



**THE QUEST FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY:
A READING OF MODERN CANADIAN FICTION IN THE LIGHT OF
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING* AND *THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

Muhammad Moustafa Muhammad Abd-ur-Rahmanⁱ

Ph.D. in English Literature,
Al-Azhar University,
Egypt

Abstract:

Margaret Eleanor Atwood (1939 –) is one of the contemporary most preeminent and multitalented living figures in Canadian Literature. Apart from being a novelist, she is an innovative poetess, a social critic, a children's author, a short-story writer and a winner of countless literary awards and accolades, including the prestigious Booker Prize for Literature. An Anglo-Canadian, Atwood's works provide additional insights into her scope of vision about her culture and society. The present study focuses on Atwood's preoccupation with her inquiry of and quest for identity—both individually and collectively, that is to say, female and national identity. The study is not intended to provide a historical review of Canadian literature, nor is it meant to offer a comprehensive assessment of causes and probabilities. Rather, it presents and discusses one significant aspect in particular, namely the marginalization and victimization of Atwood's female protagonists who made their quest for identity a necessity. A relevant aspect is Atwood's haunting nationalistic concerns which are most evident in her works through such motifs as alienation, defeatism and victimization. Atwood strongly believes that a writer must consciously work within the literary tradition of his/ her nation. One main reason why the present study was conducted is the strong affinity that lurks in the background of the fictional world of Atwood's novels between the status of the writer's "self" as a female and that of Canada as a nation. Atwood seems to link a female's quest for identity with that of Canada in a colonist-oriented world. Atwood raises the question of woman's search for a distinct identity within a political-feminist framework. Her protagonists suffer from varying forms of victimization of masculine hegemony. The study is also structured as an in-depth analysis of Atwood's abused women. It investigates how they succeed in subverting not only the structures of

ⁱ Correspondence: email dr.mmustafa2016@gmail.com

domination from within but also the myth of feminine subordination from without. To overcome their predicament of victimization and emerge as free-willed females, women resist the exploitative forces—which are patriarchal and consumerist. They try to redefine the very “ecology” of their existence which is more or less a prison-like compound, carefully constructed by the authority to strip them of their selfhood and freedom. Hence, victimization and survival are contradictory motifs within the main theme in the study. One of the twentieth century's leading feminist writers, Atwood is convinced that the artist is a responsible citizen not just a passive victim. She delineates her characters with such a tenable drive and determination as to survive and undermine devaluation, coercion, enslavement, torture, potential death sentence, and outright genocide. Although her protagonists experience outward defeats, they gain inward victories. An attempt is made to unravel the politics adopted by Atwood's endangered women protagonists to prove that they are different in that they refuse to be victims—whether sexual or political objects, wishing to survive. The central aim of the study is to bring into focus the way women use all that is in their power to fight for their own existence. Survival for them means that there is no dominance or submission, since all individuals are free to determine their own lives as equals. The study also contends the strategies adopted by these female protagonists in their endeavour to confront dehumanization. The study confines itself to two major novels presented in their chronological order: *Surfacing* (S) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (HT). Both novels share the theme of self-seeking and hence self-discovery.

Keywords: national identity; colonialism; feminism; marginalization; victimization; collective and individual identity; submission; dehumanization; predicament; survival

Introduction

Canadian literature, or CanLit, as it is often referred to, is that type of literary output originating in Canada out of the confluence of the two main streams in the English language—British and American. Northrop Frye points out that Canadian literature is “*the fruit of the British seed planted in American soil*” (140). Globally, it asserted its nationalism and developed as an independent tradition. It also gained, as time went by, “*a unique identity of its own, transcending cultural and racial barriers*” (Damn 16). The twentieth century witnessed a Canadian exuberance of fiction writing. It was remarkable that women writers outnumbered the male writers in that field. To cope with the sweeping changes, occurring on a global footing with the women's self, position, power and politics, Canadian female artists and writers took up the rights, responsibilities, prospects and problems of women as the prime motif. So, their portrayals of female and national characters were constituted according to

identity issues, championed by the Canadian national and the second wave of women's movements.

Although those sweeping changes have promoted the status of woman, a female's condition has not as yet been improved. A woman's character was not only defined in relation to man, but her own images were also molded, reshaped and reoriented by man. Kate Millet points out that patriarchy "*subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male*" (qtd. in Selden: 131-132). Impelled by this awareness of her condition and the treatment meted out to her, women writers took up female identity and feminine marginalization in a male-dominated society. For them, writing was an expression of themselves; it allows them to "*throw off their chains*" and to struggle for more autonomy (Aspenlieder 4). The woman's role as a writer helps in breaking the cocoons of subordination and emerging with the knowledge of the female power. Added to that, the feminist consciousness induces a woman to dwell on her selfhood, that is, her female ego and to assert her individuality. Not only does she begin to question about her self-identity, and what she is getting to, but she also wonders how the society sees her and how she directs her life and thoughts. Such crucial questions and survival problems captured the imagination of such a woman novelist as Atwood. Atwood was but evidently "*a culturally and theoretically-aware writer who both utilizes and challenges the ideas which permeate her culture*" (Tolan 1). Issues of national identity intensely engrossed her mind at a time when efforts by Prime Minister Trudeau to redefine Canada as a bilingual and bicultural nation aroused the widespread interest of Canadians. Valérie Broege articulated the view of many critics when she recognized Atwood as contributing to the project of charting "*the geography of the Canadian imagination both for her own sense of identity as well as that of her fellow Canadians*" (117).

The surge of women writers coincided with the rising tide, or rebirth of Canadian nationalism of the 1960s. The stage was set for the blossoming of Canadian cultural identity, where Atwood became the central figure. Sandra Djwa sums up key influences on Atwood's work: "*the new feminism, a myth-centred [English and Canadian tradition of] poetry, Frye's criticism and the growing nationalism of the early sixties*" (153). Atwood emerged as a prolific writer in those confusing times, when Canada, as a post-war independent state, was both struggling with the missing national identity and witnessing a new wave of feminism coupled with disillusionment of American imperialism.

In her book *Second Words*, a collection of reviews and other critical writing, Atwood says: "*I have always seen Canadian nationalism and the concern for women's rights as part of a larger, nonexclusive picture*" (p. 282). She was once asked about her opinions about nationalism and feminism. She replied: "*I see the two issues as similar. In fact, I see feminism as part of a large issue: human dignity. That's what Canadian nationalism is about; what feminism is*

about, and what black power is about. They're all part of the same vision" (qtd. in Hammond: 102). She never forgot that "her writing is grounded in a strong sense of her cultural identity as a Canadian and a woman" (qtd. in Nischik: 46). It is thus important for the readers of Atwood's work to understand that the "femininity" which percolates through her work also represent a "facet" of Canadian national identity (Morris 37).

From this perspective, Atwood's works greatly contribute to the understanding of Canadian identity and character and the placing of Canada on the literary-world map, particularly with the publication of her book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* in 1972. For Atwood, the book is a statement of belonging; it represents the expression of Canadian identity. Atwood was passionately involved in the post-centennial Canadian literary nationalism movement as a scholar, a critic, a writer, and as the editor of the House of Anansi, a nationalist publisher. According to Yoko Araki, this literary nationalism movement, known as the Canadian thematic criticism movement, had its roots in Northrop Frye's "Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*" (1965). It was fostered by D. G. Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* (1970), Atwood's *Survival*, and John Moss's *Patterns of Isolation* (1974). Araki argues that these authors seek the distinctiveness of Canada and its literature; they attempt to distinguish their own literature from that of America or Britain (189).

Atwood's "Canadianism" is manifest both in form and content throughout her fiction. Her *Survival* is the first widely-read expression of a distinctively Canadian literary identity. In it, Atwood conceptualizes the nation's identity crisis, saying: "I'm talking about Canada as a state of mind, as the space you inhabit not just with your body but with your head. It's that kind of space in which we find ourselves lost" (p. 18). She is always afraid of losing her country/identity: "We need to know about here [Canada], because here is where we [Canadians] live" (p.19). In her writings, she cannot separate her suffering, as a woman, from that of Canada as a culturally and economically occupied country.

This causes Atwood to caution Canadians that a continued lack of national identity is a serious threat to their survival as a country. Though Atwood's vision is considered myopic by some critics, James Steele aptly points out in "The Literary Criticism of Margaret Atwood," that *Survival* "introduced many Canadians to their own literature for the first time" (qtd. in Schlueter: 3). Yet, a brief reading of the English-Canadian tradition, as defined in *Survival*, reveals more about Atwood's Canadianness. She discovers a tradition that is replete with images of victimization. For her, Canada, as a nation, is, therefore, "a victim," or "an oppressed minority," exploited— in short a "colony" (p. 35). She further argues that every country or culture has a "single unifying and informing symbol at its core," and defines "the central symbol for Canadian literature" as "survival" (pp. 31-32). In this regard, Atwood insists that she is describing a cultural phenomenon: "Canadians themselves feel threatened and nearly extinct as a nation, and suffer also from life-denying experience as individuals—the culture threatens the 'animal'

within them—and [...] their identification with animals is the expression of a deep-seated cultural fear" (p. 79). Atwood even suggests that the "real condition" of Canadians may not be "exploited victims" so much as it is the "need to be exploited victims" (p. 84).

Remarkably, Atwood's fiction as a whole deals with women's confrontation with the world. The female protagonists lead a life of oppression, exploitation, and victimization in the name of social and cultural restraints. Kudchedkar asserts that women, in Atwood's novels, suffer from personal victimization, which has its roots in the colonial pattern of dominion and destruction. The women feel inferior to men and suffer psychological tension. This supports the view that women's life constitutes an experience of colonialism (249).

Under such inexorable and oppressive conditions, women keep intact the ideals of womanhood, of struggle to survive and discover themselves and find self-fulfillment. Also, they seek ways of transcending their alienation. They are, in Atwood's words, similar to that focal image of Canada's culture, "a collective victim struggling for survival" (*Survival*, p.11). Rubenstein in "Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*" says: "Margaret Atwood has always been concerned with issues of survival—first as a condition of Canadian experience and, more recently, as a condition of female experience" (101). Margaret Laurence expresses this survival as "an inner freedom" and concludes that it includes "the survival of human dignity, and in the end the survival of some human warmth and the ability to reach out and touch others" (83). Atwood plays a key-role in setting in motion many radical ideas about women's individuality and autonomy, power and politics, "through their own strategies of rebellion through tropes of madness, silence, illness and guile" (Basu 180). The aim of her fiction is to make women "critically conscious of their own roles in conventional social structures" (Howells 4).

In *Survival*, Atwood gives a clear definition of the four-category paradigm of "Basic Victim Positions," whereby a victim may choose any of four possible options. Though unquestionably "a negative look at Canada's collective sense of self" as reflected in its literature, it provided "an interpretive lens through which Canadians might see and share and react" (Schlueter 3). Atwood says:

"To deny the fact that you are a victim; to acknowledge the fact that you are a victim, but to explain this as an act of fate, the dictates of Biology, the necessity decreed by History, or Economics, or the unconscious, or any other large general power or idea; To acknowledge the fact that you are a victim but to refuse to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable; to be a creative non-victim." (P. 14, emphasis is mine)

The italicized words fully explain the position and the role of Offred, the main character in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Atwood focuses attention on the idea that creativity

of any kind gives control over one's own life, validates one's own existence and enables one to come out of the awkward predicament of victimization. This position can probably be too difficult for an individual to withstand, but there is always the hope, the possibility of liberating oneself from the gender-power struggle through creative activity. According to Amin Malak, Offred's progress as a maturing consciousness is "*indexed by an evolving awareness of herself as a victimized woman, and then a gradual development toward initiating risky but assertive schemes that break the slavery syndrome.*" Malak goes on to argue that Offred's double-crossing the Commander and his Wife, her choice to hazard a sexual affair with Nick, and her association with the underground network, "*all point to the shift from being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor.*" This impulse of survival, in Malak's words, and the occasional flashes of warmth and concern among the handmaids, transmit reassuring signs of hope and humanity (8).

Atwood's work cannot simply be categorized in one literary tradition. Nathalie Cooke points out that "*Atwood's work is located at the intersection of three distinct, though related, literary traditions: feminist, Canadian nationalist, and post-modern*" (19). In almost all her novels, Atwood probes themes related to the politics of gender: the enforced alienation of women under patriarchy, and the delimiting definition of women as functional beings. What resonates with deeper significance is not only the patriarchal attempt to subvert the selfhood of women, but also the gradual carving out of female space by women through various strategies and woman's quest for identity, self-definition and autonomy as well (Gomez 74).

In *Surfacing* (1972), the image of Canada as "*a colony, physically exploited and psychologically oppressed by the United States, is manifest*" (Schlueter 1). The publication of the novel concurs with the progression of feminist theory. It was at that time that Canadian nationalism and the second wave feminism began to interact significantly around issues of autonomy and identity. For Atwood, the parallels between the movements were self-evident, as she herself explained in a 1981 lecture on Canadian-American relations:

"The cultural nationalism of the early 1970s was not aggressive in nature. It was a simple statement: we exist. Such movements become militant only when the other side replies, in effect, No you don't. Witness feminism." (Second Words, p. 385)

The novel presents foreign characters such as Americans and indigenous others within Canada, such as Quebecers. These characters become agents who carve out an identity for anglophone Canadian characters. According to Judith McCombs, this method of "*defining others first and oneself after, by negative contrast,*" exemplifies Canadians' lack of an independent identity (154). The construction of otherness is "*one further important element that is primary to nationalist representations*" (McLeod 73).

The novel appears to be a quest narrative in which an unnamed female narrator, in her late twenties, after years of estrangement, returns to her hometown in Canada. She is not only seen as a “*representative of Canada*” (Sankar, 41), but she also stands parallel to it, as both are searching for a distinct identity. She is an artist by profession. She remains unnamed throughout the novel as she tells her friend, Anna: “*I no longer have a name*” (p. 195). Immediately, she sets on a trip into the wilderness to look for her naturalist father, who is missing on a remote island in northern Quebec: “*I can't believe I'm on this road again ...*” (p. 1). Nina Baym describes the quest narrative as a masculine quest for identity, and, like Atwood, she considers it characteristic of American literature, which she views to be founded in the belief that “*in this new land, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition*”(71). In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye reads the wilderness as a pastoral space of renewal and redemption, of “*escape from society*” (43), the general, urban space.

The narrator is accompanied by her live-in boyfriend, Joe, and a married couple, Anna and David. This quest is at the surface of the narrator's multipurposed journey that hides other quests for her mother, for self-discovery and for Canadian national identity. She is “*emotionally disturbed*” by her past and present experiences and is considered as a symbolic “*representative of the Canadian psyche*” (Broege 123). Moreover, she represents the “*collective voice of a people in nationalist writing*” (McLeod 93). Linda Hutcheon argues that the “[p]owerless status of Canada” is often compared to that of women (139).

According to Atwood's text, Canada belongs to the domain of subservience, while America to that of dominance. The narrator's quests are interwoven with the attributes Atwood associates with Canada: natural, feminine, passive, lacking identity, and suffering a victim complex (Broege 123). Those images and “*binary structures*” are expressions of what Atwood asserts is the central image of Canadian literature: “*a collective victim's struggle for survival,*” given the country's hostile environment and colonial history (Toye 446). David signifies the American patriarchal structure of power and domination. On the other hand, Anna, the Canadian, is passive, feminine and suffers from doubts about her own identity—the great Canadian victim complex. This goes in line with what Atwood herself says: “*what I'm really into in that book [Surfacing] is the great Canadian victim complex*” (qtd. in Mehta: 71). Laura Wright argues:

“Through its careful deconstruction of power politics—imperial, gendered, national—Surfacing furthers Atwood's supposition, which is stated and codified in Survival, that Canada is a victim, that Canada is a colony, and that it is possible to imagine Canada as, therefore, a postcolonial survivor, a country, like Atwood's narrator in Surfacing, seeking to articulate and map the unspeakable and liminal space of the border.” (226)

While attempting to find her father, the narrator recalls feelings and events that have to do with her past. The main issue of the novel is that of searching for identity. As a member of patriarchal society, the young woman perceives herself as a victim of men, on one hand. On another, she is convinced that men do not only use women's bodies for their own satisfaction, but they also have more rights. They are the ones who have the main voice in creating history, in managing to save the world, since they "*can do it with guns*" (S, p.196). That is why the narrator, as a Canadian, feels oppressed by the cultural imperialism of Americans who regard a Canadian as "*the other*."

Searching for her roots, the narrator, as a victim, feels utterly dissociated with her language, culture and history, not to say, with the very members of her family, especially her missing father. Recalling her days as a child, she refers to her parents, herself, and her brother "*as if they were somebody's else's family*" (S, p.12). Still, she perceives herself as a displaced person, an outsider. Even though she is in her homeland, she feels as if she were in a foreign territory. These feelings of estrangement evoke her an urgent need for recreation. She wishes to seek her lost female identity, hoping to find and reconstruct it. In other words, by remembering her past, she might be blended with her identity, which is a form of therapy that helps her overcome her past trauma and hence survive.

Seeing a canoe full of fishermen whom she assumes to be Americans, the narrator discovers that they are in fact Canadian. In their turn, the fishermen have made the same assumption about the narrator and her friends: "*We thought you were Yanks, with the hair and all,*" they declare (p. 151). The narrator is furious with them for having "*disguised*" themselves (their boat sports a 'Go Mets' Sticker) and meditates upon the logical conclusion of this case of mistaken identity. If Canadians do not value homegrown-culture, then Americanism is:

"What's in store for us, it's what we're turning into [...] Like the Late Show sci-fi movies, creatures from outer space, body snatchers injecting themselves into you, dispossessing your brain, their eyes blank eggshells behind the dark glasses. If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, I was saying, you speak their language, a language is everything you do." (Pp. 151-52)

Atwood here delineates the ultimate Anglophone Canadian dilemma. By using the language, they hold in common with Great Britain and the United States, such Canadians have great difficulty not only in distinguishing themselves from citizens of these other countries, but also in creating their own cultural artifacts (Kirtz 58).

As the narrative continues, the narrator comes in contact with various people and also comes to know various male strategies. She finally becomes a "*metaphor*" (p. 76) for all those

under-privileged women, who are oppressed and exploited for their powerlessness. In order that one can explore the narrator's attempts of regenerating and reconstructing her lost identity, one needs to delve deeply into both her consciousness and her past. By so doing, it will be noticed how such a journey back revives the narrator's memory, as she shifts between memories of her childhood and experiences of her present. She will seek to understand and find her position not only in her family but also in the Canadian society as a whole. Here, she dives into the unconscious side of her psyche only to recall how her male art teacher, who is also her fake husband, seduced and exploited her sexually. She became a prey to his lust and got pregnant in the process. She was then compelled to undergo an abortion which left a scar on her psyche that burdens her with a painful anxiety that drives the psyche to reach out for a sense of identity and self-esteem. Her art teacher, therefore, turns into a destroyer of her motherhood and of her identity as an artist. Though an artist by profession, she is never given any chance to prosper and express her artistic talent. Her motherhood and creativity are thus ruined. Tealia DeBerry comments that "*Both the impregnation and abortion were acts of subjugation and the utter lack of bodily control, rather than the acts themselves, is what haunts the Surfacers*" (6). So, she perceives herself as a powerless and innocent victim. Nevertheless, she manages to survive in this paralyzing state of utter humiliation, even though she has to compromise at every step of her life. She says:

"One of my drawings was too frightening and I said children liked being frightened. "It isn't the children who buy the books," he said, "it is their parents." So I compromised." (S, p. 57)

Atwood here describes the negative effects of the suppression of woman's creativity showing how a woman is destroyed intellectually, emotionally and morally by the male-dominated society. More significantly, this reflects the first part of the heroine's adventure—her separation or departure from society. In this initial phase, she is alienated from her parents, her inner self and emotions as she has suppressed the memory of her traumatic abortion and pushed it into the unconscious part of her psyche. In this respect, her initial psychological state "*corresponds to Frye's agon which indicates her conflict with the unconscious side of herself or the Jungian shadow*" (Obidič 20). For this reason, she loses her identity and feels psychologically divided into two halves—the head, and the body, which represent her heart and feelings—"*The other half, the one locked away was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head*" (S, p.127).

One of the narrator's concerns of survival and hence the assertion of her individuality is how to discover the values that are "real" or indigenous to her as a female, as a Canadian, and as an individual—to become, in her words, a "*natural woman*" (S, p. 228). Tolan argues that this authenticity draws Atwood's novel to "*communitarian theory,*" and to "*the politics of*

recognition” discussed by the Canadian political theorist, Charles Taylor. Tolan further comments that the work of both Atwood and Taylor proves hugely influential, not just within their immediate spheres, but as part of a more general cultural discourse. Atwood’s early interaction with Taylor’s ideas molds her response to feminist arguments and leads her to locate feminism, at a very early stage in the second wave, within much broader themes of cultural identity (Tolan 40). Taylor argues that identity is shaped by the recognition or misrecognition that a person receives from others, and misrecognition, or non-recognition, can be a form of oppression:

“Thus some feminists have argued that women in patriarchal societies have been induced to adopt a deprecatory image of themselves. They have internalized a picture of their own inferiority, so that even when some of the objective obstacles to their advancement fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities. And beyond this, they are condemned to suffer the pain of low self-esteem.” (25-26)

Ostensibly, the grail the narrator is searching for is her missing father, gradually; this triggers off a psychological inner search for her aborted child and her missing memories, which proves the key to her past and to her true self. As she journeys into the Canadian wilderness, it becomes apparent that her quest is never intended as a quest for self-definition, but is rather an attempt to escape into isolation and innocence (Tolan 44). Tolan further adds that *“suffering the trauma of a coerced abortion, society has come to signify for her a dangerous place, filled with aggression and violence,”* where *“there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them”* (S, p. 150). The narrator does not perceive herself as an agent of action—as a quester—but as a survivor and a victim (Tolan 44).

In the second phase of her incitation, the narrator discovers her father’s rock drawings which guide her to the lake, where she dives into the water to find her missing father. At the same time, she *“figuratively dives into her unconscious realm where she discovers her psychological shadow”* (Obidič 20): *“My other shape was in the water, not my reflection but my shadow...”* (S, p. 165). According to Carol P. Christ, the lake offers her *“‘redemption’* (S, p. 12) *since, under water, she finally faces her suppressed traumatic event and, thus, confronts the shadowy part of herself by acknowledging the death of her aborted baby”* (322). Atwood comments: *“... dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open ... it was dead”* (S, p. 166-167). Her preoccupation with death forces her to think of life, of survival. Yet, Obidič remarks that, the dead baby also causes *“her emotional death, which corresponds to Frye’s definition of Pathos,”* and adds that *“[it] represents her ‘evil grail’* (S, p. 167) *as well”* (20). Since she gains this self-knowledge with the help of her father’s guidance, she considers it his gift. At this stage, her epiphany or self-revelation also leads to her illumination. Her father’s gift is *“not enough for*

her to heal her spirit" (Obidič 21). So, under the spiritual guidance of her dead mother, she also finds a picture of a woman with a baby inside her belly, which she considers her mother's gift. Only then does she decide to conceive a baby with her present non-patriarchal partner Joe to release her of her past guilt of abortion. She makes love to him "in the role of a goddess" according to Frye and Joseph Campbell's "divine sexual union" (qtd. in Pratt: 138). During then, she heals her split by rejoining the two halves—the head with the body and integrates them as part of her selfhood:

"I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long [...] the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds. [...] I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god." (S, p. 193)

According to Pratt, her godlike baby is "the re-found grail that represents her elixir of life and enables her psychological transformation or rebirth since she finds her authentic self," and, thus, her "female identity in the new regenerative role of a mother" (157). DeBerry views that her child not only represents the child she aborted at the request of her previous lover, but also "the potential for a matriarchal genesis without the threat of man's influence" (8).

Now comes the moment of atonement with her parents when she leaves her lover Joe and her friends. She escapes into the forest, where she loses her sanity, becomes one with nature and reconciles with the memory of her drowned father, who was found dead in the lake, and her lost mother, who died of cancer long ago. Obidič declares, "In a shamanic trance, she imagines to see the ghosts of her divine parents and forgives them for having died and having left her too soon" (21). She realizes that they are no longer "gods" and lets go of their innocence which she attributed to herself as well, "Our father, Our mother [...] they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human. [...] their totalitarian innocence was my own" (S, p. 227).

The narrator's flight into the wilderness cannot be interpreted as an escape from reality, but as an escape from her entrapment within social guilt and recover her authentic, innocent self. When her feminine consciousness reaches its climax, she revolts against the world that has both exploited and victimized her. Quigley points out that "a complete return to nature is the only solution for regaining wholeness" (83). She now learns to reconcile with nature and nature enables her to realize her strength. Describing the impact of nature in the protagonists search for an identity, Frank Davey remarks in *A feminist Poetics*:

"In Surfacing it is by seeing herself as a part of the landscape, a tree, a deer, a skeleton, a rock. It is by feeling her blood smell up like sap that the protagonist begins to acquire purpose and identity." (132)

Marie Françoise Guedon writes: *"In order to complete her quest, the protagonist of Surfacing confronts herself and discovers her own strength"* (106). When, therefore, she comes to believe that the friends she has brought with her to the island are perpetuating the corruption she fears, she hides from them until they eventually return to the mainland: *"I am by myself; this is what I wanted: to stay here alone"* (S, p. 202). For Christ, this is pivotal to the novel: *"The choice of solitude is not so much a rejection of community as a recognition that certain experiences and truths are so alien to ordinary consciousness that the individual must withdraw in order to experience them"* (47). As she retreats from society, the narrator believes that *"she can overcome the alienation from her true self, symbolized by her lost memories, and recover her authenticity"* (Tolan 45). According to Jerome H. Rosenberg, *"She attempts to return to the primitive, to merge with the surrounding wilderness, to escape humanity and unite with her parents' spirits and her ancestral past"* (104). S. Grace believes that:

"The surfer's parents and her aborted baby represents her psychological conflict or the Jungian shadow which she resolves by consciously confronting the loss of her dead baby together with the death of her parents. By letting go of their ghosts, she finally heals her divided self and achieves wholeness in the psychological process of Jung's individuation – although her personal growth and transformation will continue all her life." (109)

At the end of her journey, the last goal of personal transformation, the narrator feels so confident about her power and refuses to be a powerless victim, and says—*"This above, all, to refuse to be a victim"* (S, p. 229). She conquers the non-victim position, as Atwood points in her critical study *Survival*. It is, as Nancy Walker argues, *"a sign that the protagonist is prepared to be a creator rather than being created to meet the needs of others"* (81). She conventionally returns to civilization and her lover Joe comes to look for her in the Canadian bush so as to take her back to town since she has no other choice, as Atwood suggests at the end of the narrative —*"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 [...] withdrawing is no longer possible, and the alternative is death"* (S, p. 229). She has risen from death to life. In other words, she achieves integration and becomes a whole after experiencing fragmentation and disintegration. As John Moss states, *"the protagonist has achieved the integration of head and body, resolving the amorphous parts of herself into a single coherent identity"* (142). She is no longer a divided self but a whole person. Now she gains the ultimate sanity, as Barbara H. Rigney points out, *"the protagonist belongs to the ultimate sanity; the knowledge that woman can descend and return—sane, whole, victorious"* (115). Seen as a *"journey of self-discovery,"* *Surfacing* is viewed as presenting a route to integration: *"The social quest is a search for self in which the protagonist begins in alienation and seeks integration into human community where she can develop more fully"* (Christ 317).

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a critique of female brutalization, a tale that dramatizes and exposes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society where women are deprived of their rights and denied their individuation. It is a kind of anti-utopia of the not-too-distant future as reflected through the voice of Offred, a Handmaid. She is one of the victims in that absolute theocracy termed the Republic of Gilead which replaces and takes over the North-eastern United States. In describing her novel as dystopia in form, Atwood calls it "a cognate of *A Clockwork Orange*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (qtd. in Bloom: 1). Pauline Das considers it "a troubling cautionary vision of mankind's potentially dismal future" (236). Similarly, in Moss's words, it is "a future projection set in the past that has not yet happened" (7). Atwood further states:

"I had long been interested in the histories of totalitarian regimes and the different forms they have taken in various societies. This is a book about what happens when certain casually held attitudes about women are taken to their logical conclusions. The root of the book goes back to my study of the American Puritans. The society they founded in America was not a democracy as we know it, but a theocracy." (Qtd. in Das: 237)

Hence, it can be argued that Atwood's novel reflects the form and style of the early Puritan society of the 1980s and addresses the dynamics that produce such a situation.

The heroine is one of several "Handmaids" whose sole function is to produce healthy children for the elite because of their "viable ovaries" (*HT*, p. 153). The fictional setting of the novel is the bizarre, male chauvinistic world of Gilead, a church-state regime which professes to have drawn and developed a social system based on the precepts of the Bible and has reduced a woman's identity to nothing more than a "two-legged wombs [...] sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (*HT*, p. 146). Simply speaking, women are valued for their biological functions only—the root of their victimization. Coomi S. Vevaina declares that this is "a repressive and regressive society run by what seems like a group of mad men" (222-23). Commenting on the paradoxical aspect of Gilead, Malak says:

*"One of the novel's successful aspects concerns the skilful portrayal of a state that in theory claims to be founded on Christian principles, yet in practice miserably lacks spirituality and benevolence. The state in Gilead prescribes a pattern of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror—in short, the usual terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states, instance of which can be found in such dystopian works as Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's 1984."* (4)

Offred, the protagonist-narrator, is just one of the several handmaids who are trapped in this totalitarian state. As in other Atwoodian novels, the theme here is “*the examination of patriarchal structures of dominion and power and the woman’s quest for a meaningful identity*” (Salat 74). Offred escapes from that relentless regime to the Underground Female road to tell her tale of victimization to the world. The novel takes the form of a personal diary, where the memories “*combine to build an extraordinary portrait of an ordinary woman in extraordinary circumstances*” (Das 238). More precisely, Atwood deconstructs the ideological trap called femininity and exposes the extreme subjugation of women under a theocratic patriarchy more bluntly than she does in her other novels.

The novel begins on an autobiographical note. The narrator records her own experiences as a Handmaid, but she makes a desperate detachment only to distance herself from the experience by calling it a story: “*I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it*” (HT, p. 49). Right from the beginning, the narrator confesses the plight of the Handmaids in the Gilead. They are placed there like prisoners, though apparently treated well. In reality, their very identity is denied. Even when they are asleep, they are under strict supervision. Everything is valued in terms of their sex and body only. They are reduced to merely sex objects and are not allowed to go outside or communicate with any stranger. In other words, they are, in a sense, prisoners of their sex and are retained as prisoners of the ideological chains of feminine ideals that brainwash them into believing that their imprisonment is a privilege, as Offred comments: “*Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said*” (HT, p.18). In addition, their actual names have been forgotten. Despite being constantly warned against the evils of talking and reassured by the advantages of silence, the handmaids communicate, in different ways, and defy the vigilance of militaristic Aunts. Offred says,

“We learn to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch our arms, when the aunts are not looking, and touch each other’s hands across space. We learned to lip-read [...] In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.” (HT, p. 14)

Their exchange of names declares tragically their loss of identity. Their very names are open to deconstruction. They do not have any particular names. Names are interchangeable as their function is common. All of them are breeding machines and their names are just prepositional phrases, “*composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question. Such names were taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the household of a specific Commander, and relinquished by them upon leaving it*” (HT, p. 318). According to Jessie Givner, “*The shifting of names conveys the impossibility of tracing any*

originary, referential name" (58). When a new Handmaid comes in place of Ofglen, Offred's neighbour, she also tells Offred, "I am Ofglen." Offred immediately remarks, "Of course she is, the new one, and Ofglen, where ever she is, is no longer Ofglen [...] That's how you get lost, in a sea of names" (HT, p. 295). The name of the narrator is also puzzling. She has to disregard her own. Offred is not her real name as it refers to her having been pressed into service of childbearing as a mistress or a Handmaid just for 'breeding purposes' for that patriarchal regime of Gilead. As Offred laments the loss of her name: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses because it's forbidden [...] your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others" (HT, p. 94). Not only is this a kind of identity distortion, of denying cultural and personal history, but it is also a way of violation and possession as well.

After Gilead comes into existence, the narrator loses traumatically her husband and daughter. Gilead's first blatant move against women is to strip them of any rights. The state's entire structure is centred around a single goal: control of reproduction. It assumes complete control of women's bodies through their political subjugation. Women are forced to submit to the ruling elite. They are not allowed to vote, get education, and hold property or jobs. Neither do they have financial independence nor can they make any friends, or do anything else that might allow them to become subversive or independent and thereby undermine their husbands or the state. There is a ban on reading and writing which is obviously a form of victimization that women suffer. Such types of subjugation create a society in which women are treated as subhuman. Women are "let go from their jobs, denied employment, and— with the regime in command of all the computer data banks—their money and property were transferred to the control of husbands or male relatives" (Kolodny 104). All women are categorized and given tasks directly related to the state of their reproductive capabilities: "every woman is assigned to one several very specific sexual roles depending on her fertility quotient" (Tolan 209).

Gilead also strips away the Handmaids respective identities by issuing a specific dress code to them and they are all bound to follow that code. Women are separated from one another on the basis of the colour of their clothes and are subjected into rigid categories based on their roles and functions. Walker argues that Gilead posits a fundamentalist patriarchal society where "feminist dreams have been replaced by fundamentalist patriarchy that divides women into rigid categories based on function" (69). Applying Atwood's theory of four basic victim positions, Gomez places the Handmaids in victim position two:

"In Gilead, where women are defined as mere functions to serve man, the average woman is incarcerated in position two. The wife, decorative in function and dressed in blue, the daughter, silent and submissive, dressed in white, the Martha, middle-aged housekeeper in green and the Handmaid in red personifying the child-bearing function, all accept their victim

positions as something inevitable, dictated by Biology and decreed by History, at a time when Caucasian birthrates had declined steeply." (86)

Still in her formative and fertile years, Offred is "*designated a 'Handmaid,' her sole function became to bear children*" (Moss 8). Gomez observes, "*in The Handmaid's Tale, the child bearing function of woman is isolated, blown out of proportion and shown to be at the root of the victimization of women.*" One way that Offred is victimized in the Gilead regime is that she has no human rights. She is deprived of any freedom, identity, individuality and even her name. Her identity is "*reduced to a prepositional phrase, 'of Fred'*" (90). Her sole purpose is to be impregnated by her present Commander for his and the wife's benefit in a "*periodically programmed sexual intercourse*" every month under the guise of religion. The Commander's wife arranges and supervises these sex sessions, in which the handmaid, desexed, dehumanized, and is obliged to participate. The following excerpt is the most traumatic to show how Offred stresses out her dreadful experience:

"My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. [...] Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. [...] I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter. Close your eyes and think of England. But this is not England." (HT, p. 104)

This unforgettable monthly rape 'ceremony,' which follows the scriptural 'and she shall bear upon my knees' in Ildney Calvalcanti's words, "*grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. It synthesizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead*" (166). Alanna Callaway adds: "*The Handmaids lost control of their bodies, and therefore, of their identities*" (38). Malak argues that the "*regime condones such an unorthodox practice out of necessity to overcome a fertility crisis,*" and declares "*the polygamy of the Old Testament provides the sanction*" (4). Religion is one of the major reasons behind the manipulation and sexual exploitation of women in Gilead.

The function of procreation assumes crucial importance in Gilead. The fertile woman becomes man's possession, an object to be used, manipulated and discarded. The commander is the master and the Handmaid his slave. The Handmaid's mind is conditioned into a passive acceptance of her sub-human status. She is not expected to be a person at all. For the purpose of procreation, Gilead adopts a simple tactic of declaring that:

"All second marriages and non-marital liaisons adulterous, arresting the female partners, and, on the grounds that they were morally unfit, confiscating the children they already had, who

were adopted by childless couples of the upper echelons who were eager for progeny by any means." (HT, p. 316)

Women are allotted for reproductive purposes in Gilead, and each Handmaid is posted thrice and each posting being of two years with a different Commander every time. If she is unable to produce a child during these fixed postings, she is declared as Unwoman and is sent to the Colonies for further dehumanization and exploitation—a state which is even more painful and worse than death. Kolodny remarks that the reward for successful reproduction is the promise that the Handmaid will never be sent off to Colonies. He further adds: *"Should she fail to produce a healthy child after three postings, her fate is sealed."* As Gilead does not recognise *"male sterility but only female infertility, the Handmaid who does not conceive is declared as Unwoman and banished"* (103). The chief concern of the males in a patriarchy is to consider women as the breeders of healthy offsprings. The roles of mother and wife are cleverly devised and defined by the authority to suck all individuality of women and reduce them to automatons like Offred and others (Kolodny 103). Offred says: *"We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled for all they care, like the shell of a nut"* (HT, p. 107). The dictates of state policy in Gilead *"relegate sex to a saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival"* (Malak 4). Here, Atwood also reiterates the commodification of women in the social structure. In addition, Handmaids' life is also dominated by boredom. They are supposed to be invisible. Just like other Handmaids, Offred is dressed in red robes and white wimples which symbolize fertility. Offred expresses her dislike at that dress code. She says:

"Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. I never looked good in red; it's not my colour." (HT, p. 18)

Besides being stripped of their identities, the Handmaids are also tattooed like cattle. The structure of eyes carved on to her ankle signifies that she is under constant observation. Offred remarks how tattoos are itched on her ankles as a sign of slavery: *"I can't avoid seeing now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It's supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource"* (p. 75). Thus, Offred sees herself no more than a slave, without an identity. She is not allowed to watch television. She is like *"a child being allowed up late with the grown-ups"* (p. 92). The laws of Gilead place Offred and other Handmaids on the lowest degree.

Offred often defies and resists these rules of Gilead. She once imagines stripping in front of guards, thus asserting herself and individuality. Her narration of her story reveals her resistance against the oppression and subordination of women, since women are not supposed to relate their experiences in their own words. According to Karen F. Stein, Offred's story telling "*violates the rules of Gilead, for Handmaids are supposed to be not only speechless but invisible as well*" (270-71).

Time and again, Offred fantasizes about her past when she had a husband and a daughter and was absolutely free to do anything. She had a name, an identity which is denied here. According to Salat,

"The futuristic vision that Atwood presents in this novel depicts the total appropriation of a woman's identity in the repressive Gilead society. Gender-roles are well defined and untransgressable. Men are the rulers and women their subjects [...] The Handmaids have no individual names. Each has the same name as the one before her. They have no distinctive identity. They have only a function." (74-75)

Like in her other narrative, Atwood makes Offred revolt against male hegemony on the one hand and cruelty of the State and social codes which expect a woman to be docile, modest and meek on the other. Because *The Handmaid's Tale* is a reconstruction from voice recordings of Offred on cassette tapes, Atwood explains the use of the tape recording as a device: "*I had to do it that way. The paper and pencil supply would have been quite limited. It also allowed for the discontinuous, episodic nature of the narrative*" (qtd. in Ingersoll: 26).

Stein argues that Atwood's "*handmaid is locked into silence; to tell her tale is to risk her life.*" She further adds that Offred's narrative itself is "*a criminal act, performed in secret and lost for many years,*" and by narrating the story of the repressive Empire of Gilead, "*[Offred] inscribes both her victimization and her resistance*" (269). To Stein, Offred asserts her individuality by narrating her story since women in the patriarchal Gilead are marginalized as they have often been the "*objects rather than the creators of narrative, their stories have often been untold.*" Women are denied any right to get the power of language and narrate their stories, as it is supposed to be the privilege of men only. Offred uses language as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings and bitter experiences, as well as a "*subversive weapon*" to tell her tale (269). Her tale addresses itself to the marginalization of women. She tells her tale with a sense of commitment to expose how the dignity and autonomy of women are negated by "*anarchic and repressive societies*" like the Republic of Gilead. She suggests the ways and means to "*surmount the barriers to woman's individuality and autonomy*" (Das 238). David S. Hogsette focuses on the "*self-liberating potential*" of storytelling in relation to Atwood's novels, claiming that "*even in a politically oppressive*

regime, women may be able to reclaim their identity, freedom, and sexuality through language and storytelling" (263-264). Yazdani and Royanian think that Offred uses language to fight oppression and injustice, as she *"comes to know of the importance of language for self-realization and eventually survival. Language makes her strong enough to survive in Gilead and to raise her voice against the subjugation of women in the patriarchal society"* (90).

Despite all the restrictions imposed upon the Handmaids, Offred's defiance is obvious all through. Unlike the other Handmaids who are supposed to forget their pasts and their names, she neither forgets her past nor her name. She makes fantasies and excursions into her *"distant past"* which often flesh out the narrative (*HT*, p. 94). She recalls vignettes of her life with her husband and their daughter, perhaps to convince herself of the objective reality of the former state of affairs before Gilead. As narrator, Offred often apologizes for her frequent flashbacks: *"You'll have to forgive me. I'm a refugee from the past, and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I've left or been forced to leave behind me"* (*HT*, p. 239).

A Handmaid is not supposed to make any intimate relationship with her commander. Yet, Offred defies and subverts this rule. For her, it is hard to accept her identity as a breeding vessel only. When she is called by the commander to his room, she is, undoubtedly, surprised. She does not let this opportunity go out of her hands. She knows that it is dangerous for her to go to the Commander's room as it is against the law:

"My presence here is illegal. It's forbidden for us to be alone with the commanders. We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favours are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no footholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices." (P. 146)

Here, Offred reckons the various roles imposed on a woman i.e; concubine, geisha and courtesan. Offred manipulates her relationship with the Commander. Now she is not just a Handmaid to the Commander, she is *"on different terms"* (*HT*, p. 171) with him now. Although she does not love the Commander, she still has come to a level when she feels.

"He's of interest to me, he occupies space, he is more than a shadow. And I for him. To him I'm no more merely a usable body. To him I'm not just a boat with no cargo, a chalice with no wine in it, and oven — to be crude — minus the bun. To him I am not merely empty."(*HT*, p. 172)

A Handmaid is not at all supposed to go to this extent with her commander. This is not all. The meeting serves many purposes for Offred. The Commander offers her to play the scrabble game which proves to be a turning point in Offred's life to regain her lost voice and lost self. The scrabble game helps her recover her stolen language as well. It is her first step to re-learn the language and rebuild her forgotten vocabulary. In this context, Hogsette points out that,

"Only by making a connection between the Gilead power structures and language, Offred uses her speech to construct a subjectivity that can enable her to serve as an agent for social and political change. She activity rebuilds her vocabulary and strengthens her command over language." (266-67)

Here Offred finds a great change in her life as she says, *"something has changed, now, tonight circumstances have altered"* (p.153). She realizes the power of words and language and decides to use this power to deconstruct and defy the ideologies of this patriarchal structure of Gilead. Gomez states that Offred realizes the power of language in debunking and abusing wielders of power:

"There is something powerful in the whispering of obscenity about those in power. There something delightful about it; it deflates them; reduce them to the common denominator where they can be dealt with." (89)

Gradually, Offred gains command over the language. She says:

"My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I'd once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world [...] things I'd read about once but had never seen. It was like trying to walk without crutches." (P. 164)

Now, she makes up her mind to write down her worst experience of Gilead in the form of a book. As she holds the pen to write, she feels that *"the pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains"* (p.196). In this regard Sturgess remarks that Offred wants to cross *"the demarcation lines from official silencing to the world of communication associated with the past"* (188). Marie Jonsson comments on the power of writing at the hands of Offred, saying: *"by telling her story she won power. To Offred the pen was also powerful and something she envied, since it was the tool for the powerfully written word"* (10).

When the commander brings Offred a special red dress to take her to Jezebel's, a hidden brothel which is situated outside Gilead, she is a bit hesitant initially but immediately after that she is very much excited and happy. She has not worn this type of dress before. This creates an opportunity to defy the rules of Gilead. She strongly wishes to assert her identity. She wears the dress, makes up her face and in the guise of a wife goes out of Gilead. She also wants to revolt against the concept of femininity in that regime:

"I've never worn anything remotely like this, so glittering and theatrical, and that's what it must be, an old theatre costume, or something from a vanished night club act [...] there is an enticement in this thing, it carries with it the childish allure of dressing up. And it would be so flaunting, such a sneer at the Aunts, so sinful, so free. Freedom, like everything else, is relative" (HT, p. 242).

She knows it is an act of transgression, but she wants to be free. She wants to revolt against the orders of Gilead. She knows that it is very risky to go outside as she might be put to death for this offence. Still she accepts the commander's proposal as she wants to assert her being. She deconstructs all the set norms which treat them nothing more than the objects of lust and desire. Offred thinks of the dress as the empowering, if only momentary escape from the 'Eye' of the system.

"I know without being told that what he's proposing is risky, for him but especially for me; but I want to go anyway. I want anything that breaks the monotony, subverts the perceived respectable order of things." (P. 243)

In the brothel, Offred comes across her friend Moira, who had made an attempt to flee from the Gilead and been recaptured. Moira tells of a resistance movement, the Underground Female road, which organizes escape routes out of the Empire. Moira is connected to the Handmaid's former student days and to her mother, a feminist who was deported to the colonies during the initial purges. Fragments of the past re-emerge. At this juncture, escape seems to be the only solution to Offred's dilemma as it is almost a necessity for most of Atwood's heroines. There is still a gleam of hope in her life which is the hope of meeting her family members someday which keeps her alive.

When Serena Joy, the lady of the house, shows Offred a photograph of her daughter, only then does Offred realize her loss of identity. She becomes aware of the fact that she is a victim in the hands of Gilead Regime, which has also deprived her of her identity. She points out, *"It has washed over me, washed me away, as if I am nothing more than a woman of sand, left by*

a careless child too near the water. I have been obliterated for her. I am only a shadow now [...] A shadow of a shadow, as dead mothers become. I am not there" (p. 240).

She compares herself to a heap of sand that has been washed away. She ultimately realizes that her existence is in great danger in Gilead. If she doesn't take any positive action now, she will be completely ruined. She thinks that she is not meant for the carnal pleasure of the male authorities of Gilead. She seems to be very keen to regain her lost identity. For the first time, a positive change in Offred's personality occurs. She decides to change herself from being a helpless victim to being "*a sly, subversive survivor.*" She associates herself with the underground May Day resistance group, that group of rebels against Gilead regime. She shows her courage to criticize and challenge the male authorities of Gilead Regime. Malak states that she condemns the Gilead regime for "*its intolerant, prescriptive set of values that projects a tunnel vision on reality and eliminates human volition*" (7). Malak further observes: "*Thus the victim, manipulated and coerced, is metamorphosed into a determined conniver who daringly violates the perverted canons of Gilead*" (9).

The final and conceivably the most significant way that Offred survives is by simply narrating her story to others. For Offred, the oral tale becomes her hope and a means of her survival. By narrating her story, Offred demonstrates her resistance and breaks the silence imposed upon her by the regime. It further establishes her own distinct identity. She realizes the significance of narrating her story because it keeps her alive. She gives herself a reason to live and, in narrating her tale, she immortalizes herself. She finally writes her traumatic experience in a book "Historical Notes." Thus, Offred achieves a new identity for herself and survives. She now moves to victim position four as discussed by Atwood in *Survival*. Gomez states:

"Offred approaches the creative aspect of position four in her oral reconstruction of her life and experiences. She thus recreates her own history as her story. This oral narration at first to herself and then into tapes serves several purposes. It validates her own existence, gives her a sense of control over her life [...] Narrating a story thus becomes an active strategy of acquiring female space for oneself and others in a patriarchal universe." (90)

Despite the various ways of physical abuse and torture that Gilead sought to obliterate Offred's identity, she manages to endure and perhaps triumphs. Although she is confiscated, brainwashed, deprived of her identity, and forced to endure such harsh treatment as institutionalized rapes, the protagonist combats all the obstacles successfully and is able to survive. She eventually attains the status of a creative non-victim because she realizes the pernicious effects that the Republic of Gilead has had on her and thus, ends up as rebel against the Gilead Regime. Howells writes that "*Stubborn survival continually subverts*

the Gilead Regime's claims to absolute authority, creating imaginative spaces within the system and finally the very means of Offred's escape from Gilead" (69).

Conclusion

Atwood played a significant role in shaping the Canadian national and literary identity. The Canadian literary tradition is so victim oriented that Atwood stated throughout *Survival* largely because of Canada's political status as a colony. A Canadian woman writer, Atwood is concerned with the issue of victimization and survival as condition of both the Canadian experience and female experience. She sees a similarity between the status of Canada and woman. In almost all her fiction, she explores the Canadian national consciousness and the female psyche. She associates the Canadian quest for a national identity with the feminist search for a distinctive identity. Hence the narrative of her women characters became the narratives of the nation. Atwood deconstructs the structures of power and domination in gender relationships. Her texts revolve around the quest for self-assertion on the part of her female protagonists who are threatened and subjugated by patriarchal power structures. As she equates the powerless status of women with that of Canada, her narratives significantly become the narrative of Canada as a powerless victim. Since women are portrayed as colonized entities in the patriarchal discourse, the depiction of women in Atwood's texts becomes a portrayal of Canada as a colony in the context of Americanization.

Atwood's protagonists are women in typical situations who are cruelly victimized in innumerable ways; yet they refuse to accept and do whatever in their power to fight victimization and marginalization. In order to survive, the women need to connect to their pasts and other people in their endeavour to become a less divided, whole self. They attempted as much as they could to defy the social constraints that almost deformed their power. They arrived—to different degrees—at knowledge of their power and thus were poised to achieve some measure of psychological awareness and personal transformation. The heroine in *Surfacing* struggled with her inability as she perceived herself as completely isolated and alienated from people around her. This tragic and pitiable situation had split her reality, her memory, and her personality. Yet, unlike Offred, she could achieve survival by revolting against both physical and spiritual powers represented in western civilization through giving up language, the language which colonialism imposed on her/ Canada in order to wipe and uproot her identity.

Atwood's female protagonists survive because they are able to change and be transformed in order to fit in to their environments. These transformations allow the women to find a language suitable for them, thus enabling them to rediscover their voice. They survive in a specific way. To be deemed a survivor, one must not simply continue living, as

might be the accepted definition of the term. In fact, Atwood's women survive on many different levels. As Atwood described in her thematic guide to Canadian literature, survival in order to survive from being victimized, one must become a creative non-victim. They each thwarted off a sort of metaphoric death of self to re-emerge as stronger, more integrated selves.

One of the most triumphant ways of these women to survive is through finding their voice in writing, just as Atwood has. By writing her experiences in a book, Offred was able to leave something by which to be remembered; something permanent. She could achieve a new identity for herself. So, just as Atwood exists through her own writing, her protagonists survive through theirs. They embarked upon many journeys and were able to reach the destiny "*position four: To be a creative non-victim.*" The operative word being "*creative,*" for it was only through creativity that they were able to find their voices and true survival. Fortunately for Atwood's protagonists, the rediscovery of their voice enabled their survival. In *Surfacing*, the anonymous heroine undertook a self-explorative journey to regain her sense of identity. Atwood expressed the female's power in terms of her ability to give voice and power to her life and feelings so as to acquire an emotional response. *Surfacing* was also a meditation upon love and the wounds men and women inflicted upon each other. This was presented through the abortion experienced by the heroine and her decision to conceive another child as part of her healing process. Thus Atwood translated the trauma of abortion into an act of self-exploration through which the heroine has gone to recover and affirm her identity. The actual journey was the surface meaning while the deep meaning lied in the journey of self-discovery and assertion of the heroine's individual identity.

Atwood's strategy also consists of creating female protagonists who, each in her own way, find the means to seize the metaphorical pen, the writer's creative tool, and conquer their fear of being chased. The protagonist of *Surfacing* used pictures to connect to her past. Offred found her voice and captured the ability to speak out by narrating her sordid tale.

Atwood projected an image of the U.S. as an exploitative, imperialistic and expansionist culture and reflected the Canadian paranoia about the imminent U.S. takeover of Canadian culture. In *Surfacing*, Atwood was concerned with the country's national predicament as a political victim. She attempted to show what being a victim in the colonial culture felt like. She put her anguish into words by saying that the United States as an imperial master was the cause of Canada's victimization. The novel voiced Atwood's border relationship with the United States of Canadian consciousness—the threat of Americansim to Canada's national identity. Of course, the novel depicted a slice of Canadian reality. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Republic of Gilead symbolized the ultimate form of imperialistic and hegemonising structures and represented the most overt expression of Atwood's antipathy for the domineering American culture. Again the female protagonist strived to reconcile

conflicting identities: her socially proscribed identity and her authentic identity. Offred represented women's exploitation in a consumer society where woman's body was treated as an object, a tool and consumable item. Offred managed to subvert and escape that hegemonic regime successfully, thus achieving survival and freedom. As in *Surfacing*, Atwood focused on the problems of gender inequality and pitfalls of patriarchal system for women's oppression. It is, therefore, not only through the trope of survival that Atwood reads Canadian literature and interprets Canadian national identity, but also through the trope of victimization. Her private, female and individual experience transcends the universal and the global.

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