has a legacy of oppression or a potential source of power and vision. (Hammond 29) Elucidating on this, Atwood states,

It's a potential source of power and vision. The oppression isn't in nature; it's in what people have done to nature. To ask that question is to also ask, 'Is being a woman necessarily to be oppressed?' The

oppression doesn't come from within the fact of being woman. It comes from outside that fact...The oppression is in people's attitudes towards nature...it's a potential source of power and vision – partly because the alternative is to lock yourself away or become a machine. And that isn't practical or plausible for anyone – men or women. (Hammond 29)

In Foucauldian thought, power is not merely seen as a “thing” that oppresses individuals or groups of individuals. It has both negative and positive implications. The repression and suppression that women face in the novels can be seen as negative impacts of power whereas the gradual shift in power when these individuals employ it to their personal advantage can be interpreted as the positive effect of power. According to Laurence J. Silberstein, “One of Foucault's distinctive contributions has been to accentuate the way in which power operates positively as well as negatively, that is, constructively and creatively, as well as repressively.” (Silberstein 31) The positive impact of power is that it:

Invents, creates, produces. It produces more than the law that forbids desire – it produces desire itself, induces and produces desire, it gives desire its objects, power, indeed, is desirable, not only produces desire...produces the very form of the subject; it produces what makes up the subject. The form that the subject takes is, precisely, determined by power. (Silberstein 31)

On the other hand, it also imposes limits on what people can do or say. For instance, the language and actions of the characters in the novels come under the surveillance of the society. The moral codes are especially restricting for women because their roles are traditionally fixed. Subverting these socially accepted norms at times becomes necessary for these women to experience freedom and emancipation from the discriminatory gender roles that they are expected to adhere to. This often results in the rejection of social institutions such as marriage, family, government, religion and in the case of the unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing*, rejection of modern civilization.

Margaret Atwood's female protagonists are everyday characters with varied experiences and the novels deal with the realities of daily life. The novels provide a glimpse of the childhood of these protagonists through backstories or memories, which

gives an insight into the social and historical background of the novels as well as the experiences of these characters.

In 1972, Margaret Atwood published *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* where she asserts that “survival” is a recurrent theme found in Canadian Literature. It is non-fictional text in which she expounds on the idea of victimhood and the various approaches to analyse it. For her, victimhood and survival are part and parcel of Canadian identity. Through her writings and activism, Margaret Atwood is a writer who sees the power of survival in human society. A recurrent theme in Atwood’s writings including novels, poetry, short stories as well as non-fictional prose is survival. In the novels, to survive means to defy the odds and to refuse to succumb to physical and psychological challenges that are life-threatening in some cases. In this sense, it plays a prominent part in the negotiation of power. In order to survive, the most important task ahead is to refuse to remain “victims”. The protagonists in the selected novels, as stated in earlier chapters, are women who often find themselves in difficult situations, emotionally and financially. Most of them are stuck in unhappy relationships and dead-end careers with no possibility of moving forward. Despite the unflattering background that these women have, they realize that they have two options; to remain victims of these dire circumstances, or to overcome victimhood and gain control over their lives. Although at first they remain helpless and seem to get stuck in their state of powerlessness, they eventually choose to confront their issues which eventually lead to subversion of power. As long as the protagonists see themselves as victims of an unjust system, the future remains bleak. By refusing to passively remain as victims, these women finally gain strength to act and negotiate power. Atwood believes that persistence is quintessential in one’s negotiation of power.

The horse throws you and you get back on the horse. I learned to swim by being dropped into the water. You need to know you can sink, and survive it. Girls should be allowed to play in the mud. They should be released from the obligations of perfection. (Curious Pursuits 145)

The female protagonists in Atwood’s novels are seen as being oppressed by members of their own family, their superiors at workplace as well as partners in their romantic relationships. The physical and emotional abuse that they face in these places

haunt them throughout their lives. But as they reach a certain point in their lives, they refuse to let these traumatic experiences define them.

As mentioned above, survival is a recurrent theme in Atwood's novels where her characters are faced with endless ordeals and their strife to overcome these hardships in hostile environments is a common motif. Atwood admits that her earlier novels, particularly *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*, are novels that are "about how to survive." (Ingersoll 12) This can also be applied to most of her novels that followed later. Regardless of whether this struggle for survival is portrayed in a straightforward manner or more subtly, it also points to one thing, which is the struggle for power. For Rennie, the struggle for survival is apparent from the beginning of the novel where she reveals that she has to undergo mastectomy. Fear and uncertainty about her life causes her to lose stability, yet she survives. She is faced with another life-threatening circumstance while staying in St. Antoine. Despite the morbid reality of her present and the bleakness of her future, she refuses to succumb to it. Lora, on the other hand, violently protests against the guards and ends up paying with her life. The same fate is met by Offred's predecessor whose overt resistance against the regime purportedly cost her her life. Rennie and Offred resist the oppressive system but do so in a calculated and careful manner while focussing on physically surviving their current ordeal. "Offred is a survivor whose various disciplines of survival implicate her in sites where collective resistance is being carried out." (Hansot 67) Her determination to survive is seen early in the narrative when she says:

I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last. (17)

Thus, at a time when her friends Moira and Ofglen physically suffer the consequence of their resistance, Offred survives. However, she resists Gileadean laws by having an illicit affair with Nick, and also subtly conspiring for an escape and silently communicating with the other handmaids. Her determination to stay alive allows her to avoid overt resistance all the while subverting the 'norms' of Gileadean society.

Tandon and Chandra are of the view that most of Atwood's novels deal with the notion of survival, i.e., the female protagonists' struggle for survival in a male-dominated world.

Margaret Atwood's fiction shows that she is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society and in exploring her true potential, all with the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs. Survival is the keyword for Margaret Atwood and she wants her protagonist to refuse to be a victim and demand equal space as man. Her novels do not intensify the war between male and female but desire for a real, healthy and balanced human relationship. Her feminist vision is neither male-centered nor female-centered but it offers a fresh perspective on women's problems.(ix)

Power is an ambiguous notion as depicted in the selected novels. While in some cases, it is the strife towards overthrowing male authority, in most cases, it is the struggle to achieve or reclaim sovereignty over their own thoughts and body. A number of these female protagonists are deprived of the said authority over their own selves. In order to gain or regain such power, they have to put their life and priorities in order which often means the rejection of repressive ideologies. The manifestation of power itself often becomes difficult to notice in the selected novels, yet it is undeniably present.

In the selected novels of Margaret Atwood, the characters can be seen as undergoing a liminal stage. Liminality as a theory was originated by Arnold Van Gennep who gave a theoretical description and its significance in his book *Rites de Passage* (1902).

Rites de passage, in Gennep's view is an indispensable attribute of any type of change (change in place, country or social status, change in age, etc.), showing the dichotomy that exists between 'hardened' and 'changeable' structures. He believes that each process of movement or transitivity is characterized by three phases: 1. Separation, 2. Marginality or Liminality, 3. Union or incorporation. The first phase or separation implies isolation of a concrete individual form or chosen individual, so-called 'initiana' from the fixed social or cultural structures. It denotes the detachment initiated from the real temporal-spatial setting;

the second phase – liminality – expresses the ambivalent state of the initiand or the same ‘transit-traveler’, his transition to the intermediate, ambivalent social zone, the so-called ‘limbo’; the third – final phase of incorporation – corresponds to the return of the initiand to society, but in a renovated status, i.e. the individual’s ‘re-aggregation’. (Ratiani 1)

In Atwood’s fictional world, there are multiple phases in the lives of the protagonists who, in tandem with Gennep’s view, undergo them as they journey to find their ‘selves’. “Of these three phases special interest attaches to the second or liminal phase in which the individual acquires the experience of becoming completely obscure and detached from reality. The term liminal, deriving from Latin ‘limen’, means a threshold or boundary, a corridor between two different places.” (Ratiani 2)

The initial phase represents the traditional and strictly conservative stage where the female protagonists are born and brought up. Unable to conform to these ideals, the women leave their home and family behind and move to a city or elsewhere. It is here that the confusion and the need to negotiate power occurs. Joan’s escape from her parents’ home, Rennie’s escape from the conventional town of Griswold, the unnamed protagonist’s abandonment of her family in *Surfacing*, Penelope’s departure from Sparta may be cited as examples for the shift from the first stage to the next. The last and final stage is where these women would eventually fulfil their quest for identity and power. As mentioned, these women have escaped the stage in which they are controlled and oppressed by other individuals and the gaze of the society. As the narratives progress, the transition experienced by the protagonists can be discerned from the perspectives of the narrators. The novels of Atwood are mostly open-ended and therefore they do not present any conclusive idea for readers. However, what can be gleaned from the narratives is that they do arrive at a point where they rediscover their identity. The future still remains bleak and uncertain for these women as it appears they will have to navigate the repressive realms of society. But what can be understood is that with the new identities they will now have the power to think for themselves and control their own lives, as opposed to their former complacency.

It has been stated in the previous chapter that the family, particularly the mother-figure plays an important role in transmitting traditional ideals to their

daughters. The inability to adopt these ideals contribute to the breakdown of mother-daughter relationships in the novels. According to Shannon Hengen,

To chart the process of redefinition that her central female characterizations undergo, Atwood's works trace the effects of family and culture upon the formation of identity and therefore lend themselves to interpretation...My purpose here is to show that her central female characters must attend to their matrilineage and cultural history before they can redefine and change[.] (16)

In novels such as *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*, the protagonists need to revisit their past and return there in order to experience emancipation. These women's lives have been haunted by their dark past and the breakdown of their relationship with their family, especially their mothers. Reconciliation with their mothers, prove to be fruitful in establishing a stable identity.

There is always, in Atwood, the necessity to redefine the mother, to return to one's childhood home, to explore the past in order to confront the present...[as] the orphaned and isolated protagonist of *Surfacing* begins her actual journey into the Canadian backwoods of her childhood and her psychological journey toward selfhood...(Rigney 4)

In *Surfacing*, the narrator begins her story by saying, "I can't believe I'm on this road again" (3) signifying the physical and psychological journey towards her childhood home. She writes,

I wait until we're into the middle of the lake. At the right moment I look over my shoulder as I always did and there is the village, suddenly distanced and clear, the houses receding and grouping, the white church startling against the dark of the trees. The feeling I expected before but failed to have comes now, homesickness, for a place where I never lived, I'm far enough away; then the village shrinks, optical illusion, and we're around a point of land, it's behind us. (34)

The protagonist's alienation arises as a result of her failure to reconcile with her past, the past that she believes she could bury. After running away from her island home, she arrives in the city with the hope of a better life, filled with happiness and successes.

However, the dull and monotonous daily life, exacerbated by her failed relationships and unfulfilling career brought about a sense of fragmentation. She feels as if she is stuck in a world without the power to choose a future for herself. In the city, she comes to an understanding that rather than being an independent being, she is being held at the mercy of others, and is unable to control her own fate and destiny. The abortion she has had has a damaging impact on her mental state. Adding to the sense of fragmentation that she already experiences, visuals and imageries continue to disturb her. For her, being forcefully denied motherhood, and the inability to have power over her reproductive rights becomes one of the chief reasons that brought instability. As she travels back to the wilderness, she realizes where she belongs. The narrator employs symbols and imagery to describe various experiences. One of the most powerful imagery used in the novel would be the narrator's emergence out of the lake, which is also an explanation to the title of the novel. It signifies her triumph over the forces that try to suppress her, the subversion of power. "Perhaps they think I drowned myself, that would be the kind of blunder they would make." (240) It is after she surfaces from the water, and re-emerge as a new being with a sense of identity that she finally sees her mother.

Then I see her. She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out, she is wearing her grey leather jacket; her hair is long, down to her shoulders in the style of thirty years ago, before I was born; she is turned half away from me, I can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them; one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder. (236)

The significance of this passage lies in that the narrator tries to explain, through the use of her mother's appearance, how she has regained her sight so that she could finally understand her own self. The misunderstanding she had with her family, and the ensuing personal problems she faces had cast a dark cloud upon her life, preventing her from reconciling with her mother.

Fragmentation is a theme that is also expounded in novels such as *Life Before Man* and *Bodily Harm*. In the opening statement of *Life Before Man*, Elizabeth proclaims:

I don't know how I should live. I don't know how anyone should live.
All I do know is how I live. I live like a peeled snail (3)

She describes the dreary existence she has and uses the expression “like a leg that’s been cut off.” (LBM 3) Her present condition is a direct result of the suicide of her lover, and more indirectly impacted by the breakdown of her relationship with her husband and more distantly, her aunt – the mother figure of her childhood.

He doesn't know what “love” means between them any more, though they always say it. For the sake of the children. He can't remember when he started knocking at her door, or when he stopped considering it his door. When they moved the children into one room together and he took the vacant bed. The vacant bed, she called it then. Now she calls it the extra bed. (6)

The strain in their marriage takes a deep dive when Nate starts having an illicit affair with their maid henceforth ushering the start of an open relationship between the married couple. Elizabeth, who often sees herself as a victim of unfortunate and unhappy circumstances since her childhood, experiences a breakdown when her lover dies. She isolates herself and dwells in the tragedy that has befallen her. Her passiveness and the restive state she allows herself to dwell in denies her power. It was when she finally realizes that she needs her job, and prioritize her children that her life took a sudden turn. Especially after Nate's affair with Lesje, her colleague, is disclosed, she knows she has the power to take advantage of the legal system which according to Nate is a “fake structure.” (248) When Elizabeth announces that she wants to settle the matter in court, he asks, “Couldn't we do it without lawyers?” (348) He says this as he knows that despite his understanding as the “structure” implying the legal system, as being fake “it could wreck his life.” (248) She replies, “You can't have a divorce without lawyers... That would be hardly fair. You know the law, I don't. I feel I need protection.” (248) In 1977, a law was passed in Canada which granted equal rights to both husband and wife with regards to legal authority over their children. Previously the law favoured “paternal authority” which gave men more legal rights. This was replaced by the Canadian Human Rights Act of 1977 that prohibit discrimination based on sex, among many others. The novel *Life Before Man*,

published in 1979 subsumes this Act and is wielded by Elizabeth when negotiating their divorce terms.

Despite the setbacks and betrayals she has previously encountered, Elizabeth knows how to make use of those by using them as means to negotiate with her husband. Although she is the one who has and will continue to suffer more losses, she subverts her position of victimhood as a means to empower herself. The overturn of power between the two is graphically portrayed in the following words:

She's placed herself on the sofa, where she's curled with every show of comfort. He, on the other hand, is sitting on a pine pressback chair, from which, he notes, the cushion has been removed since the last time he was here. His ass hurts, bone against wood, his spine hurts, the chair was always too low for him.

He must make it clear to Elizabeth that he will not tolerate having the children used as weapons against him. (*Make it clear*, a joke. What power does he have, how does he know what she says to them when he isn't there?) (248-249)

Rennie Wilford, the protagonist in Atwood's *Bodily Harm*, is left feeling amputated, literally as a result of her breast surgery. The physical and mental fragmentation that ensues causes her to lose her confidence as she is constantly troubled by the thought that her partner will abhor her due to the loss of her breast – a symbol of her femininity and beauty. The inferiority complex she now possesses, ruins her relationship with her boyfriend Jake, which in turn prompts the latter to leave her for another woman. Like Elizabeth, Rennie sees herself as a victim in her refusal to accept her identity and move on. She pursues a relationship with her married doctor Daniel as she feels he will accept her for who she is. She seeks sympathy although she refuses to admit it. When she realizes that the affair has no future prospect, she decides to escape the city.

Rennie's transformation towards self-acceptance came after she met Paul in St. Antoine. Seeing that Paul is not bothered at all by the missing breast, she comes to an understanding that her physical amputation does not define her. However, by this time, Rennie has fallen too deep into the pit of self-deprecation and naiveté that almost

completely destroys her life. Rennie's newly found freedom and identity needs to be subdued as she could pose a threat to the government, the unjust system that runs St. Antoine. As a journalist, Rennie has the capability to expose the corruption and abuse of power on the island. She does not seem to recognise her ability before her enlightenment as she keeps referring to herself as a travel writer in the beginning of the novel. The recognition of the power of words that she possesses enable her to exert a bold and brave disposition. The tragic incidents that she experiences in St. Antoine eventually bring about an emergence of a new and empowered Rennie who now understands the meaning of life. She is finally able to observe people and act accordingly.

She will pick her time; then she will report. For the first time in her life, she can't think of a title. (300)

This passage suggests two things. One is the impact of the narrator's change in perspective towards life which made her confused as to how to take a precise step ahead. Second, which is a result of the first, is that with the new identity that she has acquired, there are innumerable opportunities before her and an equally wide areas how she can approach them. Either way, it indicates that the limitations and setbacks she used to encounter in the past are no longer issues that she is willing to be bothered with. This change is also denoted in the manner she responds to a fellow traveller who asks her to dinner. While her 'old and complaisant self' had no power to disagree with others and was easily influenced and controlled, her reformed 'self' transformed her into an independent and liberated being with the power to decide her own courses: "He asks her to dinner and she wonders what to say." (301) Here she contemplates alternate responses to escape the truth, "She could say that her husband is meeting her at the airport or that she's a lesbian or that she's dying, or the truth." (301) Her decision to reject the man's proposal proves that she no longer sees herself as an object, seeking men's approval which is in stark contrast to her former self-perception. Her choice to tell the truth also shows her prioritizing herself, marking a shift from her old self who was scared of offending people.

She says unfortunately she doesn't have enough time, she has to meet a deadline, and that's the end of him, he feels rejected, he's

embarrassed, he moves back to his own seat and opens up his briefcase, it's full of paper. (301)

R.W. Connell agrees with Michel Foucault as well as Gramsci, Williams and Said in her belief that “a collective culture sets limits and exerts pressures on thought and action.” (Maharaj 52). Understanding that power has its basis in knowledge, she goes farther by saying that social institutions play an ultimate role in controlling the beliefs and practices of individuals as they are the sources of presumed “knowledge”. She also argues that these structures limit individual freedom and perpetuate constraints. To analyse the established norms and structures is significant in order to negotiate power. She writes:

‘Structure’ is more than another term for ‘pattern’ and refers to intractability of the social world...It reflects the experience of being up against something, of limits on freedom...The concept of social structure expresses the constraints on social practice operate through a complex interplay of powers and through an array of social institutions. Accordingly, attempts to decode a social structure generally begin by analysing institutions. (Maharaj 52)

One of the common experiences shared by the protagonists in Atwood's novels would be their earnest effort to escape their homes and the memory they have of their unhappy childhood. In a sense, most of these women can be seen as escapists in that they try to escape painful experiences and memories. Instead of confronting and standing up for their rights, these women choose to run away from their problems which unfortunately lead to more trouble. Their quest for happiness and fulfilment only come to pass when they muster up the courage to face these issues in an attempt to resolve them. The promise of the breakage of these chains of endless failures and problems only come once they decide to confront them. One of the characters to best exemplify this kind of behaviour from the selected novels would be Joan, the protagonist in *Lady Oracle*. In the opening lines of the novel, she pens the following words:

I planned my death carefully; unlike my life, which meandered along from one thing to another, despite my feeble attempts to control it. (3)

According to Coral Ann Howells, “Joan’s primary motivating force is fear – fear of the past, fear of blackmail, fear of the loss of Arthur’s love, and above all, fear of being found out.” (Howells 70) Presently, she is faking her own death in an attempt to escape her predicaments at home. She has fled to Terremoto after spending her entire life fleeing from one ordeal to another, only to realize that her life has been entangled in an endless chain of mess. Unable to brave the harsh reality she escapes one final time to her current location.

My life had a tendency to spread, to get flabby, to scroll and festoon like the frame of a baroque mirror, which came from following the line of least resistance. I wanted my death, by contrast, to be neat and simple, understated, even a little severe...No trumpets, no megaphones, no spangles, no loose ends, this time. The trick was to disappear without a trace, leaving behind me the shadow of a corpse, a shadow everyone would make for sordid reality. (3)

Joan’s complicated’ life began way back when she was a little girl. Her unhappy upbringing in the hands of her abusive and disdainful mother instils in her the feeling of fear and the need to conform. Her mother’s as well as her friends’ constant warning of men seem to have a contradictory effect when in fact it was an adult male stranger who rescues her when her friends left her tied and alone in a ravine. This incident leaves her questioning, “Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?” (LO 65) The incident has a lasting impact on Joan which changes and confuses her perspective on men. The realization that all men are not dangerous encourage her to pursue relationships with strangers, or to put it more elaborately, men she barely knows. None of her relationships with these men including the Polish Count, Arthur and the Royal Porcupine seem to work out. The fear of rejection by others prompts her to create fake images of herself. “This was the reason I fabricated my life, time after time: the truth was not convincing.”(LO 162) Her lack of a concrete identity and her fear to face reality makes her life more complicated eventually resulting in her present condition where she has to fake a death in order to escape the harsh realities of her life. Joan’s empowerment comes only when she isolates herself from the rest of society to examine her own self. It was only in Terremoto that she understands how she has spent her entire life trying to fit in an image that others desire of her. This has made her

dependent on them for physical, financial and emotional satisfaction with no promise of emancipation from this fake existence. The thing that she fears the most is that people will find out about her past and all the secrets that she has hidden. Now at her presumably worst moment when she knows that all these will be publicly known, she finally gathers strength to return to Toronto to face the world.

It was good for him to lend me the plane fare. I'll pay it back once I'm organized again. The first thing is to get Sam and Marlene out of jail, I owe it to them...And I'll have to see Arthur, though I'm not looking forward to it, all those explanations and his expression of silent outrage. After the story comes out he'll know the truth anyway. He loved me under false pretenses, so I shouldn't feel too rejected when he stops.
(LO 374)

It was the decision to put her life back in order, sans all the pretensions and fake images, that Joan finally takes back control of her life. In the past, she has published some Costume Gothic under a pseudonym to make money, as it was a popular genre and it provided her an income. She used it as a means of escape from reality despite her own distaste for the genre. "I won't write any more Costume Gothics, though; I think they were bad for me. But maybe I'll try some science fiction. The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure it's better for you. I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all this, as my mother would have said." (LO 374)

Rennie Wilford, the protagonist in Margaret Atwood's novel *Bodily Harm* is another character from the selected novels whose reliance on men alleviates her own position in the power structure. Presently, she prepares for a business trip to St. Antoine in the hope of escaping her dull existence at home. It is revealed in the novel that she had ended her relationship with Jake, and had also pursued an affair with a married doctor, Daniel. After both these affairs failed, she gets the chance to turn her life around when she is offered the chance to travel. Upon her arrival at St. Antoine, Rennie allows herself to be taken advantage of by the people she meets on the island. Her naiveté and lack of determination to distance herself from the society that she enters, eventually brings about her downfall. Towards the end of the novel, after undergoing tremendous physical and mental suffering, she comes to realize the need to focus on herself and take back control of her life.

In *Bodily Harm* the two worlds of Griswold and St. Antoine represent a patriarchal worldview that morally suppresses women. Griswold, the small town that Rennie grew up in, believes in conformity to traditional roles. Rennie is being taught by her mother and relatives that the decency and obedience are virtues that girls must strive to achieve. (as explained in chapter 3) The problem with this view is that it obstructs women's progress. The conflict between her traditional upbringing and her progressive views bring about fragmentation in the life of the protagonist which is embodied in her mastectomy.

The unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* underwent similar experiences as the aforementioned women. The novel portrays masculine hegemony in its subtle form. The protagonist leaves home to join her boyfriend in the city which bears an unfruitful and unhappy result. The narrator also deals rejection at work when her boss tells her that she cannot pursue the career she dreams of because she is a woman. She later has an illicit affair with a married man who impregnated her. Fearing repercussions, her partner forces her to undergo an abortion which had a damaging impact on her mental state. The feeling of guilt that she has over the abortion continues to haunt her in the form of various morbid images. The lack of freedom of choices that she has in society severely represses her potential which she does not even realize until she escapes the social environment she lives in. The decision to go back to her childhood home on an isolated island proved to be significant as the meaninglessness of material acquisitions and human relationships is juxtaposed with the peace and tranquillity that nature provides. Upon her return to the island, the protagonist come to understand how unhappy and oppressed she has been. After a couple of days on the island, she made the decision to wholly reject "civilized" society with its oppressive systems.

As a young woman, the unnamed protagonist has been seduced by a married man which resulted in pregnancy and later, abortion. She subverts her former powerlessness in the end by encouraging her partner to have sex with her so that she may finally conceive and give birth. This incident shows how the protagonist is now able to act on her own authority and make choices for herself, without the dictate of men.

The Handmaid's Tale is a description of the worst case scenario for women living in a patriarchal totalitarian society. Unlike the women in the other novels, the

submissiveness of the women in this novel is involuntary. They are being forced into their position by the powers that be. Refusal to conform result in death or torture.

I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it. (THT 279)

In this novel, the handmaids are reduced to a form of sex slaves where their role is to conceive and have children for the Commanders. Women, who are divided into several ranks are being set up against each other. There seems to be no possibility or way out for the handmaids since they understand that everyone around them are possible spies who could report them if they happen to commit an unacceptable mistake. In Gilead, the handmaids are forbidden to read or write. They are given a set of words that they may use to communicate with each other on the rare occasions that they come together. This made it extremely difficult for these women to fight their way out from their position. The bleakness of their future, and the stress that they currently experience often make them feel hopeless and depressed. A few handmaids have succumbed to their hopelessness and took their lives. To prevent instances like these, stricter rules were made for the handmaids. The fear of being seen and caught in a compromising act prevents them from defying the laws of Gilead. The "Wall", for instance, is a place where dissidents are executed and hung as a means to ward off dissent views. The regime wants to make sure that no stone is left unturned to prevent a revolution from happening. However, all these brutal regimes did not stop a number of handmaids from making plans to overthrow the abusive regime. Various measures were used by them in order to make a plan for their escape. The narrator Offred too, makes use of the wall in order to test the allegiance of other handmaids by taking them there. She passes judgements according to their reaction so that she can know whose side the other handmaid is on. This is a form of subversion of power as Offred takes advantage of the regime's resources for her own means. Although the situation appears to be tremendously bleak and hopeless, the handmaids gradually learned how to subvert their oppressive state. The story as seen from the perspective of the narrator Offred, ends with a hope for a better future for the oppressed in Gilead.

In Atwood's novels, the female characters negotiate power and authority in the form of resistance. The resistance to obey or conform to society or the authoritative

figures within the society is seen in these novels. The traditional belief that the ideal woman is a submissive, virtuous, obedient and passive individual is questioned and more often than not, rejected by the female protagonists. As already mentioned in the earlier chapters, Atwood does not believe women to be wholly virtuous but rather, she sees them as “humans” with both the potential to do good and bad from time to time. Her idea of “woman” is projected in her novels where women are not merely portrayed as victims of male dominance, but also at times perpetrators of vile actions. Conflict between women are often seen in the plots of the novels. In some of the her novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Penelopiad*, women themselves become responsible for the downfall of other women.

In *Foucault Live. Collected Interviews*, Michel Foucault opines,

...all those on whom power is exercised to their detriment, all who find it intolerable, can begin the struggle on their own terrain and on the basis of their proper activity (or passivity). In engaging in a struggle that concerns their own interests, whose objectives they clearly understand and whose methods only they can determine, they enter into a revolutionary process. (Silberstein 33)

Foucault’s assertion that the existence of power gives way to resistance is seen in the selected novels. In *Power/Knowledge* Foucault states, “Where there is power, there is resistance.” (95-96) The dichotomy between power and resistance is undeniably present in the selected narratives where the protagonists employ various means to resist and subvert power. These will be further examined in the passages that follow.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the regime advocated a “return to traditional values.” (THT 17) This implies the subservience of women and the suppression of their freedom. They are expected to perform domestic tasks such as knitting and sewing and other menial tasks where their service and value does not extend beyond the domestic realm. As the narrator describes the unpleasant atmosphere she is placed in, she remembers Aunt Lydia’s words, “Think of it as being in an army[.]” (THT 17) The comparison here is aptly put because these handmaids, like armies, are allocated in their respective households in order to protect Gilead from extinction. The narrator

makes another comparison where she likens the place to a nunnery (18) where time is measured in “bells” and “there are few mirrors.” (18) A subtle allusion to the religious aspect is seen here, where she equates the handmaids’ roles with those of nuns.

A bed. Single, mattress medium-hard, covered with a flocked white spread. Nothing takes place in the bed but sleep, or no sleep.

The handmaids are put in small rooms that have been designed to prevent self-harm. “It isn’t running away they’re afraid of. We wouldn’t get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge.” (17-18) The preventive measures that have been installed in these tiny spaces is an indication that the regime is fully aware of the harsh conditions and its mental impact the handmaids are forced in.

So. Apart from these details, this could be a college guest room, for the less distinguished visitors, or a room in a rooming house, of former times, for ladies in reduced circumstances. That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced, for those of us who still have circumstances. (18)

This sudden shift in “circumstances” has the tendency to take its toll on many handmaids, who in the future would choose to take their own lives than be enslaved. Obedience and gratitude are being taught where Aunt Lydia tells them to accept, “Where I am is not a prison but a privilege[.]” (THT 18) The fear that has been inculcated in the handmaids impacts the narrator in such a way that she believes resistance would be futile and reminds herself to conform and to be grateful for the small things that they can still access. Despite lamenting about her abject condition, she does not see the possibility of a way out. The catalyst for transformation occurs when Offred discovers a Latin inscription left behind by a former handmaid on the wall which reads “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum.” The phrase which is a made-up phrase in mock-Latin, originates from the classroom joke that Atwood recalls from her childhood, at first baffles Offred as she does not grasp the meaning of it. Roughly

translated as “Don’t Let the Bastards Grind You Down,” Offred uses the phrase as an inspiration to resist the repressive state regime.

In *The Edible Woman* Marian is first seen as someone who wants to uphold traditional values when she asserts that she will leave her job in order to take care of her family. She believes that once she gets married to Peter, it would be ideal for her to sacrifice her career and independence in order to keep her family safe. However, as the novel progresses, so does Marian’s ideals. A major conflict in Marian’s life occurs when she met Duncan, a college student, during one of her survey duties. At first, he seems like a weird teenage boy with his radical ideas and unusual behaviour. But after a chance meeting at a laundromat, where they shared an awkward kiss, she is intrigued by his personality and later developed a relationship with him. Marian’s interest in Duncan intensified after she gets engaged to Peter. Around the same time, Marian experiences a sudden change in her appetite, where she finds her body is no longer willing to consume meat and a list of other food. One night, while having dinner with one of her old classmates, Len, and Peter and Ainsley, Marian suffers from a mental breakdown. Although they try to brush it off as an incident related to her drinking, she is fully aware that it was rather her instinct taking control over her body. She regained her normal “self” the following day but with a new consciousness that she herself had not yet fully comprehended at this point. For her, forming a relationship with Duncan, who has little, if at all, expectations or attachments from her, emancipates her from the pressure she has to endure in her other relationship. Their relationship signifies freedom, equality and independence. With Peter, she has to keep up with a lot of societal conventions which are of little importance when she is with Duncan. In a way, she feels quite comfortable and she can exhibit her real self when she is with Duncan. She eventually abandons Peter and her engagement is called off as the story ends. For Marian, her mental episode prompts an epiphany where she experiences a shift in her priorities and goals for her future.

Like Marian, the unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* experiences a change in her perspective on life upon her return to her childhood home. It is here that she ponders on her life realizes that she has led an unhappy and discontented life in the city. After her aspirations of becoming an artist and a mother were thwarted by her former employer and ex-boyfriend, she manages to hold a job that she does not like,

and enters a relationship with Joe who she does not love. She is stuck in an unsatisfactory situation but does not know how to get out of her miserable state. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, in the words of Carol P. Christ, "I about a woman's spiritual quest" where the unnamed protagonist "seeks redemption." (Christ 316)

In Atwood's novels, negotiation of power often involves a process in which the female protagonists have to isolate themselves from the consciousness of others as well as their old selves so that they can emerge with a new identity. Ulla Kriebner asserts that Margaret Atwood's novels are novels of individuation, a psychological process in which the individual separates his/her self from the consciousness or identity of others, in which the formation of a female identity is dealt with. She writes,

Atwood's female protagonists are often split between two domains: the expectations of the hegemonic patriarchal society- -which would demand their adherence to a traditional feminine, passive role, or self-realization – which would require the overthrowing of stereotypical concepts. However, the binary oppositions the characters are torn between are not equally strong... During their exhausting search for a female subjectivity the protagonists' inner conflicts manifest themselves in severe identity crises. These conflicts constitute a central theme that can be found in many of Margaret Atwood's narratives. (54)

The analysis shows that these women experience their moments of epiphany when they are in isolation. This is a clear indication of how society or the social system oppresses individuals as the protagonists are only able to re-examine their lives and thought process when they are isolated. The aforementioned women and their experiences indicate the toxic nature of the society in which they are placed. The fact that empowerment comes only when they are isolated proves the negative impact that social institutions have on these individuals. Hence, the need to examine and question the authority of these institutions becomes essential in negotiating power. The surveillance of society under which they are placed in, limits their thought and personal freedom. Unconsciously, they are conditioned to conform to societal norms. In other words, they are expected to fit into an image and lifestyle that the society assigns them. Despite their attempts to do so, these women have been unable to strictly

adhere to these values and norms bringing them unhappiness, lack of fulfilment and satisfaction. Eventually, they come to realize that resistance to these oppressive systems is the only path that would save them from their powerless state.

In *The Penelopiad* the maids' attempt to subvert their position is displayed in the form of resistance and indulgence in sexual promiscuity. These acts are committed for two reasons, to spite their masters and also to ease their sufferings. Since these maids spend their entire lives under the command of the royal family, the only means through which they can resist the said domination is through these acts. They say, "As we grew older we became polished and evasive, we mastered the secret sneer. We swayed our hips, we lurked, we winked, we signalled with our eyebrows...we met boys behind the pigpens, noble boys and ignoble boys alike." (*Penelopiad* 12) They even have sexual relations with the suitors as a means to entertain themselves as well as to distract them from Penelope. Some of them were raped by these drunken men. Their behaviour with the boys and the suitors however became a fatal flaw as it was the act that earned them the label "traitors" for which they were brutally murdered by Odysseus and Telemachus.

Seeking their revenge in Hades, chapter 28 titled "The Chorus Line: We're walking Behind You, A Love Song" is sung by the maids which addresses their anger towards Odysseus. Now that the King is finally stripped off his power, he no longer has the authority to order the maids and neither is he in a position to silence them. Therefore it is the maids' turn to exercise their power and seek justice. They mock the king by calling him "Mr. Nobody! Mr. Nameless! Mr. Master of Illusion! Mr. Sleight of Hand, grandson of thieves and liars!" (155) These names suggest how Odysseus has lost his power and is being called out for who he really is. The maids refer to themselves as "the ones without names", (155) indicating their insignificance and worthlessness in Odysseus court. The maids bring up how they have taken the blame for things crimes they did not commit, "The ones with the shame stuck onto us by others. The ones pointed at, the ones fingered." (155) As they are not in the position to tell their story or even defend themselves while they were alive, they take the chance to do so in the afterlife. They also paint a graphic description of their murder so as to taunt Odysseus for the injustice he has committed.

You should have buried us properly. You should have poured wine over us. You should have prayed for our forgiveness.

Now you can't get rid of us, wherever you go; in your life or your afterlife or any of your other lives.

...we're right behind you, following you like a trail of smoke, like a long tail, a tail made of girls, heavy as memory, light as air: twelve accusations, toes skimming the ground, hands tied behind our backs, tongues sticking out, eyes bulging, songs choked in our throats. (156)

The maids' wit and is seen in this chapter where they use their inferior position as "serving girls" as a means to confront the abusive king by saying, "We're the serving girls, we're here to serve you. We're here to serve you right." (156-157) By referring themselves as serving girls, their former and present position is juxtaposed which aptly delineate the subversion of power. The maids did not stop their mission of seeking justice with the confrontation of Odysseus, but also taunt Penelope who they regard as an accomplice to the king. The novella ends with the chapter "Envoi", a chorus sung by the maids:

we had no voice

we had no name

we had no choice

we had one face

one face the same

we took the blame

it was not fair

but now we're here

we're all here too

the same as you

and now we follow

you, we find you

now, we call

to you to you

too wit too woo

too wit too woo

too woo

The Maids sprout feathers, and fly away as owls. (159)

The chorus is directed towards Penelope, whom according to the maids, failed to protect them. Now that they have a “voice”, and free of their earthly bondage, they are calling her out seeking for an explanations to why she refused to save them from their brutal fate. This chapter in the book is significant because it deals with the identification and confrontation of agents who have abused their power. The first part describes their lack of power and identity, while the second part portrays the injustice that they suffered as a result of their oppression. The third and final part describes how they are finally free and are able to stalk Penelope. Their metamorphosis into an owl is symbolic of the knowledge and power that the maids have acquired in Hades. It is a powerful symbol that reflects the subversion of their position, as compared to their position on earth.

Joan spends her entire life searching for stability. She believes that having a reliable partner will make her happy and settled. Throughout the novel, she looks for a male figure to somehow whisk her away from her predicaments. Unfortunately, she is unable to find ultimate happiness and satisfaction in them. She always end up disappointed when these men fall short of the saviour she attempts to find in them. It was at the fact end of the novel when she realizes that the only road to her emancipation is by taking control of her own life and cease to rely on others. All her

past failures and problems were a result of her inability to trust herself to navigate her own issues. The soul-searching process that she has in *Terremoto* finally makes her realize that she needed only herself to put her life back in order.

Joan's earnest endeavour to leave her childhood home, especially her mother is noteworthy. The absence of her father during most of her childhood means that power was monopolised by her mother over her. Having failed to meet the expectations of her ambitious mother makes her the object of ridicule not only by her mother but anyone who she comes across. Her mother's constant bullying, fat-shaming and other forms of abuses not only has a negative impact on her life, but also instils a sense of hatred thus fathering the strain between mother and daughter. Joan realizes that the only means to avoid her abusive mother was to leave home and become physically and financially independent. However after leaving home, she finds it impossible to escape the authority of her mother as the latter continues to intervene in Joan's life in varying forms. Feeling dejected at home, Joan is constantly on a quest to find love and acceptance and thus create false images of herself in order to find them. As she moves from one partner to another, she feels the need to hide her past until she reaches a point where the mess she has created is no longer resolvable. The continuous threats she receives to uncover her secrets from an unknown stalker pressurised her to ultimately fake her death. For Joan, negotiating power meant evaluating herself by confronting reality, something she has escaped from all her life. Although there has been a few occasions where she has expressed that she wants to come clean, she is unable to face the probable outcome of it. Her fear of defying norms result in her imprisonment in a perceived ideal image that deceives her own self. Empowerment comes when she finally abandons her pretentious "self" and comes to terms with reality.

Similarly, Rennie, the protagonist in Atwood's *Bodily Harm* undergoes similar constraint during her childhood. As she revisits her past, Rennie remembers the values that her family tried to imbibe in her. For her, Griswold is an embodiment of traditional ideals which she sees as old-fashioned, and which she yearned to move away from. Like Joan, her father has been absent during most of her childhood. She later realizes that her parents had been divorced and they have been hiding it from her in order to protect her. Despite the sense of security and protection she gets in Griswold, Rennie finds Griswold restricting her of her freedom, thus prompting her to depart from her

childhood home. The unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* also looks for a chance to leave her family home and does so as soon as she finds the opportunity. This notable similarity in these characters hints at their progressive mentality that sees traditional ideals as redundant. For them, to remain at home is to live a life of subordination and repression. The dilemma these women face in the novels is the author's effort to explore and examine the impact of modernisation on women.

Margaret Atwood's female characters share a common experience in their failure to establish stable relationships. On top of breaking their ties with their families, the fear of loneliness and isolation and their yearning for acceptance lead them to pursue unreliable partners. Their relationships not only cost them happiness and fulfilment but also make them question the value of their own lives. These women consciously and more oftentimes unconsciously choose the path of self-destruction. The consequence they face is the decline in their influence in society, and worse, control over their own lives. The turning point in their lives occur the moment they choose to refuse to identify themselves as victims. The unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* states:

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that, I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. (*Surfacing* 249)

Unless they cease to see themselves as victims, they have no chance of survival in a consumerist society where the ones in power oppress their subordinates. According to Barbara Hill Rigney, "Atwood's heroines often move through mirrors and through their own self-deluding fictions into worlds of myth, where it is possible to lose the self and where they flounder amidst the ruins of traditional roles and obsolete images of women." (2) The decision to confront people and issues that thwart their progress usually occur in the latter part of the novels. In a way, the protagonists in the selected novels utilize their bad experiences and innumerable failures to examine themselves and eventually move towards empowerment which result in independence and taking control of their lives. Through their passivity, they realize that their lives have been reduced and confined to a powerless state. Hence they feel the need to negotiate power.

The narrative style in *The Edible Woman* is reflective of the protagonist Marian's internal conflict. The first part of the novel is written in first person narrative

where Marian is seen as a normal everyday woman with a stable job and boyfriend. She recalls the first day they met,

[He] had asked me what I planned to do. I had talked about a career, making it sound much less vague than it was in my own mind, and he told me later that it was my aura of independence and common sense he had liked: he saw me as the kind of girl who wouldn't try to take over his life. (70)

Her attempt to conform to her conventional role meant that she will choose marriage with a "conservative" Peter over a career as she knows she cannot have it both ways. The nature of their relationship is best described in Marian's own words:

...and he brought his other hand and placed it on top of mine. I was going to bring my other hand up and place it on top of his, but I thought if I did then mine would be on top and he'd have to take his arm out from underneath so he'd have another hand to put on top of the heap...I squeezed his arm affectionately instead. (75)

The hand gestures mentioned above is an understated reflection of the power-relation between Marian and Peter. This occurs in the earlier part of the novel in which Marian was still trying to accept herself as subordinate to Peter and submit herself to her boyfriend's authority. She soon gets engaged after which she begins to experience disorientation. She begins to have manic episodes and mental bouts during which the narrative shifts to the third person. Now that Marian undergoes a sudden shift in character and perspective, her story is told by an observer, an external narrator. Towards the end of the novel, she emerges as a holistic character. By the last chapter of the book, the narrative shifts to the first person singular where Marian shifts her priorities and attention to herself, instead of focussing on others and their happiness. She expresses her irritation with another person for him "not wanting to discuss what I was going to do with myself." (350) This is indicative of the resolution of Marian's identity crisis. For Marian, the negotiation of power equates the questioning of her expected role in society. By refusing to marry Peter, she rejects her traditional role to become a submissive being bereft of power. Her brief period of anorexia where her body rejects food is also symbolic of her self's rejection of the said conventions although she does not understand it at the time. She is able to return to normalcy once

she rids herself of all the societal pressures that demands her to betray her true self. While having a conversation with Duncan on the latest developments of their friends, Marian says, “I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again I found my own situation much more interesting than his.” (350)

I was cleaning the apartment. It had taken me two days to gather the strength to face it, but I had finally started. I had to go about it layer by layer. First there was the surface debris...The amount of dirt that came off was astounding: it was like uncovering an extra floor. (349)

The amount of waste that comes out as she cleans the house is symbolic of the unwanted memories and ideologies that she has consumed in the past. The negotiation of power lies in the protagonist's, like all the other protagonists in the selected novels, willingness to reflect and negotiate her own past. The emergence of a new and enlightened self is seen in *Surfacing* only after the protagonist allows herself to see the truth for what it is.

She surfaces now after realising the truth about herself. The lies she had been building, for others as well as for herself, as an escape from reality (reality which she could not bear), get shattered now. She confronts the truth about her situation i.e. she was never married and hence, the question of marriage did not arise; that she had not lost her child to her husband in the court, in fact, the child was not allowed to be born i.e. the pregnancy was terminated, a traumatic act for which she too was indirectly responsible. The only way out to compensate for this anti-nature act, she thinks is to get pregnant...she uses Joe (in a sense exploits him) to get pregnant but refuses to get married to him, possibly as a revenge upon the previous man who used her and later refused to marry her, The roles seem to have reversed now. It is only here that the quest of the protagonist is complete. Having discovered her own power, she can now confront herself. (Kaur 17)

At the end in *Life Before Man*, Elizabeth reads a caption from a painting, “Do not allow Lin Piao and Confucius to Slander Women...Everyone Helps in Building Each Other's Houses.” (308) This is a sentiment that has been expressed by Chairman Mao in his “Red Book” where he also asserts, “Women hold up half the sky.” The

message about the importance of women in building a welfare society, and also to look out for each other is echoed in these words. Margaret Atwood's novels are far from being romantic representations of the real world. She does not extend sympathy towards her characters when they commit blunders. Instead she never fails to make them pay for their mistakes and learn from their experiences. Her nationalism and preoccupation with colonialism/post-colonialism is often seen in her novels where she invokes this idea to explore the dichotomy between power/powerlessness. Despite the bleak and oftentimes pessimistic tone that the narratives have, the novels close with uncertain yet highly probable optimistic endings as Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* proclaims: "And so I step up, into the darkness within, or else the light." (307)

The narrative techniques employed in the novels play an integral part in highlighting the position of the protagonists in the power structure, where the ultimate reclamation of the narrative voice affirms the subversion of power. In *The Edible Woman*, for instance, Marian's loss of narrative voice in the second part of the novel while undergoing mental breakdown can be seen as her loss of control over her own mind and body. Her passivity and acceptance of her assigned roles comes in conflict with her own desire for independence and individuality. Therefore, she becomes detached from reality and loses the ability to control the narrative and the story is told from the perspective of an observer. The realization that she has in terms of understanding what her body wants become a catalysing factor in helping her reclaim her voice. In *Bodily Harm* there is a continuous shift in terms of the narrator. Rennie assumes the role of narrator only when she talks about the distant past, events that she recollects from her childhood. While the narrative predominantly shows Rennie as an object, the tone changes in the latter part of the novel where Rennie begins to re-examine herself. When she arrives in St. Antoine, she was perceived as a "subversive" despite her naïve yet straightforward intention of writing a "travel piece" that completely differs from their perception. Her experiences in the island ultimately shows her embracing the label, and she chooses it to describe herself at the end.

She has no intention of telling the truth, she knows when she will not be believed. In any case she is a subversive. She was not one once but now she is. A reporter. She will pick her time; then she will report.
(300-301)

Throughout modern history, there have been women who have tried to bring about a change in the hierarchical gender relations. In order to challenge the status quo, Helene Cixous, a French feminist and philosopher advocates what she calls “écriture feminine”, a feminine mode of writing. For her, the weapon that women have to gain power is by writing about themselves and the world as they see it. She implores women to “write”. She asserts,

Woman must write about her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies...Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (875)

She further acknowledges that she writes this as a woman, toward women. “When I say ‘woman’, I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. (875-876) She believes that it is by overcoming their fear of writing about their bodies that women will ultimately free themselves from the oppression of men. As Offred states in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,

By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you, I believe you’re there, I believe you into being. Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (279)

Cixous asserts that writing must no longer be reserved for “great men” but women should put themselves in the pages of history.

The novels of Margaret Atwood portray the dynamics of power which exist in various aspects of society. “As an integral figure in the Canadian cultural awakening of the 1960s and 1970s, Atwood hopes to encode in her writing the potentially renewing powers of change.” (Hengen 19) In the novels analysed in this study, the female protagonists are seldom seen in a position of power. Situated in a patriarchal society, they often find themselves in unfavourable positions, both within and outside the domestic realm. Despite the bleakness of their reality, Atwood’s novels suggest the possibility of a breakthrough from their position of powerlessness. In the novels, the mode of narration and the shifting perspective of the narrative show the changing dynamics of power. While the early phases of the narratives show them presenting

themselves as helpless victims, the realization that their passivity contributes to the continuation of their subordination becomes a catalysing factor that encourage them to resist. Atwood's heroines' refusal to conform to gender stereotypes and submit to traditional norms ultimately reverse their position from a state of victimhood to that of an empowered autonomous individual. The manner in which they tell their stories and present themselves as victims in the earlier parts of the narratives show their acceptance of the subordinate position they are assigned in society. Their passivity and refusal to react to circumstances limit their rights and freedom. However, their ultimate resolution to subvert their position finally changes the tone of the narratives. Analysis of this aspect shows that the protagonists re-examine themselves in isolation and go through the process of thoughtful consideration in an effort to redeem themselves from their past failures. Reconciliation with their own selves and prioritizing their lives over others' help them manoeuvre their adversaries. Resistance to conform to their traditionally assigned roles by defying social norms change the power dynamics in the novels.

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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study examines the various ways in which power is seen in the novels of Margaret Atwood. In the selected novels, the protagonists either experience or witness different manifestations of power including sexual violence, verbal and mental abuse. Apart from these overt manifestations of power, aspects such as deceit and manipulation are also subtly presented in the novels. These different aspects of power encompass all human relationships and are exercised through various means including coercion, conditioning as well as surveillance. In Atwood's novels, power as a theme encompass all social relations where the personal is often interwoven with the political. In this study, the theoretical premise of power is derived from the ideas of Michel Foucault who states:

Power is a relation, it isn't a thing. It's a relation between individuals, a relation which can direct or determine another's behaviour.

.... it is the exercise of something that can be called 'government' in a broad sense. One can govern a society, a group, one can govern a community, a family, one can govern someone. When I say "govern someone", it is simply in the sense that one's behaviour can be determined according to strategies by using a number of tactics.
(Medeiros)

Foucault's theory on power is not gender-based and has its limitations in the context of this study which focuses on women and their negotiation of power in a patriarchal social structure. In order to facilitate this lack, relevant feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Helene Cixous et.al. are incorporated to examine gender-specific issues that are dealt with in this study. These feminist ideas provide significant perspectives in analysing gender politics in the novels of Atwood. Margaret Atwood's novels are representations of patriarchal society from the perspectives of women and as such, they reveal the experiences of being a woman in a male-dominated world. These experiences are gathered from their participation at

different of social relationships and they furnish an understanding of the realities of the plight of these women that are often neglected, ignored or obscured.

In Margaret Atwood's novels, power remains a central theme where various manifestations of power are gleaned from the female protagonists' experiences. According to Atwood, power is ubiquitous and it directs all social relations. She states, "Power is our environment. We live surrounded by it: it pervades everything we are and do, invisible and soundless, like air..." (Howells, *Cambridge* 43) Violence, manipulation, surveillance, physical, mental and verbal abuse are recurrent themes witnessed and experienced by the female protagonists. The function of power, as seen in Atwood's novels, is to evoke fear and dependency and is exercised by individuals or groups of individuals to control others. In the context of this study, power is seen in social relations where it acts both as an agent of oppression, and also reversely, a mechanism of empowerment through different forms of resistance. The thesis attempts to present an understanding of the concept of power and its significance in the novels of Margaret Atwood. The focus of this study is on the condition of women in a patriarchal society and showcase how power is exercised and negotiated by the female protagonists.

Gender-politics constitute a major thrust and an overriding preoccupation in Margaret Atwood's novels wherein she questions sex and gender roles and protests against patriarchal structures of power and dominion that subsume and expropriate the women's identity...[she] problematizes the feminine search for a distinctive identity within a predominantly feminist framework and postulates a contestual discourse on feminine identity that explores and exposes the male will to power and iterates the need to recognize and resist hegemonic and homogenizing patriarchal power-structures. (Salat 61)

In her novels, Atwood highlights contemporary issues and challenges faced by women. These stories portray the daily struggles of the protagonists in their attempt to find acceptance and fulfilment in a hostile environment. The novels of Atwood delve into the mundane everyday reality and complexities of the lives of women through stories narrated by her female protagonists. Through art, according to W.J. Keith, artists "provide us with alternative ways of looking at the world and at ourselves." (14)

He further denotes, “artists can produce a portrait of our society that disturbs us because it makes us realize that aspects of it which we have accepted as natural or inevitable or ‘normal’ may in fact be recognized as unnatural, challengeable, and abnormal.” (14-15) Atwood’s novels portray experiences of women that are often ignored or overlooked. By analysing the experiences of these protagonists, an understanding of the roots of their subjugation and the means by which they try to gain agency is uncovered.

The preceding chapters highlight the experiences of women in the selected novels of Atwood, and emphasis is laid on issues that uniquely pertain to women. Women’s issues vis-à-vis marriage, motherhood and reproductive roles are inherently present in the selected novels. The conflict between traditional ideals and modernity with regards to women’s roles is often seen in the novels of Atwood. Patriarchal tradition, according to Beauvoir, expects women to become good wives and bear children. They are confined to the domestic realm and have no power within or outside this realm. The modern era ushers in a number of progressive changes for women including the right to enter the workforce. This changing role empowered women as they began to experience financial independence. It also challenges the traditional patriarchal social structure which asserts that women’s role starts and ends at home. However in terms of career, they have no option to choose and are unable to attain higher positions in their workplace, resulting in a feeling of frustration and stagnation. Moreover, the novels show how women still face the pressure to marry, bear children and take care of the house as these are continued to be seen as ultimate roles of women. The unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* and Rennie in *Bodily Harm* have to pretend being married during their trips to avoid complications. Similarly in *Lady Oracle*, Joan has to tell her landlord that her husband would soon be joining her in Terremoto although in reality, she was running away from home. In these novels, the protagonists resort to these pretensions in an effort to seek validation.

The traditional ideas regarding marriage comes under scrutiny with the rise of modern feminist movement, especially by modern feminists who view them as tools of women’s oppression. The breakdown of marriage and arguments against marriage is often seen in Atwood’s novels to underline this aspect. In *The Edible Woman* Clara’s marriage to Joe, despite the latter’s efforts to care and provide for his family, proves to hinder her own physical, mental and financial well-being. Her successive

pregnancies prevent her from getting a degree and a career in addition to experiencing a decline in her mental health. Clara's experiences play a significant role in shaping and altering Marian's view on marriage. The unhappy marriage between Rennie's parents in *Bodily Harm*, as well as Joan's parents in *Lady Oracle* have a negative impact on the protagonists during their childhood. Their mothers' frustrations in their marriages are projected in their relationship with their daughters through forms of abuse and indoctrination. The need to uphold tradition results in an arranged marriage between Penelope and Odysseus, an event that aggravates Penelope's desolation. The loveless wedlock prompts the young bride Penelope to relocate to an unfamiliar kingdom where she experiences discrimination and suppression of her voice. In *Life Before Man*, Elizabeth describes her married life with Nate saying:

Living with Nate has been like living with a huge mirror in which her flaws are magnified and distorted. Fly-eyes. She's been forced to see herself measured constantly beside his set of East York domestic standards...(198)

She admits that the divorce gives her a sense of freedom and exhilaration. Juxtaposing her experience living with Nate, with that of her life after their divorce, the narrator states:

Already she feels better. This is what she needs: small goals, projects, something to keep her busy. Other women knit. She can even sense a hint of that lightness of spirit she hopes to be able to describe, later, to her acquaintances...Freedom from that other set of rules, that constant pained look... She'll be free of that. It will mean she'll have to carry out the garbage bags herself on garbage day, but she thinks she can live with that. (198)

The above passages show a typical experience of the protagonists where marriage is presented not as an escape from their predicaments, but an institution where women's freedom and happiness are limited and suppressed. Hence, prompting the protagonists to seek an escape from it.

Apart from marriage, issues regarding women's reproductive roles are recurrent in Atwood's novels. Understanding this aspect becomes significant as it

plays a critical role in the oppression of women under patriarchy. Feminists argue that women's biological functions contribute to their oppression. The sexual abuse and manipulation of women often find expression in the novels of Margaret Atwood. Sexual objectification of women is explored in *Bodily Harm* through Rennie's mastectomy as well as her experience at a studio of visual art where images of women in sexually explicit and compromising positions are shown. The images and footages presented at the visual art show the sexualisation of women for the gratification of men, disguised as art. In the novel, Rennie breaks up with Jake after her mastectomy because she feels that she no longer fits the ideal image with the loss of her breast, a symbol of her femininity and sexuality. Motherhood, pregnancy, contraception and ideas of abortion and childbirth are themes that pervade the novels. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist recalls how her former married partner forced her to have an abortion in order to save his marriage as well as his reputation. The incident perpetually haunts her throughout her adult life. In *Life Before Man*, Lesje considers having an abortion after being impregnated by Nate because of the probability of losing her job and her reputation for conceiving an illegitimate child, as well as the uncertainty of a future with Nate. Instances of rape occur in the novels to further highlight the vulnerability of women and how sex is used as a means to subordinate women. Through an analysis of the novels, it becomes apparent that women's lack of power in relationships make them vulnerable targets of abuse and subjection and compels them to become victims of men's sexual desires as well as objects of control. Thus they are deprived of their reproductive rights are forced to either undergo abortion or labour. In this way, it enables their male partners to use their pregnancy as means to control them.

Michel Foucault's idea of power sees the subjects in power relations as docile bodies. Hannah Arendt postulates in her book *On Violence*, "Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together." (44) This conception of power thrusts the notion that power is the result of a coordinating effort between two parties. The novels of Atwood show how their experiences urge the protagonists to see themselves as victims in an unjust patriarchal system. The disadvantage of seeing oneself as a victim is that it prevents them from resisting and challenging the agents of their own oppression, which in a way, can be seen as collaboration with their adversaries. Instead of resolving their own

issues, they create alternate realities in an attempt to evade confrontations. Atwood states, “Everytime you act you’re exercising power in some form.” (Graeme Gibson 15) She is of the opinion that despite a person’s inability to predict the consequences of one’s actions, the ability to act or react to a situation itself is an act of power.

...you cannot predict the consequences of your actions entirely. You may hurt someone, but the alternative is closing yourself up in a burrow somewhere and not doing anything ever at all. (15)

In addition to the systemic discrimination and lack of justice, their inaction contribute to their powerlessness. Instead of taking immediate action, these women resort to accepting, hiding, evading, escaping and withdrawing from unpleasant circumstances. Their habitual act of escaping renders them powerless and ineffectual in ameliorating their condition. Marian’s predicament in *The Edible Woman* is a consequence of her “evading, avoiding, running away, retreating, withdrawing” instead of confronting and taking action about the current circumstance causing her to lose her sanity. By accepting that she is a victim, she is reduced to a mere object. Atwood states,

If you define yourself always as a harmless victim, there’s nothing you can ever do about it. You can simply suffer... Only if you stop identifying yourself as a victim, you know, fated by powers that be, can you act. (14)

Taking into account Atwood’s own view of her protagonists, the study presents how this sense of victimhood limits their ability to take control of their own lives. However, the turning point in the lives of these women occur once they resolve to confront their worst fears and adversaries. The key to power, according to Atwood is overcoming victimhood. Catalysing the transformation from this state of victimhood to a powered state involves unpleasant physical and spiritual journeys mostly instigated by the protagonists’ successive failures.

For the female individual to survive, she must recognize or reject not only the social arrangement, but her own participation in these arrangements as well. Atwood’s protagonists ultimately achieve such a recognition. Each affirms, at the end, a superior sanity based on

personal order and the discovery of at least the potential for an authentic and integrated self. (Das 313)

Atwood's representation of power politics are sometimes seen within the framework of hierarchical social structures based primarily on class and gender. The interrelationship between people at different levels of the social structure, such as the relationship between men and women, children and adults as well as the upper and lower class, poignantly reflects the theme of power, or the lack thereof. In novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Penelopiad* the struggle is conspicuous as society is basically presented in the form of binary opposites, namely, the haves and the have-nots. The disparity between the maids and the royals in *The Penelopiad*, as well as the interrelationship between members of the royal family is a projection of the dynamics of power and an unjust system of government where the lower class are oppressed. In *The Edible Woman*, there is a rigid hierarchy based structure at Marian's workplace. On top of the pyramid are men who literally occupy the top floor of the building. They control and authorize all functions in the office. Marian never interacts with these men as she sits in the all-female second tier as a surveyor. *The Handmaid's Tale* showcases unequal class distribution where violence and exploitation of the lower classes is rampant. The novel is "a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime." (Mervyn Rothstein np) Atwood describes Gilead in the following statement:

Gilead is the usual kind of dictatorship: shaped like a pyramid, with the powerful of both sexes at the apex, the men generally outranking the women at the same level; then descending levels of power and status with men and women in each, all the way down to the bottom, where the unmarried men must serve in the ranks before being awarded the Econowife. ("Haunted by *The Handmaid's Tale*")

The division in Gileadean society is strictly based on gender and class and there seems to be no mobility in the social hierarchy. However, failure to conform to one's respective duties bear tragic consequences. The novel is a critique of a totalitarian system of government where a few men in power exploit the rest of the people. It seeks to highlight the power-struggle that exists in such form of dictatorship and how the

oppressed class attempts to gain agency through various means. The novel also proves how extreme repressive forms of power encourage resistance.

In Atwood's novels, children play a significant role in the power dynamics. The antagonism between adults and children project the interplay of power and resistance in the novels. Children are often portrayed as victims of verbal and mental abuse, neglect, and often aggressively coerced to follow stern religious practices. Shulamith Firestone believes that women and children are seen as equally inferior in patriarchal society and are always mentioned in the same breath. (72) She feels that they have a special tie and that "the nature of this bond is no more than shared oppression." (72) The description of the childhood of Penelope and the twelve maids in *The Penelopiad* lays bare the abuse suffered by the female characters during childhood. In the name of upholding tradition, children are used as tools for material gains. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope states that marriage is a tool of oppression of children who "were vehicles for passing things along, [such as] kingdoms, rich wedding gifts, stories, grudges, blood feuds. Through children alliances were forged; through children, wrongs were avenged. To have a child was to set loose a force in the world." (20) She further states,

Under the ancient customs, the huge pile of sparkling wedding loot stayed with the bride's family in the bride's family's palace. Perhaps that is why my father had become so attached to me after having failed to drown me in the sea: where I was, there would be treasure.(22)

In novels such as *Bodily Harm*, *Lady Oracle* and *Surfacing*, the young protagonists are trained to adhere to traditional gender and religious ideals. Their inability at times to follow these strict rules lead to physical and verbal abuse, which later plays a contributing role in their decision to move away from these teachings.

Atwood's protagonists are predominantly female whose experiences as seen in the novels, show the complexities and plights of women in patriarchal societies. By revisiting their childhood, insight into their upbringing can be gathered. These glimpses of the past reveal how these women have been groomed during their childhood to fit into the image of the traditional ideal woman. By analysing the repressed childhood memories of the protagonists, the study finds that the disorientation of the female protagonists began in the family. The theme of power is

evident in the adult-child relationship in these novels as the adults are often seen as the authority-figures who abuse and attempt to indoctrinate the young girl-child. In this respect, the family unit becomes an arena where the earliest instances of power struggle is evident. A common experience shared by Atwood's protagonists is their failure in establishing stable relationships. Their unhappy childhood prompt them to abandon their families and sever any connection they have with them. Their emotional trauma is contributed by the abuses they suffer during their childhood and young adulthood from members of their own family, particularly their parents. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan recollects the verbal abuse she endured throughout her childhood from her mother. The abuse got worse as she gets older, and the realization of her own powerlessness at home compelled her to finally leave her mother and her childhood home. Her escape from her abusive mother proves to be the first in a string of events in which Joan escapes from unpleasant situations and relationships. Her habit of escaping instead of confronting her problems lead to more problems which eventually force her to "plan her own death." What is further disconcerting while examining the aspect of social conditioning is that it is always the mother-figure who instils and attempts to cultivate submissiveness and traditional ideals to their daughters. As they get older, these ideas come in conflict with their own beliefs and ideas of the self. This idea of the self, in the words of Samantha Vice, "isn't something that is given to us, or just happens 'despite ourselves'. We are responsible for its contours and so in a significant sense, are self-made persons" (98) Their inability to adapt to this conditioning causes a strain in the mother-daughter relationship which prompt them to run away from their homes and cut ties with their families. Joan and Rennie's escape from their homes are results of their inability to cope with the pressures they face from their home to adhere to the norms of patriarchal society.

During their exhausting search for a female subjectivity the protagonists' inner conflicts manifest themselves in severe identity crises. These conflicts constitute a central theme that can be found in many of Margaret Atwood's narratives. (Kriebernegg 54)

Surveillance is an effective means to regulate the behaviour of those who are being monitored. The idea of surveillance is seen in Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish* where he expounds its relation to power. By tracing its origin, Foucault describes how it develops and theorises how it is exercised in modern societies. In the

selected novels of Atwood, this idea of surveillance find expression where the female characters in particular are monitored to ensure that they conform to accepted societal norms. Marian's landlady in *The Edible Woman* spies on her tenants in the pretext of protecting her young granddaughter from moral corruption. Her habit of closely monitoring her tenants, particularly Ainsley, whom she sees as being promiscuous, negatively impacted their interrelationship. The behaviour of the landlady limits their personal freedom and space as the ladies are compelled to conduct themselves in accordance to the landlady's idea of normalcy. In the novel *Bodily Harm*, the intrusion of Rennie's apartment at the beginning of the novel becomes one of the reasons that prompts her to flee to St. Antoine. Her trip to the Caribbean shows her being monitored by the locals as they feared she was a spy. Rennie's awareness of being watched leaves her in constant fear of physical harm and she struggles to make the right decisions. This whole notion of spying and monitoring impact both parties as they each try to glean the truth from each other's activities, all the while exhibiting behaviours which they feel will be appropriate for the other party. This complex interrelationship eventually ends in the manipulation and physical threats of Rennie. Joan's complex life is made worse in *Lady Oracle* when she comes to realize that she is being monitored by an unknown person. This other person leaves signs and physical mementos and articles to suggest to Joan that her life was under scrutiny. In addition to other concerns, this became crucial in Joan's plan to flee society by faking her own death. The idea of surveillance becomes a tool of suppression of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* where the handmaids' activities are closely monitored constantly. This exercise of power by the regime makes it extremely difficult for the Gileadeans, particularly the handmaids, to exhibit behaviours that do not conform to the regime's ideology.

Negotiation of power in Atwood's novels is a gradual process that involves strenuous procedures. Foremost in this process is survival. The study shows the victimisation of women in a male-dominant society. As the protagonists undergo harsh physical and emotional journeys, the need for survival becomes paramount. Survival is a significant theme that concurrently runs with the theme of power, and is found in the various literary works of Atwood, particularly in her fictional writings. In her novels, the protagonists are placed in situations where they have to survive childhood abuse, abusive relationships and hostile environments. Survival itself can be seen as

an act of power as it involves physical and mental strength, persistence, endurance and the will to exert oneself regardless of the consequences.

Understanding of the self is prerequisite to negotiating power. Atwood's novels, according to Ulla Krierenberg, are novels of individuation. The need to separate themselves from the consciousness of others play a significant role in the path to self-redemption and empowerment. In order to facilitate this process of individuation, the protagonists undergo physical and emotional isolation seen in the forms of physical journeys and mental breakdowns. This state of isolation from human society gives the protagonists the opportunity to examine their own lives and reconcile with their past. According to Frank Davey,

Atwood's fiction focuses on isolated female protagonists, who are rightly suspicious of calls to identify with religion, political parties, simplistic nationalism, or feminism. (Salat vi)

In their search for identity, Atwood's protagonists do not only refuse to conform to patriarchal norms, but also refuse to identify with any established institution and instead, rely on their own conscience and individual idea of selfhood. Their notion of this selfhood is, in other words, not dependent on dominant ideologies but rather their own invention generated from reflections of their own past experiences.

In Atwood's novels, there is a subtle element of conflict within the protagonists which leads to their fragmentation and alienation. This conflict arises from the contradicting notion of their own idea of the self as opposed to the traditional idea of womanhood. While the protagonists are expected to conform to traditional roles, that often comes in conflict with their own aspiration for physical and financial independence. Hence, they defy the norms and values of society and instead choose to prioritise their personal well-being.

Margaret Atwood's novels show the importance of discourse in challenging and subverting power. In her works, the fictional world of her protagonists and the narrative process are intricately interwoven where the act of story-telling itself is presented as an act of power. Her protagonists are mostly artists and journalists who have the capacity to use their art to tell their story. The attempt to manipulate and silence Rennie in *Bodily Harm* proves the attempt to suppress the power that she holds.

Her self-introduction as merely a “lifestyle journalist” and her own sense of insignificance prior to her imprisonment shows how she is unaware of her own power. In her poem “Spelling”, Atwood writes: “A word after a word after a word is power.” This line encapsulates the power of the word, and in the context of this study, the significance of narration in order to express themselves and to call attention to the issues that women are facing in society. In *St. Antoine and Gilead*, the press is owned by the state where dissident voices are suppressed. In *Gilead*, the handmaids are not allowed to interact with others beyond a few accepted words and the act of writing is out of the question. They do not have the freedom to tell their story. However, the inscription on Offred’s bedroom wall by a former handmaid, and Offred’s own tale show how these women subvert the repressive regime. Offred’s tale further shows how she has been silently resisting the regime by having a romantic relationship with Nick, her Commander’s “Eye”. Moreover, conspiracy against the regime is orally transmitted which leads to the prospect of widespread resistance to the current regime.

The novels in this study are written in a non-linear manner and can be seen as being narratively fragmented. The novels chronicle the personal travails that the protagonists experience in their journey towards emancipation. A reading of Atwood’s novels shows the novels as being fragmented where the narratives traverse the various dimensions and corners of the mind. The narrative technique used in *Surfacing* “give the impression that the narrative is disjointed, chaotic, as restive as the narrator’s own mind... this is due to the numerous flashbacks that suggest by their form the twists and turns of the protagonist’s memories.” (Campbell 20) Likewise in novels such as *The Edible Woman*, *Lady Oracle*, *Bodily Harm* and *Life Before Man*, the change of narrator and the narrative voice, exploration of the past through flashbacks as well as narration of present events are seen throughout the novels. This is indicative of the state of mind of the narrator/s who experiences fragmentation in both physical and mental forms. The protagonists are able to assume of role of narrator only after fulfilling their quest to discover the self.

By making her protagonists “critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structure” (Howells 4) Atwood portrays “woman’s struggle to discover her self and find self-fulfilment.” (Das 128) Through the female protagonists, Atwood’s novels explore the individuality, power and autonomy of women “through their own strategies of rebellion through tropes of madness, silence, illness and guile.”

(Basu 180) While all the novels uniformly deal with the personal struggles of the protagonists and their journey towards empowerment, in novels such as *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale* the female protagonists find themselves amidst chaotic political atmosphere where the personal struggle for power coincides with the struggle for survival. Through her writing, Atwood portrays man's strife for dominion not just over other men, but also over their own selves and their environment. As an environmentalist, she is deeply critical of man's destruction of his environment which is yet another issue that is encapsulated in her work, particularly *Surfacing*. From a feminist perspective, the struggle for power is magnified by patriarchy where men suppress and dominate women. The inability to express themselves in the domestic sphere, as well as being prevented from achieving success or high ranks at work result in frustration, conflict and disappointment in the female characters. For instance, Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* struggles her whole life to free herself from societal obligations and expectations. But in failing to do so, she is compelled to construct false identities and eventually fake her own death. It is only after isolating herself from society that she is able to reflect upon her past and come to understand and accept herself. This is a significant step towards achieving power not necessarily over others but rather, attaining power of control over herself. Suppression and domination of women is seen in the novels of Margaret Atwood, particularly maximised in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where women are not only victims of male oppression, but are also conditioned to fight with each other for survival.

The novels in this study question the socio-cultural and traditional ideas that associate women with characteristics such as submissiveness, modesty, passivity and the belief that the role of women is simply to become a good wife and mother. The propagation of these traditional ideals only aggravate the subjugation of women in modern societies as it limits their opportunities and personal well-being. What is notable here is that women themselves are responsible for cultivating these ideas in their young girl-children. For instance, the mothers' attempts at imbibing these traditional ideas to their daughters play a significant role in causing a strain in the mother-daughter relationships in the novels, particularly in novels such as *Lady Oracle* and *Bodily Harm*. The rejection of these ideas prompt the protagonists to flee from home as they reach adulthood. The study finds that the protagonists' attempts to

conform to these traditional roles only lead to disorientation as it comes in conflict with their own idea of the 'self'.

The study finds that negotiation of power and the eventual subversion of power vary from novel to novel. The most common aspect however, is the rejection of women's traditional roles. In *The Edible Woman*, Marian rejects marriage to Peter as she comes to understand that her mental breakdown has been a result of her engagement. The prospect of submitting herself to Peter's control and the loss of physical and financial independence that it entails deter her from the idea of marriage. 'I realized Peter was trying to destroy me. So now I'm looking for another job.' (350) Clara's predicament also plays a significant role on her view on marriage. For her, marriage entails the loss of her physical and financial independence, and thus she rejects it and rather decides to focus on herself instead.

In the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, empowerment of women, comes in the form of resistance to authority echoing the Foucauldian thought that resistance is a by-product of power. *Life Before Man* describes the lives of the three central characters whose interrelationships signify their struggle for dominance. In the novel, the protagonists initially present themselves as helpless victims suffering from identity crises. They each tell their story from their own perspective where the strife for dominion is seen in their attempt to present the most compelling story. On the surface, Elizabeth and Lesje outwardly appear to fight over Nate, but the real issue is their internal conflict and their quest for identity. This struggle is merely projected in the women's relationship with Nate. Lesje continues to struggle with the uncertainty of her own future even though keeps Nate. Elizabeth rediscovers her 'self' through the emancipation that comes with her divorce with Nate. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan is seen as an escapist who invents an alternate reality to hide the truth, eventually compelling her to flee society in an attempt to evade confrontations. In her isolation, she re-examines her life and came to the conclusion that she "spend too much of my life crouching behind closed doors, listening to voices on the other side." (369) She also comes to find that her "fake death" has dire consequences for her friends, Sam and Marlene, who were imprisoned for their part in the incident leading to her 'mysterious disappearance.' With an ongoing investigation back home, she knows the truth about her life was going to surface anyway. Hence she decides to control the narrative by deciding to return home.

Perhaps I could elude him...Perhaps I could hide among the artichokes. Perhaps I could run down the hill, perhaps I could disappear and never be found. But if I ran I would simply be caught, sooner or later. Instead I was going to defend myself... (369)

By resolving to confront her problems instead of avoiding them, she is able to reconcile with herself and her past. Her choice to lead an honest life, in spite of the impending backlash, marks the emergence of a new empowered self for Joan.

I still had options. I could pretend I wasn't there. I could wait and do nothing. I could disguise my voice and say that I was someone else. But if I turned the handle the door would unlock and swing outward, and I would have to face the man who stood waiting for me, for my life.

I opened the door. (372)

Like the protagonists in all the other novels, Rennie seeks approval and fulfilment in life through her relationships with men. She consistently finds herself more disillusioned after each breakup. Her reliance on men for validation impels her to engage in relationships that turn out to be detrimental for her own sense of security. Moreover, her mastectomy makes her question her self-worth causing her to lose faith not only in others but more significantly, herself. During her imprisonment in St. Antoine, she finally comes to understand the need to accept herself and assert her identity in order to survive. Contrary to her initial self-description as merely a "travel journalist", she also comes to realize her capacity to influence others, with her profession as a journalist, through her works. "She will pick her time; then she will report. For the first time in her life, she can't think of a title." (301) With the new-found emancipation comes uncertainty, but Rennie is free nonetheless. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood gives 'voice' to Penelope and her twelve maids. Their stories showcase their suppression and victimhood in a male-dominated society. Penelope's submissiveness and passivity, despite her wit and intelligence, compels her to become a victim, both in life and in Hades. Her inability to protect the maids from their execution led the latter to see her as an accomplice to Odysseus thus prompting them to hold her responsible for their unjust murders by stalking her in Hades. The maids, in spite of belonging to the lower class, exhibit resistance throughout their life through

subtle means. Taking advantage of their immortality and voice in Hades, they continue to seek vengeance to the perpetrators of their brutal execution. “We’re the serving girls, we’re here to serve you. We’re here to serve you right.”(156-157) The protagonist in *Surfacing* subverts control over her reproductive choice by manipulating Joe to impregnate her. This marks a stark contrast to the pregnancy and forced abortion she underwent in the past. Her plan to get pregnant at the present is an attempt to attain redemption from her past mistake. Moreover, she resolves to let go of the alternate world she invented in order to escape the harsh realities of her past. By confronting the truth, she is able to reconcile with her past and come to terms with herself.

She surfaces now after realising the truth about herself. The lies she had been building, for others as well as for herself, as an escape from reality (reality which she could not bear), get shattered now... The only way out to compensate for this anti-nature act, she thinks is to get pregnant...she uses Joe (in a sense exploits him) to get pregnant but refuses to get married to him, possibly as a revenge upon the previous man who used her and later refused to marry her, The roles seem to have reversed now. It is only here that the quest of the protagonist is complete. Having discovered her own power, she can now confront herself. (Kaur 17)

In Atwood’s novels, the mode of narration and presentation of the narratives are intrinsically related to the negotiation of power. The novels, despite being chronicles of the protagonists’ lives, often present their marginalization. The study finds that, subversion of power is efficiently portrayed through the protagonists’ reconstruction of their identity and hence, reclamation of control and ability to present a self-centric narrative.

The publication of Atwood’s early novels coincide with the feminist movement in the west, particularly the second wave of feminism also known as the Women’s Liberation Movement. While the movement attempts to promote women’s civil rights, reproductive rights, equal or increased work opportunity and other forms of empowerment, Atwood’s novels deal with the personal experiences of women amidst the larger social movement. “Literature is not only a mirror,” writes Margaret

Atwood in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, “it is also a map, a geography of the mind.” (18-19)

For Atwood, art is a moral issue, and it is the responsibility of the writer/artist not only to describe her world, but also to criticise it, to bear witness to its failures, and, finally, to prescribe corrective measures – perhaps even to redeem. (Rigney 1)

By exploring themes such as sexuality and women’s reproductive issues through her heroines, Atwood’s novels are commentaries on the state of the society. Through an analysis of the selected novels, the social developments and changes within each publication can be seen. As the novels are presented from the perspectives of women, the issues and problems that pertain especially to women are amplified. Atwood’s protagonists are those that are denied power, who struggle to find acceptance within and outside the domestic realm. Internalising the society’s perception and expectations, and knowing their failure to fit into the ideal traditional image, the protagonists often resort to self-rejection. The inability to accept their identity leads to more problems which places more power in the hands of their adversaries. For Foucault, individuals are “both the subjects and the objects of power as they are “always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising...power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation.”(*Power/Knowledge* 98) When the protagonists see themselves as helpless victims of patriarchal society, they allow themselves to be subservient and incapacitated which only exacerbates their predicaments. The author’s belief that the idea of self-victimisation hinders one’s progress is undeniably evident in the novels. From the analysis of the novels, it has been established that the protagonists’ empowerment does not necessarily come from external machineries or institutions such as religion or government but rather lies in their own hands. The ability to regain control and sovereignty over their own selves, which is a significant aspect of reclaiming power, depend on their willingness to overcome passivity and victimhood.

[Atwood] deconstructs the exploitative and inferiorizing structures of power and dominion obtaining in gender relationships and thereby typifies the strong feminist voice that is heard in the post-sixties in

Canada. Her novels depict the quests for self-assertion of her women-protagonists who are threatened and thwarted by domineering patriarchal structures. (Salat xix)

Analysis of Atwood's novels show that the dynamics of power is effectively presented through the characters' social relations, using a variety of themes and narrative techniques. In an attempt to understand the manner in which power operates in society, the study examines the personal and collective experiences of the protagonists, with emphasis on their social relationships. The study reinforces the centrality of power in the novels of Margaret Atwood in conformity with the Foucauldian concept of power. It finds that power pervades all social relations. In her fiction, Atwood gives 'voice' to the gender-specific mute minority culture. (Salat xix) As opposed to the conventional understanding that sees power only as an oppressive and dominating means of control, the present study affirms Foucault's assertion that power is everywhere and has the possibility of operating from below. This is established through analysis of the means employed by the female protagonists, presumably those who occupy the lower class in the patriarchal social hierarchy, to negotiate and subvert power through various forms of resistance.

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M.A	MZU	2012	II	56.94 %
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- i) Presented a paper titled, “Representation of Culture Through Folktales” in a National Seminar on ‘Understanding Children’s Literature of Nuchhungi Renthlei : Approaches and Systems’ to commemorate Pachhunga University College Diamond Jubilee (1958-2018) organised by the Department of Mizo, Pachhunga University College held on 17th April 2018 at Sikulpui, Serkawn, Lunglei, Mizoram.
- i) Presented a paper titled, “The Impact of Colonialism on Mizo Language and Culture” in the International Seminar on Indigenous Languages and Culture : It’s Preservation and Dissemination organised by Centre for Languages and Cultural Studies, Gauhati University from 21st September to 22nd September 2018 in Guwahati, Assam.
- ii) Presented a paper titled, “Mizo Women in Historical Narratives” in the *Capacity Building Programme in Social Science Research*, a National Level Workshop organised by Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati in collaboration with Government J. Buana College, Lunglei, sponsored by Indian Council of Social Science Research, New Delhi from 12 to 14 February 2019 at Government J. Buana College, Lunglei, Mizoram.

2) Published Work:

- i) Published a paper titled, “Narrativizing Memory in Xiaolu Guo’s *Village of Stone*” in the International Research Journal of Management, Sociology and Humanities. Vol. 10, Issue 11. November 2019.
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DEPARTMENT : ENGLISH

TITLE OF THESIS : NEGOTIATING POWER:
A STUDY OF SELECTED NOVELS OF
MARGARET ATWOOD

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HEAD

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

**NEGOTIATING POWER: A STUDY OF SELECTED NOVELS
OF MARGARET ATWOOD**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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Power is a concept that is of interest to socio-political thinkers and attempts have been made to define power in various ways. It is a function that may be exercised by an individual or a group of individuals in any given society. The capacity to influence the actions of others can be carried out either by force or without the use of coercion. Power plays an indispensable part in the function of society. It characterizes social actions and mobility and is thus an integral aspect of human society. Thus, an understanding of the dynamics of power becomes quintessential in understanding how different institutions of human relationships work. The study aims to identify how power operates by examining the experiences of the female characters in the selected novels of Margaret Atwood, and by doing so, it attempts to highlight how these women negotiate and subvert power. Negotiation is a process which involves discussions and debates and in the context of the present study, the use of the term suggests challenging and questioning the repressive modes of power. Thus the study will attempt to present the novels of Atwood as discourses on power and its subversion.

Seven of Margaret Atwood's novels have been selected for the study. These are, *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Penelopiad* (2005).

The Edible Woman is Margaret Atwood's first published novel that tells the story a young woman Marian MacAlpin. The story is divided into three parts where the first and last parts are narrated by Marian. The narration shifts to a third-person narrator in the second part of the novel while the protagonist undergoes a mental episode and struggles to regain sanity. The condition of women, and issues concerning women are explored through Marian's relationship with her fiancé Peter and friend Duncan as well as her interactions with her female colleagues, her flatmate Ainsley and college friend Clara. The themes of marriage and reproductive issues pervade these women's discussions. While her female colleagues embody stereotypical submissive women, Ainsley offer a more progressive and perhaps radical vision of feminism who idealizes single motherhood as the pivot of embodying the strength and ability of women. Clara, on the other hand is a married mother-of-two, and is currently pregnant with her third baby. She laments her role as a mother of young and restless children and feels helpless to change her condition. As witnesses of the domestic atmosphere of Clara and Joe's household, Marian and Ainsley give opposing views.

While they both argue in favour of Clara, their dialogue can be seen as a debate on tradition vs. modernity in relation to women's role in society. While Marian applauds Joe for the enormous effort he puts in to care for his family, Ainsley believes that in order to shift the power dynamic between the married couple, Clara should pursue a degree and get a job so that she can be more independent and hence empower herself.

Surfacing tells the story of an unnamed female protagonist who grew up on an isolated island off the coast of Quebec. She jumps at an opportunity to leave her family and island behind and moved to the city. She returned twice. The first time was to bid farewell to her dying mother. She was prompted to return to the island a second and final time upon learning of her father's mysterious disappearance. This journey that she undertakes with her boyfriend, Joe and two of their friends, David and Anna, is not only a physical journey for the protagonist, but also a spiritual one. On this occasion, she does not return only to find her missing father, but also her long-lost self as she asserts in the end, "I re-enter my own time." (249)

Lady Oracle tells the story of Joan Foster, who has recently earned success for publishing a feminist book. As the novel opens, it is revealed that she has fled society by faking her death and currently lives in a rented house in Terremoto. Joan narrates her story, simultaneously relating how she ends up in Terremoto, and also revisiting her past. Her story is one that is filled with fear, rejection and a quest for acceptance and redemption. The novel chronicles the miserable life of Joan, made worse by her own refusal to confront her problems. When she cannot cope with reality, she evades it by inventing alternate realities thereby living her life in fear. The secrets and lies she uses to escape from reality have a negative impact on her current relationship and public image as she finds the burden increasingly unbearable. She ultimately has to lose her husband, friends and career in her attempt to save herself. However, after losing everything she possesses, she finally comes to understand that she has led her whole life trying to live by other people's standards and fit into their "ideal" image. She then decides that she needs to undergo a transformation and enter a new chapter in her life, one that is devoid of pretensions and secrets where she will be "organized again." (374)

Life Before Man is a novel that revolves around the lives of three central characters, Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje. Elizabeth and Nate are an unhappy married

couple who reside together for the sake of their two daughters. Lesje is Elizabeth's colleague in the department of palaeontology at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The novel deals with their domestic problems and the interrelationship among the three characters and their eventual strife for dominance over each other. The complex nature of Elizabeth and Nate's marriage, and Lesje's quest for identity are interweaved in this novel to explore the theme of power.

Rennie Wilford's plight *Bodily Harm* begins with her mastectomy, but does not end there. The amputation of her breast induces a feeling of fragmentation and insecurity which makes her feel cut off from her own self. Published in 1981, the novel tells the story of a young woman's journey towards self-acceptance and power.

Rennie was born in Griswold, a small town whose inhabitants' adherence to religious and traditional values is well known. She escapes the town as soon as an opportunity arises and moves to the city. Rennie is a journalist and her diagnosis of breast cancer and eventual mastectomy marks the beginning of her undoing. The loss of her breast symbolises a loss of identity as Rennie feels that she has lost a part of her body which defines her as a complete woman. Feeling insecure and isolated, she breaks up with her boyfriend Jake and begins relying on and seeking affection from Daniel, the doctor who performed the operation. "When Jake moved out, naturally there was a vacuum. Something had to come in to fill it." (39) Around the same time, an intruder enters Rennie's apartment, leaving a coil of rope on her bed. Rennie feels that her safety and privacy have been compromised. With all the pressure she was facing at home, she decides to take a business trip to St. Antoine to write a travel piece on the supposedly peaceful and tranquil island. Like Joan in *Lady Oracle*, Rennie's decision to escape the harsh conditions at home by taking a trip did not prove to be a solution to her problems, but a proliferation of it. The hardship she endures in St. Antoine gives her the opportunity to finally confront her fears and insecurities, prompting her to prioritise herself for the first time since her surgery. The central theme of the novel is the struggle for power which is explored through the protagonist Rennie. Man's hunger for political power as well as her own personal struggle for power are two concurrent themes that run throughout the novel.

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel that was published in 1985. The novel is set in a fictional state called Gilead which is supposedly situated in modern-

day United States. The democratic government has been overthrown and a theocratic form of government is established in its place. It is a totalitarian state where citizens are stripped of their rights and power is concentrated in the hands of a few leaders who are known as Commanders. The story is narrated by Offred who describes the harsh realities of life under the new regime.

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. She has only one function: to breed. If she deviates, she will, like dissenters, be hanged at the wall or sent out to die slowly of radiation sickness. (*The Handmaid's Tale* np)

The novel explores the idea of power through Gileadean totalitarianism where women are abused and exploited for their reproductive capacity. While portraying the miserable conditions of the handmaids and the oppressed groups in Gilead, Offred subtly hints at a prospect for resistance which provides a glimpse of hope for an escape from the regime.

The Penelopiad is a retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*. The original tale tells the adventures of Odysseus in the aftermath of the Trojan War. In Atwood's rendition, the story is told from the perspectives of Penelope and her twelve maids. It chronicles their upbringing, as well as their life in Ithaca. These tales are told in retrospect as Penelope states in the beginning, "Now that I'm dead I know everything." (1) Penelope's experiences are juxtaposed with that of the twelve maids who tell their own story in the form of a Chorus. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is a minor character who is best known for her wit and fidelity. Atwood gives Penelope and the maids the opportunity to tell their story and re-examine the events of *The Odyssey* by constructing a narrative which revolves entirely around their personal experiences.

Chapter I: Introduction

The chapter gives an introduction to the author, Margaret Atwood, her literary works, accomplishments and contributions to Canadian literature. It also presents an introduction to the selected novels. Margaret Eleanor Atwood (b. 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario) is a Canadian writer who is celebrated for her poetry, novels, literary criticism and essays. She began publishing serious literature in the 1960s and has continued to

be one of the leading figures in the Canadian literary scene. Apart from her literary career, she is also a well-known environmental activist who dedicates much of her time in campaigns to promote awareness on climate change and its impact. She published her first novel *The Edible Woman* in 1964 which coincided with the Feminist Movement in Canada. The novel deals with gender issues from a woman's perspective detailing her struggles in a male-dominated society, a theme that she continues to explore in her later novels.

Atwood's early novels were written in an era when women's liberation movements began to appear in North America. The changing roles of women at home and at the workplace, and how it impact social relations become remarkable aspects in her novels. Narrated by female protagonists, these novels chronicle their physical and spiritual journey as well as their quest for identity in an oftentimes turbulent atmosphere. Margaret Atwood captures the zeitgeist of the era by exploring real problems and challenges faced by women and their endeavour to escape from it. "Literature is not only a mirror," writes Margaret Atwood in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, "it is also a map, a geography of the mind." (18-19) Atwood presents a realistic portrayal of the society through her novels. The selected novels were published at a time span of three decades which suggests the possibility of social changes taking place between these publications. Bearing this aspect in mind, the study attempts to show how these changes are incorporated and conveyed in the narratives.

Atwood's novels are far from being romantic representations of reality. Instead they focus on the complexities and harsh realities of life, particularly for women. "What art does is, it takes what society deals out and makes it visible...So you can see it." (*Bodily Harm* 208) Her novels chronicle the personal travails that the protagonists experience in their journey towards emancipation. Her protagonists are seldom seen in the position of power as they struggle to find acceptance within and outside the domestic realm.

The non-linear manner in which Atwood's novels are narrated is reflective of the narrators' sense of disorientation. The protagonists' inability to cope with their personal problems, intensified by the pressure to fulfil their social obligations, instigates a gradual physical and mental decline ultimately causing them to lose sanity

and identity. The loss of voice and identity is addressed through the mode of narration employed in these novels. Internalising the society's perception and expectations, and their failure to fit into the ideal traditional image, the protagonists look for ways to detach themselves from reality. Their self-perception as 'helpless victims' further accord power in the hands of their adversaries. The process of reclaiming power requires strenuous efforts involving physical and mental transformations. By probing into the dynamics of social relations, attempt will be made to highlight the transition of power as seen in the novels of Atwood.

Central to Atwood's literary works is power, a theme that pervades all interpersonal relations in the selected novels. In 1971, she published a book of poetry titled *Power Politics* where she explores the theme of power in relation to gender issues. The poems in this collection delve into the complex relationship between two personae who struggle for dominance against each other. The same theme finds expression in *Surfacing* which was published a year later. Most of Atwood's major writings deal with the same theme where the struggle is either presented subtly or overtly. In *Margaret Atwood's Power*, Shannon Hengen writes, "The issue of power as a phenomenon defined by broader social structures runs throughout all of Atwood's writing." (16) Ajanta Dutt believes Atwood's fascination with the notion of power stems from the latter's consciousness that her nation is a "victimised individual struggling endlessly against a hostile forces of physical nature and colonial condition."(xxx) Dutt further claims:

The 1970s when she was writing was very politically motivated... This is when the English-Canadian and feminist traditions in Canadian literature were firmly ensconced. Thus Atwood in her role as poet and novelist has debated consistently men-women relationships and the nationalism sweeping the country. (xxx)

Atwood's portrayal of power dynamics in her novels are explored through the female protagonists' social relationships. In the novels, power is manifest in disparate forms and is often exercised through processes of normalization, repression, as well as the counter reaction to these in the form of resistance. The women in the novels encounter various forms of abuse, discrimination and exploitation which compel them

to struggle for their own survival. The manner in which they react to these situations play a vital role in changing the power dynamic.

The struggle for survival is an important motif that correlates to the struggle for power, where Atwood's female protagonists are subjected to different kinds of violence and abuse. In order to have a deeper understanding of women's position in patriarchal society, analysis of the mechanisms of power is crucial. The present study will analyse the manner in which these women cope with these circumstances and strive towards emancipation from these repressive forces. Power is manifested in the selected novels in various ways encompassing the physical and psychological, as well as political and personal. The following chapters will highlight how power shapes the narratives by examining social relations in the novels of Atwood. By probing women's issues and situating women in the social power structure, the present study will attempt to analyse the projection and negotiation of power in the selected novels.

Chapter II: Dynamics of Power

The aim of this chapter is to generate an understanding of the concept of power and its operations from a theoretical perspective. By presenting the ideas and definitions of power by various scholars and philosophers, and exploring the idea of power as seen in the works of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), the chapter attempts to situate the novels within that framework. Since Foucault's theories are not specifically gender-based, his ideas on power has its limitations to specifically examine women's issues which is primary to this study. Therefore, the study will further incorporate works of feminist writers such as Simone Beauvoir, Helene Cixous and Shulamith Firestone, among others that are relevant to the study.

The theme of most of Foucault's works is "the methods with which modern civilization creates and controls human subjects, through institutions such as hospitals, prisons, education, and knowledge; corollary to these investigations was Foucault's examination of power, its execution and distribution." (Habib 151) According to Foucault "Power is a relation, it isn't a thing. It's a relation between individuals, a relation which can direct or determine another's behaviour." (Medeiros) In *The History of Sexuality*, he postulates that power exists in social relations and it "is everywhere;

not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” It is “simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities.” (93)

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes traditional forms of punishments and the birth of modern prison. Modern society, he argues, is a “disciplinary society” which means that power is largely exercised in various institutions through disciplinary means. In Atwood’s fictional world, the concept of power encompasses the personal and the political where aspects of power such as violence, oppression and resistance are common themes. The projection of violence in the selected novels depict the relationship between those who exercise power and the rest who are subjected to it. *Bodily Harm* is an accurate representation of man’s hunger and strife to grasp power by all means. In the novel, the election is seen as a backdrop to explore this motif where the candidates and their associates employ various strategies including threat, violence and manipulation, to exert their influence. Freedom of the press is also eliminated in St. Antoine where “there is one paper only and Ellis has bought the editor.” (135) The struggle for political power and Rennie’s personal struggle for empowerment are two threads that concurrently run in this novel.

Atwood states, “Everytime you act you’re exercising power in some form.” (Ingersoll 15) Her representation of power relations are sometimes seen within the framework of hierarchical social structures based primarily on class and gender. The interrelationship between people at different levels of the social structure, such as the relationship between men and women, children and adults as well as the upper and lower class, poignantly reflects the theme of power, or the lack thereof. In her novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Penelopiad* the struggle is conspicuous as society is basically divided into binary opposites, namely, the haves and the have-nots. The disparity between the maids and the royals in *The Penelopiad*, as well as the interrelationship between members of the royal family is a projection of the dynamics of power and an unjust system of government where the lower class are oppressed. In *The Edible Woman*, there is a rigid hierarchy based structure at Marian’s workplace. The top class constitutes of a group of men who occupy the top floor of the office, the ones in ‘power’ who dictate what their subordinates do. Marian sits in the all-female second tier as a surveyor. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is another example of unequal class distribution. The novel is “a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime.” (Mervyn Rothstein

np) Under this totalitarian system, society is divided into different groups and power is solely concentrated in the hands of a few male leaders known as Commanders.

This chapter looks into the theme of resistance in order to understand how it is employed in the novels to question and challenge the status quo. Foucault states, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet...this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” (Foucault 95) Regardless of how oppressive the systems of power may be, there is always a possibility of resistance which can take various forms. “Resistance” to the current social order in the form of a revolution, a military coup, is what led to the formation of the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic totalitarian society in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The army overthrew the democratic government by executing the President and members of Congress:

It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time. (182)

The sudden shift in power result in unprecedented legislations where individual rights and freedom are taken away so that the few men in power could retain control. However, it is also the belief in the possibility of a resistance against the totalitarian regime that gives hope to Offred, a hope that she will one day be free.

...there must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there, taking care of things. I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light. There must be a resistance, or where do all the criminals come from, on the television? (115)

Once the army takes control in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, they slowly take away the rights of the citizens and begins to form a dictatorial form of government. “That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn’t even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn’t even an enemy you could put your finger on.” (183)

Foucault argues that surveillance is an aspect of disciplinary power as it aims to control and regulate the subject’s behaviour. It is an effective means of exercising

power as the notion of being watched induces a feeling of fear which compels the subject to act in certain conduct approved by the observer. Surveillance, in this respect, is a common thread that runs in the selected novels. This chapter looks at the ways in which it is employed in the novels to regulate and control the behaviour of the protagonists.

Chapter III: The Female Experience

This chapter focuses on highlighting the experiences that uniquely pertain to women. It examines issues concerning women's traditional roles and how they impact the protagonists, and as seen in the selected novels of Atwood. The discourse on women's reproductive role is recurrent in Atwood's and this chapter explores themes such as pregnancy, motherhood and abortion. "Atwood's representations of gender explore the social myths defining femininity, representations of women's bodies in art, the social and economic exploitation of women, as well as women's relations with each other and with men." (Callaway 1) Atwood's characterization of women in her novels reflect her own assertion:

My fundamental position is that women are human beings, with the full range of saintly and demonic behaviours this entails, including criminal ones. They're not angels, incapable of wrongdoing. If they were, we wouldn't need a legal system. ("Am I a Bad Feminist?")

Feminists like Beauvoir and Firestone are of the view that women are oppressed due to their biological functions, and that their oppression begins in the family. (Firestone 74) According to Firestone, "it was woman's reproductive biology that accounted for her original and continued oppression, and not some sudden patriarchal evolution." (73) Analysis of the novels show that the female protagonists do not have reproductive rights as they play submissive roles in their relationships. Forced abortion (*Surfacing*), forced childbirth (*The Handmaid's Tale*) and unplanned pregnancies (*The Edible Woman* and *Life Before Man*) are some examples where women's reproductive capacity is used as means to control them. In these cases, the female characters have no authority over their own bodies and do not have the right to choose for themselves, which in turn impact their physical and emotional well-being. Firestone believes that women's childbearing capacity make her both unique as well

as powerless and is therefore the cause of her oppression by saying, “The heart of woman’s oppression is her childbearing and childrearing roles.” (72) Atwood’s novels deal with women’s issues that emanate from their biological functions where the female protagonists are consequentially put under pressure in their relationships and careers due to their reproductive function. In *Surfacing*, the unnamed protagonist recounts how she had an abortion in order to save the marriage and reputation of her partner. As a result, she is haunted by images about death and throughout her adult life. In *Life Before Man* Lesje contemplates abortion when she realizes she is impregnated by her married lover. “She could have an abortion, stop time. She knows it's easier than it used to be.” (300) She understands that giving birth to an illegitimate child puts her career at risk:

Will they ask her to leave? Resign. She doesn’t know. A pregnant palaeontologist is surely a contradiction in terms...She will be an unwed mother. (300)

In addition, the complex nature of her relationship with Nate and the uncertainty of their future troubles her.

And what will Nate do, what will she do? It’s hard to believe that such a negligible act of hers can have measurable consequences for other people...She can’t tell whether he will be delighted or angry or despairing; possibly, considering his feelings about his two other children, he will be all three. (300-301)

As opposed to the above novels where abortion remains central and is an option however difficult it may have been for the protagonists, *The Handmaid’s Tale* explores the idea of forced pregnancy and childbirth where the destiny of women rests solely on their reproductive capacity where women are categorised according to their viability, or lack thereof, to conceive. In this novel, handmaids are forcefully made to conceive and produce children for their masters where neither contraception nor abortion is an option. The ability to conceive and give birth to a healthy baby is quintessential for their survival as Offred puts it, “I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance.” (153)

Love and marriage, according to Firestone, is not altruistic and is the pivot of women’s oppression. (126) It is “the final opening up to (or, surrender to the dominion

of) the other.” (128) In patriarchy, love itself becomes “complicated, corrupted, or obstructed by an unequal balance of power.” (130) Simone de Beauvoir says, “The word love has by no means the same sense for both sexes, and this is one cause of the serious misunderstandings which divide them.” (135) In light of these ideas, the chapter analyses the protagonists’ perspectives on these social institutions. The traditional role of women in patriarchal society is to become a good wife and mother. Her function is to “provide the society with children” (Beauvoir 446) as well as to “satisfy a male’s sexual needs and to take care of his household.” (447) In Atwood’s novels, love, marriage and motherhood are not depicted in a flattering light as they are seen as the modes to control women. Marian’s assertion that “Peter was trying to destroy me” (350) or Duncan’s confession that he “was trying to destroy [Marian]” (353) under the pretext of a relationship may be cited as examples.

In *Women Disunited*, Callaway observes that Atwood’s novels portray the lack of unity among women who are often responsible for each other’s downfall. In “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Cixous examines why women are disunited and postulates that it is a result of the patriarchal social system that encourages this infighting to maintain male supremacy. This idea is reaffirmed through analysis of women’s interrelationship within the novels. For instance, animosity between Penelope and her maids in *The Penelopiad* over their brutal execution stems from the maids’ perception of Penelope as an accomplice to Odysseus. Penelope’s lack of power and complacency makes her the target of the twelve maids who implicate her of the crimes, thus exonerating Odysseus. Thus, by analysing both women’s individual experiences as well as their interrelationships, the chapter shows how the patriarchal social system represses and exploits women.

Chapter IV: Negotiation of Power and Emergence of New Identity

While the preceding chapter focuses on gender issues in relation to the experiences of the protagonists, this chapter examines how these women negotiate power and in the process, redefine their identities.

Ulla Kriebner asserts that Margaret Atwood’s novels are novels of individuation, (54) a process in which the individual separates his/her self from the

consciousness or identity of others. Negotiation of power, in the context of this study, involves a process in which the female protagonists have to isolate themselves from the consciousness of others as well as their old selves so that they can emerge with a new empowered self. In this regard, the protagonists' physical and psychological journeys, and the eventual isolation that they experience, becomes crucial in their path towards self-realization and power. The emergence of a new and enlightened self is seen in *Surfacing* only after the protagonist refuses to identify as a victim and subvert her own position within the realm of the male/female power structure:

She surfaces now after realising the truth about herself. The lies she had been building, for others as well as for herself, as an escape from reality (reality which she could not bear), get shattered now. She confronts the truth about her situation... The only way out to compensate for this anti-nature act, she thinks is to get pregnant...she uses Joe (in a sense exploits him) to get pregnant but refuses to get married to him, possibly as a revenge upon the previous man who used her and later refused to marry her, The roles seem to have reversed now. It is only here that the quest of the protagonist is complete. Having discovered her own power, she can now confront herself. (Kaur 17)

Survival is a recurrent theme in Atwood's novels and it correlates to the struggle for power. Tandon and Chandra are of the view that most of Atwood's novels deal with the notion of survival, i.e., the female protagonists' struggle for survival in a male-dominated world.

Margaret Atwood's fiction shows that she is new in the dimension of time by being a rebel against the general current of the patriarchal society and in exploring her true potential, all with the struggle to fulfil her urges and needs. Survival is the keyword for Margaret Atwood and she wants her protagonist to refuse to be a victim and demand equal space as man. Her novels do not intensify the war between male and female but desire for a real, healthy and balanced human relationship. Her feminist vision is neither male-centered nor

female-centered but it offers a fresh perspective on women's problems.(ix)

“Offred is a survivor whose various disciplines of survival implicate her in sites where collective resistance is being carried out.” (Hansot 67) Her determination to survive is seen early in the narrative when she says:

I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last. (17)

Thus, at a time when her friends Moira and Ofglen physically suffer the consequence of their resistance, Offred survives. However, she resists Gileadean laws by having an illicit affair with Nick, and also subtly conspiring for an escape and silently communicating with the other handmaids. Her determination to stay alive allows her to avoid overt resistance all the while subverting the 'norms' of Gileadean society.

The protagonists' own sense of victimhood plays an enormous role in their own powerlessness as it encourage passivity and submissiveness. Refusing to present themselves as victims reinforces their capability to challenge the repressive systems that dominate them.

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone . . . (*Surfacing* 249)

The chapter further examines how survival and resistance are employed in the novels as a means to negotiate power. While resistance takes different forms, the refusal to conform to traditional roles is prominent in the novels. Atwood's female protagonists are non-conformists who rebel against unjust systems by rejecting established social norms.

Virginia Woolf states: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction [.]” (6) Space and financial independence are of paramount importance for women to exercise their creative freedom. Atwood's protagonists are either discontented artists or writers desperate for an escape from the constraints of their jobs; or, aspiring artists unable to fulfil their dreams due to the rampant sexism

that exists in society. Their plight stems from their inability to experiment with their own creative ideas as they work in areas where they are obliged to produce works that echo the sentiments of their male publishers. In her essay titled “The Laugh of The Medusa”, Helene Cixous implores women to “write” and assert themselves through what she calls “écriture féminine”, a feminine mode of writing.

Woman must write about her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies...Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (875)

Rennie and Joan reclaim power over works they produce by deciding to use their art to express themselves instead of being told what to write. This shift is seen in *Bodily Harm* when the narrator remarks: “She will pick her time; then she will report. For the first time in her life, she can’t think of a title” (301) For Marian, the shift is denoted through the mode of narration. She states: “Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again I found my own situation much more interesting than his.” (350) The assertion of oneself through the narratives denotes self-acceptance and rediscovery of identity in Atwood’s fictional world where the protagonists emerge with their own self-defined identities. In her study of contemporary Canadian women’s fiction titled *Refiguring Identities*, Coral Ann Howells state that in order to subvert power, emphasis must be on “...women’s counter-narratives to discourses of patriarchal authority in the home, the importance of maternal inheritance, and women’s revisions of traditional narrative genres, which they reshape for their own purposes.” (2) This chapter analyses the narrative technique employed in the novels as it plays a significant role in presenting an understanding of the protagonists’ perspectives and the shift in power dynamics throughout the narratives.

Chapter V: Conclusion

According to W.J. Keith, artists “provide us with alternative ways of looking at the world and at ourselves.” (14) He further denotes, “artists can produce a portrait of our society that disturbs us because it makes us realize that aspects of it which we have accepted as natural or inevitable or ‘normal’ may in fact be recognized as unnatural, challengeable, and abnormal.” (14-15) Through her novels, Atwood portray

experiences of women that are often ignored or overlooked. By analysing the experiences of these protagonists, an understanding of the roots of their subjugation and the means by which they try to gain agency is uncovered. For Atwood, “art is a moral issue, and it is the responsibility of the writer/artist not only to describe her world, but also to criticise it, to bear witness to its failures, and, finally, to prescribe corrective measures – perhaps even to redeem.” (Rigney 1)

By analysing Atwood’s novels within the given theoretical framework, the study highlights the dynamics of power by examining how power operates in society. Manifestations of power such as violence, threats, manipulation, reward as well as surveillance are seen in the novels where they are employed as means to control and subjugate women. The study explores how extreme repressive forms of power encourage resistance. A close examination of the novels show that by questioning the subordinate roles assigned to them, the protagonists negotiate and subvert through various means of resistance.

For Foucault, individuals are “both the subjects and the objects of power as they are “always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising...power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation.” (*Power/Knowledge* 80-81) The study finds that the protagonists undergo serious reconsideration of their own thoughts, beliefs and practices, in order to find fulfilment and empowerment. Their habit of escaping difficult situations in the past render them helpless victims who allow themselves to be subjugated. As the unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* confesses:

So we battled in secret, undeclared, and after a while I no longer fought back because I never won. The only defence was flight, invisibility.
(173)

When the protagonists see themselves as helpless victims of patriarchal society, they allow themselves to be subservient and incapacitated which only exacerbates their predicaments. Power is subverted only when they resolve to act against dominant forces that limit their freedom, independence and power. The study thus establishes that the protagonists’ ability to reclaim control and sovereignty over their own selves, which is a significant aspect of reclaiming power, depend on their

willingness to overcome passivity and victimhood. This changes the dynamics of power which shapes and influences the narratives.

[Atwood] deconstructs the exploitative and inferiorizing structures of power and dominion obtaining in gender relationships and thereby typifies the strong feminist voice that is heard in the post-sixties in Canada. Her novels depict the quests for self-assertion of her women-protagonists who are threatened and thwarted by domineering patriarchal structures. (Salat xix)

Analysis of Atwood's novels show that the dynamics of power is effectively presented through the characters' social relations, using a variety of themes and narrative techniques. In an attempt to understand the manner in which power operates in society, the study examines the personal and collective experiences of the protagonists, with emphasis on their social relationships. The study reinforces the centrality of power in the novels of Margaret Atwood in conformity with the Foucauldian concept of power. It finds that power pervades all social relations. In her fiction, Atwood gives 'voice' to the gender-specific mute minority culture. (Salat xix) As opposed to the conventional understanding that sees power only as an oppressive and dominating means of control, the present study affirms Foucault's assertion that power is everywhere and has the possibility of operating from below. This is established through analysis of the means employed by the female protagonists, presumably those who occupy the lower class in the patriarchal social hierarchy, to negotiate and subvert power through various forms of resistance.

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