Literary Responses
to Bewilderment in Western Society

A Study of Margaret Atwood's Novels

By

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Textual Emendations

Page	Line	Amendment
Ack.1	4	*For* their *read* them
Ack.2	8	*For* Brissendon *read* Brissenden
		For Meyer *read* Mares
		For Russel *read* Russell
	9	*For* Shellick *read* Sellick
3	3	*For* HowFell *read* Howells
6	13	*For* crisis *read* crises
8	18	*For* causes *read* cause
16	5	*For* to *read* for
20	25	*For* Feminist approach *read* A feminist approach
25	27	*For* into *read* in
26	1	*For* remaining *read* which remains
	28	*For* being *read* is
27	28	*For* in the promise *read* on the promises
28	17	*Delete* representing
29	3	*For* By all means *read* In every respect
30	27	*For* self-boundary *read* self-boundaries
31	25	*For* at the expenses of *read* at the expense of
34	18	*For* at the expenses of *read* at the expense of
41	1	*For* no read not
	12	*For* to read of
	16	*For* on *read* in terms of
45	8	*Delete* the case of
53	18	*For* Late-capitalism *read* late-capitalism
54	3	*For* be carried *read* come about
	6	*For* against *read* in terms of
57	6	*For* indulgence of *read* but to indulge their
	13	*For* cloth colours *read* coloured clothing
59	2	*For* ceremonious *read* ritual
	3	*For* an act of political requirement for general Handmaids *read* an act where the Handmaids' attendance is politically required
	14	*For* pooled *read* arrested
	14	*For* Colony *read* colonies
	23	*For* in the margin read on the margin
60	19	*For* pooled *read* directed
	21	*For* an executive of certain state power *read* who holds a high executive position in the state
	27	*For* by its miniature *read* inn miniature
61	4	*For* gender confrontation *read* polarisation
	20	*Delete* her
63	19	*Delete* at
64	7-8	*For* adapt *read* to adapt

DECLARATION

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference had been made in the text.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to apply Fredric Jameson's theoretic construct of the political unconscious in a discussion of Atwood's novels, particularly her characterisation in *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Cat's Eye*.

Jameson's concept of social reification, a central concept to his theoretical construction, refers to the process in which social structure entirely alienates human individuals and the modes of experiencing life for individuals. Jameson advocates a linkage of Marxism and psychoanalysis, since he considers individual subjects as alienated by the social system and governed by psychological laws at the same time. The core of Jameson's understanding of modern subjectivity is that social alienation is internalised and is shown through psychological disturbances. Society thus becomes the ultimate source of the individual's anxiety.

Atwood's characterisation interestingly reflects Jameson's stance. Her protagonists are characterised with the bewilderment, frustration and depression, which prevail in the contemporary West. Indeed they are the profoundly disturbed subjects as their inner world directly corresponds with social reification.

Introduction: the Self Political

Up to 1991, along with her poetry, short stories and literary criticism, Margaret Atwood has published seven novels. They are *The Edible Woman* (1969); *Surfacing* (1972); *Lady Oracle* (1975); *Life Before Man* (1979); *Bodily Harm* (1981); *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and her latest novel to date *Cat's Eye* (1989). This thesis undertakes a study of three of Margaret Atwood's novels, namely, *The Edible Woman*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye*, although there are brief references to her other novels. In brief, I wish to discuss her major characters as individuals subjected to social reification while governed by psychological rules. Their demonstration of psychological symptoms reveals the internalised social reification.

Atwood's works attract both scholarly attention and popular interest all over the world. Approaches to Atwood's works vary extensively but criticism, generally speaking, concentrates mainly on three issues: Canadian nationalism, feminism and the Gothic tradition and folklore elements in Atwood's works.

The first category of Atwood's critics sees the victim-survival theme as central in Atwood's works. Hence Atwood's most controversial book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature,* is useful for its argument that Canadian literature reveals survival as both a political and geographical necessity for Canadians. Critics examine the double colonisation suffered by Canadians in respect of their domination by two mother countries as well as by the United States. They associate Canadian nationality with features of the natural landscape. The significant

influence of Northrop Frye upon Atwood in this respect is frequently stressed and, is believed to have led to those recurrent metaphorical images in Atwood's works, such as water, snow, ice, forests and coldness. Atwood's attitude towards the ambivalence of Canadians in their relations to American imperialism and European colonialism becomes the core of the investigation. However, there are different opinions about Atwood's tendency to simplify the themes of Canadian literature to the point where everything is reduced to a simple scheme -- that of "victim and survivor". Some critics hold that Atwood's works are only partial reflections of the Canadian reality.

Feminist approaches consider basically how Atwood's women confront gender issues in family and society. The fact that all Atwood's protagonists are women and have problematic relationships with their partners underpins feminist argument that Atwood's work illustrates women's oppression under patriarchy, viewing their bleak lives as a result of male manipulation since women's fate depends on masculinist assumptions in society at large. Among the issues raised by feminist readers are: the mother and daughter relationship, the demythologising or remythologising of the kinship between women, and the relation of women to the natural world. Especially important is the healing effect of the natural "green" world upon women. The quest for self-knowledge in Atwood's women is seen to originate in an intuitive understanding which links them to nature.

Feminist critics also focus on a connection between feminism and nationalism in Atwood's works. A number of them have examined the affinities between the situation of women and that of Canada itself and have shown how such an understanding informs Atwood's works. Coral Ann Howells, for instance, in her book *Private and Fictional Words:*

Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s, establishes how analogy reveals a problematic relation between women and Canada as the Canadian landscape is often perceived as a hostile mother. HowFell illustrates that women and Canada share a history of oppression and a common ideology in their resistance to power politics. Hence Atwood's works are considered by many feminist critics as to present the ambiguous relation of Canadian women to the power politics of both patriarchy and imperialism.

Genre criticism highlights the use of Gothic elements and allusions to Gothic tales as well as popular folklore in Atwood's works, though it does not exclude discussions of nationalism and/or feminism. Atwood's fictions are seen in a way to reflect the argument that Gothic elements foreground female fears and reveal how plots arise out of the fear of victimisation. Dominant topics for this group of critics are the use of mirror tricks, shamanism, and the idea of transformation. Many praise Atwood's refashioning of traditional literary genres and popular folklore stories. Some claim Atwoodian heroines revitalise the myth of woman as an archetype. For instance, Marian MacAlpin is regarded by many as a replication of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Lady Oracle* is seen as another version of the woman as victim-victor in "Bluebeard".

Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood edited by Judith McCombs is a very comprehensive chronological collection of representative criticism on Atwood. The collection gathers articles from the appearance of *Circle Game* up to the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*. In her introduction McCombs suggests a division of Atwood's literary work into three stages. The first begins with the publication of *Circle Game*, and is characterised by a Gothic, "Drowned World". The second starts with the 1978 *Two-Headed Poems* and the 1979 *Life Before Man* and ends with the 1986

Canadian Selected Poems II. This second period is seen by McCombs as a more realistic and more political stage than the first because it develops relations with a wider "Open World" as opposed to the previously enclosed world of myth in Atwood's earlier works. The third stage is yet to be completed. However, I would suggest that with the publication of *Cat's Eye,* which represents a development from the second period, Atwood is leaning toward a more comprehensive connection between the inner and outer worlds.

In addition to the mainstream critics of Atwood's work, other critical positions have derived from the theories of Marxism, modernism, postmodernism, Jungianism, Laingianism, and psychoanalysis. The last approach is particularly influential and useful to an understanding of Atwood's characterisation. Two books which, in this respect, are particularly useful, are those of Bouson and Rubenstein. In *The Empathic Reader: A Study of the Narcissistic Characters and the Drama of the Self* by J. Brooks Bouson, there is a whole chapter on *Lady Oracle.* The book is intended in general to illustrate Atwood's works by way of "the psychology of the self" as advocated by Heinz Kohut, who analyses individual subjects as "tragic men" or "tragic women" within the grip of a harsh social reality. Hence Bouson looks at literary characters as narcissistic subjects incessantly seeking empathy from others, with whom they have troubled relationships. Bouson analyses Joan Foster, the protagonist in *Lady Oracle,* through a series of such "troubled" relationships to show how Joan Foster's achievements as a writer have deepened the cracks in a fractured sense of self. Atwood has, as far as Bouson is concerned, lured "us into a strange world in and beyond the looking glass: the multiple, mirrored, decertainized world of the narcissistic character" (168). Bouson later examines *The Edible Woman* in a

similar manner and sees Marian MacAlpin "a uniquely female variation on the familiar patterns of the narcissistic malady that psychoanalysts like Heinz Kohut see as the predominant psychological illness of our time" (*An* 230).

The other book which adopts a psychoanalytic approach in commenting on Atwood's work that I find useful is *Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture, Fiction* by Roberta Rubenstein. Atwood is one of the six contemporary women writers discussed in the book. Rubenstein's central concern is to reveal that there is a dialectic relationship between inner and outer reality and that social organisation and culture are the result of innumerable mediations of various boundaries between the individual and the collective. To Rubenstein, the link between Atwood's characters and their home country lies in the correspondence between physical and psychological boundaries. The marginality of Canada as a border country has a definite connection with the split self of Atwoodian protagonists. Rubenstein examines all the major Atwoodian characters up to those in *The Handmaid's Tale* to illustrate her thesis and to suggest that what Atwood has created so far is an embodiment of the Canadian collective psyche. That Atwood's characters can be regarded as metaphors of the collective Canadian psyche returns us to the issue of victimisation and survival, though Rubenstein has given it greater depth.

However, Atwood indeed concentrates more on individual psychology than on an overall comprehensive depiction of a realistic world. Although the growth of her characters certainly swings between the inner and outer worlds, they are obsessed with their daily life and routine, and with anxieties over their immediate relationships. They hardly involve themselves in any significant social events or grouped activities of any sorts. But the depiction of their inner world and their

personal life convey a very clear message that society is fundamentally in conflict with the individual's aims. As early as 1978 in his book *Here and Now*, John Moss noticed Atwood's tendency to reveal political messages by means of an individual's personal inner experience. He commented that "for Atwood above all is a social critic, although her medium is what might be called psychological realism" (*The Canadian Novel* Vol.1 p9). What Moss terms psychological realism is Atwood's use of her characters' feelings, perception and thoughts as a reflection of social reality at large. The reader is supposed to follow the emotional patterns and thoughts of the protagonists in order to look at the world through their perspective.

The adoption of psychological realism enables Atwood to reflect both social reality and the individual's inner being. Atwood constructs her plots and characters through a series of inner crisis, which she depicts in such details and narrative power that her characters all appear "psychic". For most of her characters, there is an inescapable bleakness in life, as they constantly find themselves at odds with social reality at large. Being in conflict with society becomes their experience of life. Hence, in order to understand them, the reader needs to understand the particular social structure[1]. In my view, a better understanding of Atwood's protagonists needs an analysis of their inner complexity in relation to the social system. For this purpose, I find Fredric Jameson's writing the most appropriate and insightful.

In his book *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson brilliantly bridges Marxism and psychoanalysis, and his work provides a theoretical basis for my study of Atwood's characterisation. However, I will use many quotations from Dowling's *Introduction to The Political Unconscious*, as his exposition makes Jameson's ideas more accessible.

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[1]. This point is especially relevant to readers from developing countries, as their different social background may lead them to misread the message.

Central to my study is the notion of reification. This important notion in Jameson's doctrine has two particular aspects. Initially he uses reification to refer to "the total transformation of the world into a sphere where relations among rational or conscious beings altogether cease and there are left only relations among things" (Dowling 26). "Along with the connotation of a world of 'thingness', then, 'reification' implies a world from which the human is being eliminated altogether" (*ibid* 26). Hence, reification means the process in which social structure entirely alienates human individuals.

The other aspect of reification is its being the experience of the individual in addition to its being an economic and political process. Jameson suggests we "think about what reification might mean as experienced so to speak from within -- that is, not as an underlying economic process but as a mode of experiencing the world" (*ibid* 27). As "a mode of experiencing the world", reification becomes a way of life, which explains the threat and distress individuals associate with their life in Western society, which has comparative material affluence compared to, for instance, China or any other developing countries.

Especially important for my study is the idea of the decentering of the subject, which takes place after the "emergence of the ego or centered subject" -- a corollary of the concept of "reification" as Jameson argues. He illustrates three basic changes in social relationship for this emergence. It begins with the dissolution of the old organic or hierarchical social groups; and advances with the universal commodification of the labour-power of individuals and their confrontation as equivalent units within the framework of the market. It concludes with the anomie of those now free and isolated individual subjects to which the protective development of a monadic armature alone comes as something of a compensation (*PU*

154). In other words, what Jameson says is that the diminishing of family or other social groups as mediator between individuals and society renders individuals as separate "entities" in relation to society. Being so, the individuals are prepared as commodities for the free-market, where they compete with each other to sell their labour-power, including their intellectual ability. In the process of such overwhelming commodification, the individual subjects could only retreat inwardly and cultivate the sense of "ego".

However, this isolated "ego" is very vulnerable. Quite like the particles known to quantum physics, individuals appear to be separate "entities" yet each is divided inwardly in a close detachment to each other. Dowling clarifies this notion by calling it "interior fragmentation". According to Jameson, ever since individuals were "ushered in by capitalism", they fell into the category of "alienated or estranged individuality" accompanied by "an *interior* fragmentation, a process through which the senses become estranged from one another and begin to function autonomously" (Dowling 25). In other words, Jameson sees that the conditions of social reality that pertain to late capitalism causes self division. The psychosis of individuals is directly connected with the social reality under capitalism in which they reside.

Hence Jameson disputes the "timelessness" of "the whole current philosophical critique of the subject, as it emerges from Lacan, Freud, and Nietzsche, and is developed in post-structuralism" (*PU* 124). Jameson regards them as historically specific to "the experience of the subject in consumer or late monopoly capitalism: an experience which is evidently able to accommodate a far greater sense of psychic dispersal, fragmentation, drops in 'niveau', fantasy and projective dimensions,

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hallucinogenic sensations, and temporal discontinuities than the Victorians, say, were willing to acknowledge" (*ibid* 124 - 125).

In this way Jameson continues to argue that psychoanalytic theory is designed to map "the experience of the decentring subject" (*ibid* 125). Therefore, instead of being the study of the "universal human nature", psychoanalysis is historically specific, and "the system of family relations on which much of Freud's theory depends (the Oedipus complex, childhood truama, etc.) is not itself timeless or eternal" but "inseparable from the workings of the capitalist system" (Dowling 31). Like Marxism itself, psychoanalysis is the product of history and its relevance is confined to its historical context. Without the family system and the possibility of the entire reification of an "autonomous" individual under a free-market structure, the interior fragmentation of the individual would not be primal or dominant. In consequence Jameson points out, "the forms of human consciousness and the mechanisms of human psychology are not timeless and everywhere essentially the same, but rather situation-specific and historically produced" (*PU* 152).

However, Jameson develops his concept of the "political unconscious" from Freud's notion of the unconscious. The concept of political unconscious refers to "the collective denial or repression of underlying historical contradictions by human societies" (Dowling 114). Like the unconscious of the individual in a Freudian context, the political unconscious is similarly associated with "repression" on a collective level. Although repression has been central to both psychoanalysis and Marxism, Jameson's concept of the political unconscious reveals a further significance in so far as repression is not only a function of History but also a Necessity both to the oppressors and the oppressed. It is necessary to the oppressed as an aspect of the need for survival. In fact Jameson

shares his view of repression with Freud since subjects must defer and repress their desires (whether sexual or political) to conform to the collective. Repression from within is fundamental when it comes to understanding the relation of the historical and social worlds to the individual subject. It is also essential to the confusion of self value for the individual. "Conceived in this sense", Jameson concludes "History is what hurts, it is what refuses to desire ..." (*ibid* 102). Therefore, the individual has no other choice but to be placed into conflict with History.

Jameson's essential focus on the estrangement of the individual is particularly relevant to the understanding of contemporary subjectivity under capitalism, although his concept of political unconscious is more complex than is outlined in the discussion above. Jameson calls contemporary West "a monopoly late capitalism", within which reification is specially intensified. As a result of this intensification, individuals feel more threatened as the mode of market economy leaves only the "thingness" among individuals. Reification brings an identity crisis into the capitalist world. Dowling summarises this in the following way: "Only toward the end of that story, when the enormous power of capitalism to break human life up into ever more estranged and isolated units has begun to be felt in its full force, when all the forms of collective unity have been systematically undermined and human life shivers within the lonely monad of each isolated consciousness, does 'individual identity' as such become a primary category within thought" (Dowling 92). Indeed, a crisis of identity is a common feature of life in literature of the West, because reification threatens the complete isolation of the individual. The importance given to the "I", and to identity and individual experience, can be seen as an effort to counteract the reification of history, or an effort to "deny" history. In fact, "separation or

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individuality *at the level of consciousness itself* is a symptom of estrangement from the life of the collectivity" (Dowling 115).

In the light of Jameson's analysis of individuality and subjectivity, I believe that the conditions of Western society[2] promotes a profound identity crisis in its residents, for the social system generates contradictory senses of self value. The free market system on the one hand encourages the individual to attain the importance of being "free", "autonomous" or "independent". The free market needs individuals to be free, detached and isolated so that they can be manipulated by the "choices" given, while believing themselves free. On the other hand, capitalism devalues humanity and reduces human values to commodity values or "thingness". Western culture traditionally stresses the importance of human individuality and "the very value of selfhood ... as coherent, unified, rational" (Hutcheon *CP* 144). Yet it inspires individuals to, on the one side, develop the concept of individual importance and the desire to achieve a unitary self while it condemns them. On the other, they have to compete in the market place and to acquire a commercial worth. Under the illusion that a real, knowable, unified self is achievable and should be achieved, individuals engage themselves in a quest for selfhood in the hope of patching up the fractures that arise in their actual confrontation with society. Given the condition that such societies have no other accepted values (with the loss of religion and other changes in society), the cultivation of individualism serves as a compensation for the actual loss of individual power. However, since the individual is first and foremost a commodity to the detriment of his/her humanity, a quest for selfhood or a desire to confirm self-identity is doomed to failure.

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[2]. By contemporary Western social system I refer to the capitalist system as adopted by most developed countries after World War II, such as Australia, Britain, Canada, or the United States, though I am aware that the system has its variations in different countries.

However one views the problem, society is the ultimate cause of individual anxiety, and individuals are perpetually threatened and alienated. In this way, individuals are constantly confused and lost in the conflict of values.

Atwood's characterisation interestingly reflects Jameson's theoretic perspective in many ways. The connection between the internal being of her characters and social reality is so close and obvious that their reaction and responses to social interactions are mostly psychological. As social beings they are inevitably subjected to social reification, whereas as isolated individuals, they frequently retreat to their inner realm and are extremely vulnerable to psychological laws.

The issue of reification undoubtedly is the key to a better understanding of Atwood's characters. Social reification, as illustrated by Jameson, is both a process of history and a way of living under capitalism. Atwood's characters are not only victims of reification but also conscious of their victimisation. Their life is "experiencing reification" in every sense. Repression from which they suffer is exerted from both society and from within themselves. This, in turn, invokes profound psychological disturbances, as there is no alternative outlet for the repressed. In this sense, their psychological symptoms are the result of internalised social reification.

This serves at least as a partial answer to the question of why life is so bleak for Atwood's middle-class educated women. Four years ago, as a Chinese woman new to the West, I could not understand the crisis of Atwood's women, who, compared with the majority of the Chinese women, seemed to have been given far more freedom -- physically, materially and mentally. Yet, contrary to expectation, they are far more miserable. The Chinese "Marxists" used to criticise phenomena of this

kind as "bourgeois decadence", as they saw the identity crisis in the West as "mawkish emotion" or "sighing with grief over imaginary misfortune". From the Chinese protestant Marxist points of view, material affluence produces "superficial sentimentality" destructive to the advancement of society.

Basically a social critic, Atwood plots her novels to illustrate the process and the experience of social reification. The bleakest of modern Western life is shown through isolation, confusion and purposelessness as suffered by her protagonists. They demonstrate that an identity crisis is so deep and splits the personality so severely that they are confused about their knowledge of selfhood and goals of life. Corresponding to threat and danger in terms of social reification, especially concerned with their ego, Atwood's women seem obsessed with the problematics of identity. They engage themselves in series flights in an attempt to escape unpleasant situations. This leaves little room for them to enjoy the independence and freedom, -- denied to women living in other cultures and other political structures.

Many critics categorise Atwood's fictions under the genre of *Bildungsroman,* the "novel dealing with one person's early life and development" (OED). The *Bildungsroman,* in other words, stories of quest for selfhood, implies the growth of the protagonist through his/her acquisition and confirmation of self identity. But Atwood's fictions comply with the specification of the *Bildungsroman* in quite different sense. Her protagonists never desire to grow up and never seem to have done so. Rather than searching for identity, they are in a constant flight from identities imposed on them from society. Success in career terms rarely grants a feeling of self-fulfilment, but often accompanies an identity

crisis, for the heroine invariably senses a threat to self within the new roles she has to play.

The "quests" of Atwood's women are indeed flights. Starting from *The Edible Woman*, Atwood's protagonists are constantly on the run. Marian MacAlpin, the protagonist, establishes no fulfilling relationships and needs to run away from almost every situation she gets into. Both private and public spheres pose threats to her sense of self with false identities and in turn produces her psychological disorder. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist's search for her father is characterised by her escape firstly from the city, then from her friends and her partner. Not even in possession of a name, she has severe problems of her identity. She is neither a mother, since her child was aborted, nor a daughter, since her parents all passed away, nor a sister, since her brother is drowned. Furthermore, she is not a wife, since she is not married. Absolutely on the margins of human society, she escapes into Nature, where she places herself among animals and plants.

Atwood's third novel, *Lady Oracle*, can be read as an escape manual. Joan Foster, the protagonist, in the process of constant escape from one place to another, adopts aliases to make up new identities for herself. She even forges her own death in order to be born anew. There is so much confusion in the ways in which she sees herself and she is seen that her life becomes a succession of agonies, anxieties, mysteries, which exacerbate her ambivalence to herself evident in horrifying self images. In the meantime writing becomes her means of living, though her success in it gives her more anxiety than joy.

Despair and anxiety invariably haunt Atwood's protagonists. The desire to run away from the enclosures of life becomes even stronger in *Life Before Man* and *Bodily Harm*. Life is suffocating for every major

character in *Life Before Man*. The three of them are in a strangling relationship and none of them enjoys it and yet is unable to break the bonds. This impossibility intensifies the pain and each of them in turn demonstrates bizarre psychological symptoms. Their psychological depth is also revealed through their estranged reminiscence of childhood. Each of them is born into a family to which they are very much an alien and their unhappy childhood is shown to have shaped their present unfulfilling life. The protagonist in *Bodily Harm* manages to flee the Western society, in which she is more than "bodily" harmed, to search for "paradise", or in other words, sense of security. Yet this turns out to be even more disastrous and she ends up in a Caribbean jail. Her discontent tends to be repressed inwardly, which in time causes psychological disturbances.

The absurdities of contemporary Western society are carried into extremes in Atwood's dystopian fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale*. This is a fantasy showing how reification deminishes humanity and renders individuals to commodities. The novel points to realities in the present that bear witness to the existence of a military dictatorship, absolute patriarchal control, the theological abuse of human rights and environmental disasters. In the process, individuals experience reification to its worst effect. As "caged animals", individual subjects in confinement desperately look for outlets and resemble research subjects for psychologists.

Cat's Eye's general plotting returns to deal with "normal" circumstances, but the narrative is a further development of Atwood's "psychological realism". This time Atwood investigates the "deeper structure" of society through the linguistic sphere and shows how individual subjects respond to social reification. Indoctrination and

enforcement of social ideology are seen as implemented through language by means of daily activities. The protagonist is profoundly disturbed by the way language fractures reality and threatens her sense of the self as a unitary being. The protagonist's growth and disturbances give evidence to Jameson's comment on the relation between social reality and the inner being of the individual subject. Indeed, the individual's desire "now reified, is driven back inside the monad, where it assumes the status of some merely psychological experience, private feeling, or relativized value" (Jameson *PU* 160).

Atwood's plotting and characterisation all show, in Jameson's terms, that commodification in late capitalism has wrought a decisive development in the construction of the subject "by the constitution of the latter into a closed monad, henceforth governed by the laws of 'psychology'" (*ibid* 160). Hence, these characters of obsessive abnormal psychological symptoms are the necessary consequence of such social reality and in turn their internal turmoil constitutes a powerful reflection of that society. To conclude, Atwood's novels testify Jameson's hypothesis that social reality is the ultimate source of anxiety of individuals and the historical changes in social relationships dictate that they are vulnerable psychological beings.

The parallel between Atwood's literary writing and Jameson's theoretical construct also runs through Jameson's interpretation of the relation between literature and ideology. Jameson defines ideology as "the way men live their relation to their real conditions of existence" (Dowling 82-83), a definition that concurs with that of Althusser. Against this definition, Jameson conceives of "literature as being ideological ... as expressing the way men live their relation to their real conditions of existence" (*ibid* 83). Conceived in this light, Atwood's novels open up

different dimensions for the reader to comprehend Western society and
the bewilderment of its residents.

The Edible Person in *The Edible Woman*

The Edible Woman, Atwood's first published novel, is about alienation of the individual in essential spheres of contemporary Western urban life. Its protagonist, Marian MacAlpin, is a recent university graduate working for "Seymour Surveys", a marketing research company. Her job, as she describes it herself, is "manipulating words" in order to tempt or satisfy the consumers. She shares an apartment with Ainsley, another educated young woman, who majors in psychology and chooses to be guided by its tenets. At the beginning, Marian has an established relationship with her boy-friend Peter, a promising young lawyer, who soon proposes marriage and becomes her fiancé, though Marian becomes increasingly nervous about the impending marriage. By chance, she gets to know another young man called Duncan, a typical postgraduate in English, who cultivates an attitude of non-conformist eccentricity. Duncan is instrumental in Marian's decision to leave Peter, but is not ultimately supportive of her. Accordingly, the end of the book sees Marian finish one round of the "circle game" and come back to where she started. The circle is so complete that she even needs to apply for a new job since her projected marriage has already deprived her of her original work.

Like Marian, her room-mate Ainsley also goes through several stages of development during which she pursues a goal of "feminine fulfilment" through maternity. Initially she is determined to become the mother of a son. In order to get pregnant, she cunningly seduces a man named Len. However, as her knowledge of children's psychological

development increases, she becomes obsessed with the idea of a Father-image, since she takes to believing that a father is indispensable to the normal growth of her son-to-be, as well as necessary to prevent the possibility of his becoming homosexual. Her ruthless manipulation of Len leads to their open confrontation at Peter's party, where by chance she meets Duncan's house-mate, Fish. Fish is willing to fulfil the role of the Father-image for Ainsley and they consequently get married. Atwood herself has commented on the plotting of this novel as such:

> In traditional comedy, boy meets girl, there are complications, the complications are resolved and the couple is united. In my book the couple is not united and the wrong couple gets married. The complications are resolved, but not in a way that reaffirms the social order. (Ingersoll 45)

Living in a world "we may call our Western-urban-capitalist-industrialised-materialist democracy" (Keith *Introducing* 15), Marian inevitably confronts severe self-division and serious psychological trauma, since her desire for an ultimate individuality as generated by the culture and social structure cannot be granted by the society in which she resides. She experiences alienation in almost every essential aspect of her existence: from the use of language to the food she takes, from her working environment to her private living section, from intimate relationships to even casual acquaintances, from her job to her pastimes. Marian therefore demonstrates extremely abnormal psychological symptoms and goes through changes from normal to abnormal and back to normal again. Her "psychosis" is actually her instinctive reaction to social reification, upon which the plot of the fiction develops. Marian is established as an individual subject conscious of the danger to selfhood implicit in daily living, a "decentering" subject indeed. Her inner disturbances, viewed in the light of Jamesonian discourse, correspond

with society at large. She is best understood as a "Jamesonian" subject governed by psychological laws operating in the social context.

Literary critics have reviewed *The Edible Woman* from various stances. The most frequent attitude is to regard the book as a social commentary, which Atwood herself authorises. It is true that *The Edible Woman* is "essentially realistic in its theme and in its acute attention to detail", because Atwood "caricatures the pretensions of our consumer society and the machinery that both supports and engenders its absurdities" (Rosenberg 96-97). Although critics do notice Marian's double role as a commodity, the product of her society's obsessive consumerism, and its unwitting advocate, many tend to focus on the victimisation in association with her biological, social and national identity. In her paper "Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*: Rebelling Against the System" collected in *Reflection and Reality*, Gayle Greene summarises these views by saying that *The Edible Woman* "offers an original combination of Dickensian social satire and black comedy with a Marxist feminist view of human relations under capitalism" (Mendez-Egle 95).

Understandably, *The Edible Woman* lends itself to feminist criticism, although Atwood herself claims to be ambivalent with regard to feminism and the book was written in a "pre-feminist" period. Feminist critics suggest how Marian's society narrows her (as well as her female peers') choices because she is a woman, even an educated woman. Atwood is seen to support the view that men are hunters and women are hunted, as she elaborates on the analogy between cameras and guns. Feminist approach pays special attention to a connection between Marian and Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. *The Edible Woman*, like *Alice in Wonderland*, is a book about female identity crisis, as suggested by one of the characters in

the book: "what we have here, if you only look at it closely, this is the little girl descending into the very suggestive rabbit burrow, becoming as it were pre-natal, trying to find her role, ... her role as a Woman" (194). Barbara Hill Rigney's book *Margaret Atwood* is particularly articulate about this detail.

Many feminist critics see Marian as in the position of a commodity for male consumers but she challenges the pressure from a society that insists she become the victim of dominant patriarchal values. Marian is frequently analysed as Peter's prey when she consciously identifies herself with the rabbit he destroys. She fears that her suitor is her predator and that he will hunt her down, although her opposition to Peter's "emotional cannibalism" (George Woodcock) is largely unconscious. Her identifying herself with food is interpreted as the reason why her body gradually rejects food, first meat, then vegetables, subsequently all food. Her appetite recovers only after she turns away from Peter.

Feminist critics also tend to view Marian as possessing complex inner activities. Barbara Hill Rigney shares with other critics the opinion that "she lives partly in a surreal world of the subconscious where the bizarre is an aspect of the logical, the physical world a manifestation of the psychological" (Rigney 20). J. Brooks Bouson's article, "The Anxiety of Being Influenced", is one of the instances whereas Marian's psychological disturbance is explored from stances of psychoanalysis. Bouson comments that "Atwood deploys her female protagonist, Marian MacAlpin, to expose and subvert the ideological constructs that have long defined and confined women." Bouson regards Marian's identity crisis as the result of her injury by a phallocentric culture in that Marian suffers from a deficient sense of self due to the social expectation that female roles are confined to mother and wife. Bouson's conclusion reads: "Atwood's

novel, ... does have a political agenda. It is also a work that invites a psychological reading" (Bouson 230).

Nevertheless, the connection between Atwood's "political agenda" and Marian's psychological disturbance in terms of social structure is not invariably recognised, nor is it sufficiently explored. At the beginning of his essay "Atwood's Adult Fairy Tale", T.D. Maclulich expresses his consideration of *The Edible Woman* as an "inner" or "mythic" narrative not about "events in the external world". He opposes the point of view that "*The Edible Woman* is primarily a satire on society". By employing Lévi-Strauss' approach to myth, he suggests a parallel structure between *The Edible Woman* and "The Gingerbread Man" as well as "The Little Red Cap". He focuses his discussion on the dichotomy between culture and nature central to Lévi-Strauss' argument. Since *The Edible Woman* is analogous in structure to these two fairy-tales and carries a similar message, it becomes "a parable illustrating the complex nature of society", which is that "everyone in society is 'food' for his fellow man; everyone is both eater and eaten" (McCombs 179-197).

Thus, although his revelation of the "deep structure" of the story should be much appreciated, Maclulich's conclusion that mutual victimisation remains the central issue of the book returns his criticism to the mainstream of social commentary he originally opposes. It seems to be self-contradictory as well as inadequate when Maclulich declares: "I suggest that the book's imagery and incidents offer considerable evidence for seeing the story as a working out of Marian's problems, not of society's madness" (181). It is true that Atwood is not trying to find a solution of social problems with *The Edible Woman* and the book sees Marian undertake no overtly political commission. As Davey says, the task of Atwood characters "is more to heal themselves than to heal society" (57).

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However, Marian's problems and society's madness should not be regarded as distantly separate issues, rather, the book illustrates the latter as the cause of the former.

As an individual in society, Marian's psychology is necessarily subjected to ideological influences for the apparent reason that "[t]he destination of all ideology is the subject (the individual in society) and it is the role of ideology to *construct people as subjects*" (Belsey 58) (her emphasis and parenthesis). The fact that Marian is so isolated in an urban environment indicates the seriousness of social alienation in Western countries. As Jameson points out, the fact that individuals are turned into isolated subjects and governed by the laws of psychology has been a necessary consequence of social development in West. Hence, "Marian's problems" can only be sufficiently analysed with regard to "society's madness". I would therefore suggest that *The Edible Woman* is essentially about the predatory nature of society, and that the author draws on her own understanding of psychoanalysis in depicting her protagonists. Marian's complex inner world is an internalisation of the external world. *The Edible Woman* possesses both psychological depth and sociological significance in that, to quote Maclulich's words, it is a "novel which seeks to portray inner psychological events" (McCombs 180) in order to make a convincing social commentary.

Frank Davey points out that some critics mistake Atwood's novels for Jungian novels when they are essentially Freudian ones because "her novels are the characters' fiction not the author's fiction" and they "root personal liberation in a cathartic acknowledgment of the subconscious" (67). Yet he undermines his own insight when he suggests that "in *The Edible Woman,* where the narrator's childhood and adolescence (and with them her relationship with her parents) are unmentioned, the

psychological perspective is shallow. We are given no understanding of the source of Marian's fears, projections and transferences" (67-68). It does not necessarily follow that omission of description of Marian's childhood and adolescence should entail failure in understanding the sources of Marian's present anxiety. The problem posed by Davey when seeing Atwood's novels as Freudian fictions embodying characters paradoxically inaccessible to Freudian psychoanalysis can be resolved by an analysis of Marian's plight within the context of Jameson's analysis.

The Edible Woman lends itself to psychoanalysis despite the paucity of facts about Marian's childhood and adolescence. The latter are no longer exclusive sources of an individual's anxiety, especially in late capitalism, since the family is also a historical phenomenon rather than an eternal form of human relationship. The function and impact of the family upon the individual is even now diminishing in Western society as the attachment among family members declines. In her lacking of both family and emotional ties Marian can be defined as a Jamesonian subject. In a way her case can only be sufficiently examined in relation to social discourses, in which the laws of psychology are linked directly to the operation of social structure. Contrary to Davey's statement that "we are given no understanding of the source of Marian's fears, projection and transference" (Davey 67) due to the omission of her childhood and adolescent experience, her psychological disturbances arise from different personal and social circumstances. Therefore, I would suggest, Marian represents an isolated and alienated subject who experiences self-division in consequence of social forces that permeate her life.

One of the prime ways in which the collective threatens the individual is the entire socialisation of inhabited space. In *The Edible Woman*, the narrative settings are distinctively impersonal and exclusively

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social. Marian's isolation and alienation are most obvious, since she lacks family ties and personal space. Deprived of a close family link, Marian exists in various social spaces that stand for different social relationships. She literally shares all her living spaces with others: she rents an apartment with Ainsley, who even once "invades" Marian's bedroom on a romantic escapade. She works in a big office with other women and the "office virgins", with one of whom she shares the telephone. She spends her spare time either in Peter's flat or in Duncan's apartment, or in less domestic settings, such as restaurants, museums, supermarkets, cinemas or the laundromat. She is now and again trapped by Peter in his car. Otherwise she must travel publicly on a bus. However, in the meanwhile, she suffers from isolation since she feels alien among the people she is with, except for Duncan, who nevertheless rejects her later. Though she appears to be in possession of herself, she does not possess true autonomy, not even a room of her own. The "public" nature of Marian's environment signals the social penetration into the personal sphere and therefore represents a threat as an ever present Other. Necessarily, she is constantly viewed in a social context. Like the imprisoned protagonist Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Marian is confined. Offred's confinement is, however, openly and directly forced upon her by a dictatorship, whereas Marian is imprisoned within the public sphere, defined by social relations. The difference between them lies in the supposition that Marian has the freedom Offred is denied, yet Marian's autonomy is subtly rather than openly limited by social determinants and discourse.

If we accept that there exist parallels between Marian and Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, the essential affinity should be their unwilling association of self with their inhabited spaces. They are both situated into unpredictable, uncontrollable and therefore threatening spaces. Neither

of them can find integration within that world remaining unknown to them. Generally speaking, space remains out of the control of those who dwell within it once it is shaped. It is able, as in *The Edible Woman* and *Alice in Wonderland*, to become an ideological instrument which acts to affect the psychology of those it controls. It is in this sense that both Marian and Alice find uncontrollable space threatening. Both of them fail to locate the spatial protection vital to self security. Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space* suggests a close connection between the sense of self and the inhabited space: "Images of the deepest personal experiences and memories derive from the values of inhabited space, of the non-I that protects the I" (38). Naturally, when the "non-I" assimilates and threatens the "I", the subject chooses to flee. Marian is as alien to her rented apartment and to her work place, Seymour Surveys, as Alice is to Wonderland. In time the spatial threat induces Marian's psychological trauma. Marian's sense of self is primarily endangered by her highly socialised living and working places, because they function like a discourse which provides her with a negative self-knowledge. Therefore Marian's constant efforts to maintain her individuality in various socialised spatial arrangements take the form of constant escapes. Marian escapes from one location to another, blinded/guided by her unconsciousness due to her need for personal spaces.

In the eyes of Atwoodian women, the modern city signifies technology, assimilation and alienation. It has ceased to be a neutral background and is an aspect of social organisation. Instead of offering shelter it exerts a negative pressure on the residents, for social spatial restriction on the individual is most evident in urban areas. Whereas the space that dominates Marian's activity remains exclusively urban, Marian experiences how the individual's need being removed from such an urban

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environment. This is perhaps the reason why in *Surfacing* (which was published after *The Edible Woman*) the female narrator flees from the city to nature in order to heal her endangered selfhood. Unlike the narrator in *Surfacing*, who reaches nature eventually, Marian is never able to do so and she experiences the city as a dreadful enclosure. Probably this explaines why Atwood regards *Surfacing* as a spiral and *The Edible Woman* as a circle (Ingersoll 45). The return to nature, in Atwood's novels, is a means to regain the self and to deepen self-knowledge. However, as the heroine in Atwood's first novel, Marian has yet to "surface" from drowning in an urban civilisation.

Restricted, Marian gropes in the maze of the city, from her flat to Peter's; from Seymour Surveys' two-story, dingy, gloomy, dark-bricked building to the entrapment of supermarkets; from Duncan's apartment of "orderly chaos" to the mummy's display room in the Royal Ontario Museum. The potential menace to her identity retained in those spaces accumulates and climaxes when one night Marian ends up with Duncan in a hotel where she is mistaken for a prostitute by the receptionist. The wider social structure may be seen in miniature in Marian's social context, against which Marian's roles in social interactions derive.

In many ways the apartment Marian shares with Ainsley is a significant narrative setting that defines Marian. The shabby, genteel, third-floor apartment with a shared bathroom indicates Marian's social and economic status. It is a dwelling appropriate to her situation as a young graduate working as a clerk. The shared space is a sign of the declining family system and a result of isolated individuals functioning separately. Also it helps to reveal the commercial nature of their friendship and relationship. Commercial need is the real tie that links the women living in the promise, therefore there is a constant intrusion of self

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boundaries. The lodgers want the living space but cannot bear the landlady, while the landlady needs the tenants for financial gain but resents their presence. The apartment is therefore a battleground on which each fights for personal autonomy against the intrusion of the others. It is one of the two exclusively female worlds in the novel representative of Atwood's female enclaves and their sub-culture. Ainsley and the landlady are the two major female foils who provide a negative contrast to Marian's rationality and innocence. As an external point of reference they help establish Marian's sense of "moral superiority" (12).

The apartment provides no privacy at all, since the landlady is "intrusive as the smells" that "invades even the tenant's unconscious and blocks her dream of escape" (Davey 105). The landlady controls her apartment as if it was sacrosanct, because she regards it as her motherly responsibility to protect the innocence of the "daughters" from potentially "immoral" influences. Her omnipresent, malicious surveillance makes the house a hostile place for the lodgers. The landlady's role is that of representing an institutionalised mother figure. She is nameless and is referred to as "the lady down below" throughout the fiction. As Marian says: "I can never remember her name, and neither can Ainsley; I suppose we have what they call a mental block about it" (13). Marian rightly feels that she loses her autonomy in the house and believes that she and Ainsley are constantly watched and observed. As she puts it: "It was true that [the landlady] had never specifically forbidden us to do anything -- that would be too crude a violation of her law of nuance -- but this only makes me feel I am actually forbidden to do everything" (15-16). Since it does not offer privacy and protection, the apartment consequently ceases to be a private lodging and resembles instead a social institution. In addition, Atwood's realism is parodic of traditional romance since the life

of the maidens is restricted by the landlady's scrutiny of their behaviour. Nevertheless "lovers" manage to meet by all means and romantic episodes still take place. By all means the apartment can only entail Marian's displacement and her loss of privacy.

Marian's deprivation of privacy is further emphasised through her relation with her flatmate Ainsley. Instead of generating a friendship on a common ground, the apartment maintains Marian and Ainsley in a state of mental detachment, or even hostility from one another, but physical intimacy. Each exists, in the eyes of the other, as an obstacle to self-realisation. When Marian is reluctant to help Ainsley hunt for a man to father her child, Ainsley frankly tells Marian: "You're a prude, Marian, and that's what's wrong with this whole society" (42). Although very much against Ainsley's campaign for "feminine fulfilment", Marian leaves her bedroom free for Ainsley to use. In consequence, Marian begins to "feel homeless and dispossessed" (121). Marian never goes out with Ainsley unless it is practically necessary, because neither of them enjoys the company of the other. Marian understands that they "don't have much in common except that lady down below" (16). Theirs is a typically unrewarding relationship, a linkage based on economic dependence.

The exchange of the expected roles between Ainsley and Marian amplifies the distorted psychology of individuals. Their unconventional choices should been seen as their restricted reactions towards social reification. The more conventional Marian comes to make the most radical and unconventional moves while the apparently radical Ainsley goes on to choose, in a traditional way, to become a mother and wife. However, though her choice resembles that of the landlady's, Ainsley courageously continues to challenge people in authority, such as the landlady herself, and to challenge male dominance whenever it is visible

in social conventions. She reads books on psychology, attends relevant lectures and follows their teaching, so that she comes to believe that the fulfilment of "the deepest femininity" requires child-bearing and that, indeed, she should have a son who will require a "Father image", if not a father. What Ainsley fails to recognise, perhaps, is that such doctrines are male-constructs and encourage a return to those "feminine" values. Hence while seeking personal freedom she is led back to a submission to male dominance by virtue of doctrines which appear gender free.

However, Ainsley's subjugation is not merely passive, because in no way is she a traditional woman. In order to "fulfil the deepest femininity" (41), Ainsley traps one man whom she regards as genetically appropriate to father her child, marries another on the basis of his willingness to provide a Father-image and chooses the most conventional place for her honeymoon -- Niagara Falls. Ainsley's movement towards conventionality (for the most up-to-date reasons) satirically counterpoints Marian's growing rejection of it. While Marian sensibly begins adult life with a permanent job and a "perfect fiancé", she soon rebels against the conditions each implies or lays down. Through the contrast between the two young women, Atwood shows how their chances of self-fulfilment are limited. Neither Marian nor Ainsley ever really enters the social system. Despite their developing consciousness, they merely complete a "Circle Game".

The juxtaposition of Marian and Ainsley with the landlady (as well as with the landlady's "innocent" daughter) is highly illustrative of the commercial nature of contemporary Western interpersonal relationships. As the family ties are weakening, individuals function as separate entities so that they are extremely conscious of self-boundary and self-interest. In order to protect the innocence of her "daughters", the landlady readily

interferes with the life of her tenants. Similarly, Marian betrays her potential innocence when she decides against informing Len, Ainsley's prey, of his impending danger, though she is careful to analyse the degree of her own self-interest in relation to the two. Ainsley can do anything in her self-interest without the least consideration for anybody else. The pursuit of personal interests to the detriment of that of the community is a common phenomenon in Western society. People endanger each other as a consequence of being the products of the social ideology of a market economy, regardless of whether the individual adopts an attitude of non-compromise or "laissez-faire" towards society or whether the quality of a particular interpersonal relation is that of intimacy or distance. As George Woodcock points out: "In one way at least, *The Edible Woman* is about the distance and defences between human beings. The distances and defences are necessary because fundamentally (in Miss Atwood's view) human beings are predatory" (Woodcock *CL* 98).

The all pervasive dominance of the social ideology of a market economy is illustrated by the arrangement of work space in Seymour Surveys. The company is so constructed as to constitute the identity of the workers: It is "layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors" (19), male executives and psychologists are upstairs, machines are downstairs and the women who act as mediators and deal with "human elements and the interviewers" (19) are placed in between. Such a structure provides an uneasy and ambivalent self-identity for Marian, because her position, above the machines, below the men, and among the office virgins, reflects only social assimilation at the expenses of individual identity.

Being thus situated, Marian naturally feels her individuality being eroded, as she is extremely reluctant to identify herself with her co-workers. In no way is she able to maintain a clear self-boundary, because

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she shares working space, telephone and lunchtime with them. She is discontent with Seymour Surveys and yet unable to alter the situation. "What, then, could I expect to turn into at Seymour Surveys? I couldn't become one of the men upstairs; I couldn't become a machine person" (20). While certainly Seymour Surveys is a fair reflection of the unfair situation of women in the Western patriarchal order, Marian's situation is also an example of how society shapes social hierarchy and moulds identities for the individual. In this regard, Linda Hutcheon points out, "Such loss of individuality as is implied in these images of merging with process is therefore perceived as dangerous to her (Marian's) personal sense of herself (and her self). This loss of a firm hold on identity because of one sort of mingling with the human or natural environment is at first interpreted by Marian as a threat" (Hutcheon *CP*141).

Both Marian's job and her psychological reaction to it can be explained by the Jamesonian notion of reification as social reality and as an experience for individuals. Marian's job of commercial writing is only what is available to her in the job market where she competes as a commodity, for "what else do you do with a B.A. these days?" (15). Yet in regard to standards of morality and intelligence, Marian perceives herself as superior to the position she holds but that is the utmost value she is able to realise in the market. This evaluation of herself makes it difficult for her to blend in with her peers and in turn deepens her crisis of inner division. Far from her personal interests, the job allows no personal development, let alone self-satisfaction. Though Marian knows she has to work to survive, for "we all have to eat" (55), she is conscious that her job ultimately demands her subordination to the system and must diminish her individuality. Once when she has to write a reply to a housewife's complaint about a housefly in the food, she says: "The main thing, I knew,

was to avoid calling the housefly by its real name" (28). She skilfully plays with words and knows how to play with word meanings so as to imply a suggestion or to suppress what should not be recognised. Despite her professional expertise she is not at ease with the ethical implications of commercial writing, which basically aims at distorting the truth about reality.

Marian's awareness of the alienating effect of her job gives rise to her psychological trauma when she is compelled to join the Pension Plan, even though she is young and not a permanent member of staff. However, when compared with Ainsley, who changes her jobs frequently, Marian's job at Seymour Surveys seems more permanent -- and therefore more disagreeable and more menacing. This is because, for Marian, Ainsley "had an idea of what she wanted to do next ... she could work in a shiny new air-conditioned office building", instead of a "dingy brick" one "with small windows" (17). Apparently, here again Marian associates the sense of self with the dimensions of space. In the eyes of Marian, unlike Ainsley's temporary positions, her more stable job leaves no space for her autonomy.

In addition to space, food is another element that significantly impairs Marian's perception of her self. Space, food, relationships and selfhood are intricately interwoven in *The Edible Woman*. The novel starts with Marian's breakfast in the flat, develops around a number of lunches and dinners in both "private" and public locations leading to Marian's complete loss of appetite, and then ends with her devouring the symbolically woman-shaped cake. Many critics have commented on Marian's anorexia in terms of her victimisation as a woman. For instance, B.H. Rigney holds that "Marian's anorexia is also clearly linked with her vision of herself as an animal, a prey to the male hunter in the person of

Peter. Her own victimisation is thus mirrored in the sacrificial deaths of animals for food" (Rigney *M A* 25). Therefore, critics claim, Marian's rejection of food is her refusal of the victim position. Her avoidance of food equals her avoidance of marriage, which reflects her efforts to maintain her self boundary. Rubenstein argues that consumption, especially food, has a particular relation to female selfhood, because women are essentially closer to food than men since they prepare food and in lactation their body is a source of food. In addition, Rubenstein continues to point out, the shape of women's body, which is vital to their marketing value, is determined by the quantity and quality of the food they consume. Food to women, then, is both the self and the other. Food can begin as "Other" but is mysteriously transformed into the "self" (79-80).

Marian's relationship with food is another aspect where she, as an individual, confronts society. In her experience, food functions in various ways to reinforce social ideology. The business of Seymour Surveys to stimulate consumerism with special commitment to increasing the consumption of food is no doubt at the expenses of consumers' health. Part of Marian's work involves enhancing the marketing of food for sale. Her direct involvement in the advertisements and interviews conducted for this purpose make her aware of the commercial and ideological manipulation of people as consumers. Marian sees that Cannibalism is fundamental to consumerism and capitalism and this directly contributes to her later anorexia. She is not so much concerned with being fashionably slim as she is conscious of the way in which food operates as a form of social coercion, which, she suspects, aims at the elimination of her entire individuality. Hence Marian's resistance to social reification develops from her rejection of food. Her anorexia is a symbolic indication

of her severe inner conflict, since her body unconsciously rejects food and yet is in need of food at the same time. With her anorexia she is faced with a serious life and death dilemma due to the complete split between mind and body, conscious and unconscious.

Marian's inner division is also revealed through her shifting perception of herself as subject and object, a change acknowledged by the shifts in the narrative voice. The novel starts in the first person for the first part of the book but changes to the third person when Marian's psychological turmoil develops to its climax in the lengthy second part. In the concluding third part it changes back to the first person after Marian assumes that she has sorted out her problems and is able to face herself again. The third part therefore begins with Marian confidently resuming her role as a subject by informing the reader: "Now that I was thinking of myself in the first person singular again ..." (278). By then, Marian has completed a circular movement in her effort to gain self unity. Ellen Peel recognises this but stresses the fact that the alternation of the narrative voice reflects "the female protagonists' uneasy view of themselves as both subject and object, both self and other", and she regards this change of narrative position an example of a special feminist aesthetic. Though she rightly points out that the narrative voice indicates the division of Marian into subject and object, she fails to identify the seriousness of Marian's dilemma, because starvation means death. Hence Peel mistakenly writes that Marian "shows more promise" and "the first and third person show a little less division and competition" (Peel 112).

The word "edible" in the title of the book also throws light on Marian's self perception as both subject and object. The ambivalence of the suffix "-ible" renders at least two possible connotations to the phrase "the edible woman", namely, the woman who is able to eat and the

woman who can be eaten. The "edible woman", of course, becomes an edible cake at the time when Marian survives her psychological crisis and becomes able to eat again. Her own devouring of the cake symbolises a resolution of her inner division and a capacity to resume her subjectivity which scares her hunter Peter away. It shows Marian realises she is not merely an object for his consumption, although she is vague about how she is going to exercise her resumed subjectivity.

Marian's perception of selfhood in regard to space and food is further explored at the office Christmas party of Seymour Surveys. In this exclusively female world (apart from Marian's shared apartment), Marian senses that food functions to assimilate and alienate women. She associates the images of women with those of various foods at the party and juxtaposes them with objects in "the space of the office", which are "viewed as outlines and surface only" (167). She feels that these women's existence is abstracted and that they are made of what they eat. She calls the party "the hen yard" to imply the distorted collective image of women, because women, like hens, are treated as brainless biological creatures who support the lives of others and whose maturity is defined in terms of sexual reproduction.

> Marian's mind grasped at the word "immature", turning it over like a curious pebble found on a beach. It suggested an unripe ear of corn, and other things of a vegetable or fruitlike nature. You were green and then you ripened: became mature. Dresses for the mature figure. In other words, fat. (166)

In her unconsciousness, Marian sees the women "as attached by stems at the tops of their heads to an invisible vine" (166). She compares the sociological concept of "immature" and "mature" with the biological process of development from "unripe" to "ripe". The latter is a euphemism for becoming "fat" (166). Meanwhile, her thinking betrays how she

unconsciously identifies herself with living creatures who exist to feed human beings and how she comes to reject her social role by not eating.

Although Marian detaches herself from the women around her as much as possible, she is afraid that "she [is] one of them, identical, merged with that other flesh" (167). No matter how reluctant she is to identify herself with her peers -- the "artificial blondes" (22) known as the office virgins -- Marian cannot help perceiving that her own self-image is equally distasteful. From the elderly women in the Seymour Surveys, she projects a doomed future.

> Somewhere in front of me a self was waiting, pre-formed, a self who had worked during innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward. A Pension. I foresaw a bleak room with a plug-in-electric heater... (21)

By accepting Peter's proposal of marriage and disclosing the news to her colleagues, Marian instinctively brings an end to her assimilation by Seymour Survey, even though her stance appears passive as she informs the reader that she is "lost to the Pension Plan forever" (168). Ironically this loss is her gain, for without its bondage, she may be in more control of her self-identity and her future.

The relationship between space, food and selfhood is reiterated throughout the novel. In the chapter immediately following the office Christmas party, the scene changes to the supermarket in which Marian shops for Christmas presents. Because of her experience of publicity and advertising at the Seymour (see more?) Surveys, she is aware that individual consumers are actually the targets of consumerism. (Coincidentally, in support of my argument, one of the American chain stores in Australia is in fact called Target, even though the intended message perhaps is that their lower prices are on target for consumers.) Being in the forefront of consumerism, supermarkets are traps for the consumers. The designs for marketing, including music, colours, patterns

or trade symbols, are part of the capitalist conspiracy which aims at the individual's purse through an invasion of their minds. Marian knows it is "dangerous to stay in the supermarket too long. One of these days it [will] get her" (175). On the other hand, the supermarket is also an example that shows how consumerism restricts consumer choice, through the limited availability of goods on the shelf, as Marian's shopping experiences prove. If it is true that "what you are is what you eat", what you eat is what is available in the supermarket, and what you desire to have is what you are programmed by advertising to receive and want, so, to a large extent, what you are is what society allows you to be.

Although throughout history eating has never been a sheer biological activity, in contemporary Western society it embodies even more overwhelming social significances. Cannibalism, consumerism and capitalism constitute a Trinity in the contemporary West. While Seymour Surveys' slogan is "after all we all have to eat" (55), what, where and with whom one person eats is crucial. This is why the narrative settings in *The Edible Woman* are mostly situated at dinner tables and parties. The major psychological traumas Marian undergoes all happen at times when she is preoccupied with food either in a restaurant or at a party. The office Christmas party effects her complete loss of appetite and Peter's engagement party eventually sends her to Duncan's bed. One of the office virgins, Lucy, has taken to having lunch at very expensive places in an effort to "catch" a partner. Xunzi, a Chinese philosopher, pointed out around 2000 years ago that "victuals are the God of people", meaning that food is a social priority in association with social stability. This reflection may help us to understand the contemporary ideological function of food in the West.

On the individual level, food and space can also be manipulated to influence people. They are two essential means by which Peter works on Marian to subsume her needs to his own. Eating is the most frequent and almost exclusive activity in which the couple engage. Their first encounter is at a party, where they have ice-cream together. Habitually they date at restaurants or go to Peter's flat where Marian has to cook. It is always Peter who decides what she may have. Through their frequent dining together when Peter orders food for her, he begins to dominate her life and gradually comes to make other decisions for her. He reinforces the sexist job practices of Seymour Surveys and demonstrates how patriarchy operates.

Peter's attempt to draw Marian into his world requires her unconditional conformity and subordination. This is also reflected through other roles that Peter adopts to dominate Marian. His law books are symbolically placed on top of the bookcase. He is the one to shoot a camera at Marian or a gun at any other prey. He is the driver of the car, and is free to recapture Marian when she runs away from him. He instigates events between himself and Marian. He proposes their marriage and decides the date of their wedding. He rings Marian up in her office and programs her spare time. His changeable moods are "too obvious to cause much difficulty" (61), yet Marian is supposed to adjust to them. Since their relationship develops in places of confinement where Marian's behaviour is restricted -- such as apartments and restaurant rooms, cars, and the bathroom most notably -- Peter's world threatens to engulf Marian totally. Unable to find the retreat she needs in their relationship, she fruitlessly seeks other outlets.

Marian's rejection of Peter and his society happens largely on an unconscious level and takes the form of psychological symptoms. During

the evening with Peter and Len in the restaurant, Marian attempts several dramatic flights for the reason she offers: "He was treating me as a stage-prop; silent but solid, a two-dimensional outline" (71). When she becomes aware of Len's interpretation of the situation as her own "self-effacing on purpose" (71), she becomes anxious and runs away to hide in order to protect her fragile ego. When she retreats to the toilet cubicle alone, she cannot help but compare herself with the toilet roll -- "helpless and white and furry, waiting passively for the end" (70). In acknowledging her identity with such a lowly but necessary object she betrays her awareness of being reduced to an object of use in her relation with Peter.

Marian is constantly torn between her own "sensible" submission to Peter and her unconscious resistance, which aggravates her psychological disturbance from other quarters of life. She presents herself as a "passive" victim, though this is disguised by her "sense". Peter in fact chooses Marian because she is "such a sensible girl" (89), one "who wouldn't try to take over his life" (61), as he implicitly tries to control her. As Peter endeavours to turn Marian into his desired conventional bride, Marian begins to perceive herself in distorted images, firstly in a spoon in a restaurant, secondly in the reflection of his eyes illuminated by a flare of lightning as a thunderstorm is approaching, and thirdly in the mirror before she leaves for Peter's engagement party. Since she alters her external image completely to suit the context of Peter's party, this last reflection shows that she has no identity outside her constantly changing roles. In her red dress she makes herself perfect prey for Peter to capture in a snap and in marriage. But it is also a warning to her that she is about to lose herself completely. Her fears grow until she is impelled to walk out on Peter and to seek a more ostensibly liberated relation with Duncan.

However, Marian is no Peter's passive victim and constantly betrays her pretended innocence. She is an active participant in the process of reification, illustrative of the "mutual predatory nature" of interpersonal relationships. From the beginning, Peter is seen as an object that Marian seeks for the sake of self-confirmation. Marian makes acquaintance with Peter, because "she want[s] something solid, clear: a man; she want[s] Peter in the room so that she could put her hand out and hold on to him to keep from being sucked down" (167). She initially finds Peter "good-looking" and takes him at "surface value". She clearly sees him cultivate an appearance of "arranged carelessness" (88) so that his "ordinariness" is raised to perfection. Though she is without "stirrings of proprietary instinct" in accepting Peter's proposal to marriage, she unconsciously realises a sense of triumph, when she acknowledges "this object, then, belong[s] to me" (90). Peter as a promising young lawyer shows hers is a wise choice in valuing financial security and social status in marriage. Nonetheless, as they take each other on the "surface value", they fail to develop a closeness that a loving relationship needs.

Marian and Peter's relation is characterised by its distance, lack of warmth and superficial value. This mental distance eradicates sentimentality for both. Objectification of self and other pervades contemporary Western thought concerning individuality as well as the individual's technique of survival. It characterises and modifies relationships between separated individuals and affords a combination of physical intimacy and emotional distance, as Langer illustrates in her paper "Class and Gender in Atwood's Works". It has become a spontaneous instinct for individuals to maintain their status as a "closed monad" (Jameson *PU* 160), because objectification of each other assures a mutual distance, even though such distances within relationships are

traumatic and disturbing. Therefore there should be little wonder that in many ways Marian and Peter are at best a couple with physical intimacy and mental detachment.

Marian ultimately leaves Peter because he is a slave to social convention and seeks to succeed only in terms of traditional social goals. That Marian sees him as an accomplished victim of social roles parallels her rejection of her own allotted roles as revealed by the office virgins -- "all artificial blondes". Both incidents show her resistance to the social packaging of the individual. Besides, she knows his complete conformity in turn demands hers -- that it might already have done so -- and she has no intention of consenting to this. It is true that Marian's appreciation of Peter stops at his surface value, which she associates with commercial naming and packaging. Since Peter's "elegant", "functional" presentation(180) conforms to the image of the successful man promoted in the media, he is undesirable to her. In the same way consumer goods are always veiled by promotional language and packaging, Peter works carefully on his jingles, which, according to Marian, are copied from some "outdoorsy male magazine" (60). Peter's handsome exterior effaces his personality entirely because he turns himself into a self-made consumer item.

Marian also doubts that Peter is the disgusting Underwear Man. She thinks they are similar, because both are unable to resist the power of mass-media and intend to follow suits. For the Underwear Man, "society flaunted these slender laughing rubberised women before his eyes, urging, practically forcing upon him their flexible blandishments, and then refused to supply him with any ... They owed it to him" (117). Peter's conformity to society is likewise complete: his imitation of the cigarette-ad image, his skilfulness in handling socialising situations -- "he

knew how to blend in and stand out at the same time" (114) and even his success as a lawyer in his legal career. He also acts in the manner of the Hollywood stereotype of the lover, as the bathtub scene suggests. Marian regards the notoriety of the Underwear Man as complementary to Peter's "perfection", because their defencelessness to consumerism indicates a shared mentality: "Maybe it was really Peter. Slipping out from his law office into the nearest phone booth ... His only way of striking back at a cruel world ..." (117-118). Peter's victimisation, nevertheless, according to Marian, is equivalent to his complete loss of self.

Nevertheless, Marian's rejection of Peter is accomplished not without temptation from Duncan, who appears to be the traditional rival to Peter. Initially conceived of as Peter's opposite, Duncan is essentially subversive of all social conventions. Duncan's and Peter's different social identities obviously reflect their widely divergent political attitudes. Generally speaking, law is a profession instrumental to the functioning of a social system. Lawyers therefore conventionally have guaranteed financial security as a reward from society. As a matter of fact, Peter rises professionally like a small balloon in his small business firm. Duncan, as a postgraduate in English, and as a critic of society, finds it hard to make himself socially acceptable. As he says, "Once you've gone this far you aren't fit for anything else. Something happens to your mind. You're overqualified, overspecialised, and everybody knows it" (97). Duncan in a sense chooses to reject social success, though it means material deprivation.

Unlike Peter, Duncan cultivates a physical unattractiveness so as to promote his disapproval of social conventions and confirm his self image as a social subversive. His shabby clothes seem to have become like his shell as an extension of his sense of self. He is grotesquely emaciated,

"cadaverously thin", "and the ribs [stick] out like those of an emaciated figure in a medieval woodcut" (48). He never cooks and when Trevor half-cooks an omelette he destroys it by throwing it, with the pan, at the mirror. He rarely indicates any appreciation of food, except when he joins Marian in devouring the metaphorical cake in a symbolic support of Marian's attempt to counteract society's consumerism and "cannibalism". His awareness of food as a weapon of assimilation by the social system is obvious, for it is he who informs Marian: "Now I see. It's one of those cannibal stories" (53). His anorexia, unlike Marian's, is chronic and conscious, and provides him with a phantom-like appearance. In the Royal Ontario Museum his fondness for the Egyptian mummy reveals his liking for an object that has a sense of correlation with himself, since he views it as a parody of his own anorexic being: an a-historical, fleshless, sexless body that exists without eating, therefore, void of consuming. His own aims are not so different, since starvation produces sexlessness and is an aspect of a quest for agelessness and immortality.

To counteract social reification in the very basics of life, Duncan develops eccentric hobbies so as to challenge social conventions. His indulgence in "ironing" is an apparent effort to "switch" conventional gender roles, as it makes him look unmanly and sexually ambiguous. His pleasure in watching the washing machine circling around indicates his appreciation of the "Circle Game", in which the end marks the beginning of another round. His acute understanding of Marian's quest for selfhood as an aspect of the "Circle Game" may well be derived from his contemplation of the laundromat. There is also his extraordinary love for mummies in the museum.

Duncan's cultivation of eccentricity amounts to his defiance of dominant Western values. He consciously separates himself from the

mainstream of Western society and tries to exert control over his own life. Oriental thinking serves in his case as an alternative. The different hobbies between Duncan and Peter reflect such a difference in their perspectives. Peter's hunting and photography entail a three-dimensional perception (characteristic, in my understanding, of a Western perspective, let alone the nature of destruction and technology) whereas Duncan's indicates but a two dimensional perspective (of an Oriental motif). Duncan is obsessed with a flat smooth surface, like the one level lay-out in the case of his ironing. He ensures his appearance is "like a starved budda burning incense to itself" (51). If Peter's hunting and photography are regarded as middle- or upper-class pastimes, by means of which Peter affirms his chosen identity, Duncan's eccentricity in associating petty-bourgeois sentimentality with a working-class life represents his insurrection against the accepted values of society. In a similar manner, his laundromat-watching -- his substitute for television -- is his wishful assertion of the self, as the washing machine allows him at least a partial control of the program (94).

In more than one sense, Duncan and Peter form a symmetrical pattern like the two contrasting poles of Yin and Yang. If Peter's interest in hunting and photography is conventionally a male incarnation, Duncan's ironing and laundromat watching is the embodiment of the traditional female. However, as far as the traditional Chinese symbols of Yin and Yang are concerned, the two elements stand for separation within uniformity. In other words, they are very similar to each other despite their difference, or rather, their difference lies in their similarity. Duncan, in terms of a fundamentally male egotism they both share, is very much similar to Peter. For both of them, the "I" is at the centre of their concern and their addiction to it is morally ambiguous. The image of the budda

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burning incense to itself is a revealing reflection of Duncan's self-worship and basic narcissism. Peter's egotism lies largely in his attempted assimilation of Marian to his needs. Apparently Duncan detaches himself from her in order that his ego should remain unimpaired. Marian's experience with Duncan is likewise his manipulation and reification of her. On almost all occasions with Marian, Duncan launches into a monologue and dominates their conversation. His linguistic self-assertion shows as much aggressiveness.

There is no essential difference in Duncan's and Peter's attitudes towards Marian and she is invariably manipulated and regarded as a definite "other" by them. Duncan informs Marian quite frankly that she is "just another substitute for the laundromat" (145). To him, Marian stands for a different discourse from the one provided by his fellow postgraduates in English, because the former confirms his narcissism while the latter undermine it. Peter and Duncan both find in Marian an empathic partner, who complements their ego. In a way, Marian's passivity helps both Peter and Duncan to enjoy their narcissism and to develop their egotism in self-absorption. To put it in her own words: "She let[s] herself sink" (145). Duncan is in effect no more of an escape than Peter, since he leads her into more suffocating enclosures and she remains outcast from everything: his apartment, the laundromat, the museum, the shabby hotel. In Duncan's apartment, Marian cannot even locate a seat for herself, since all the chairs are colour-coded to indicate who owns them. Duncan also leads Marian into the Ontario Museum which resembles a historical maze that embraces death and forbids love, where Duncan's attempt to kiss Marian is abruptly stopped by the security guard. Enclosure operates still to deconfirm the self in providing the foreign territory in which Marian feels herself to be an alien.

On the other hand, Duncan is Marian's alter ego. They understand not only each other's eccentricity but also unspecified wishes and unconsciousness. They both are at odds with society and share a common aim -- to stand out against cannibalism and consumerism. Both suffer from the confinement of social space and have no personal space to speak of. Both distinguish parental figures (especially mothers) which are institutionalised within their interactive and social relationships. Both of them assume a role of posterity towards the "parental" figures and believe parents "have to be protected from reality" (146), so that Duncan lies to his friends Fish and Trevor about Marian, whereas Marian deludes the landlady about Ainsley. Duncan reckons that his house-mate, "Trevor, subconsciously thinks he's his mother" and Duncan has been "running away from understudy mothers ever since [he] can remember, there's a whole herd of them behind [him] trying to catch up and rescue [him]..." (139-140). This is the same sentiment which Marian expresses with regard to the "lady down below" and her boss at work, Mrs Bogue, in addition to her own mother and her aunts. The often repeated monologue of both Marian and Duncan is that "I just have to get out of the apartment" (95), or "she could not possibly confront the apartment yet" (169), because "the others get too close" (95). They both see the laundromat as a secluded place in which to avoid the others. Alternatively, they run into each other in their common retreat to the cold and darkness of the park. They are both engaged professionally in writing and find themselves alienated from the activity. Duncan gets lost in his own thesis and suspects that "words are beginning to lose their meanings"(96). Marian is never at home with writing commercial stuff and feels that she is "tired, tired, tired of being a manipulator of words" (110). Though good at it, they are both

displeased with their writing. They both detest social reification of the individual and try their best to maintain a minimum of individuality.

Marian initially appears to meet Duncan accidentally in unexpected places, but coincidences suggest preferences and their meeting arises inevitably from a sense of shared ideology. Marian herself is aware of this and informs the reader that "She has been seeing Duncan frequently during the past three weeks, by collusion rather by coincidence, as formerly" (183). Duncan suggests that they even have fantasies of symbiosis (264). They share, exchange and participate in each other's fantasies. They even exist for the sake of each other's imagination. Marian fancies that Duncan needs her company in order to justify her impulsive escape from Peter. Duncan is the recipient of Marian's wishes for fulfilment and his refusal to respond to her desires pushes her back to reality. Duncan's rejection of Marian, however, is based on the realisation that his own fantasy of her has collapsed when she is no longer a myth to him. He tells her: "You aren't an escape any more, you're too real" (258). With Duncan's renunciation of the "real world", Marian ends her illusions and completes the "Circle Game".

The metaphor of "Circle Game" is very important in Atwood's novels and her poetry, which derives from the image of "caged animals". To quote her own words in the foreword to the 1982 Virago reprint:

> *The Edible Woman* ... and its more self-indulgent grotesqueries are perhaps attributable to the youth of the author, though I would prefer to think that they derive instead from the society by which she found herself surrounded.

Atwood holds that the individuals suffer from mental and material confinement due to the social structure and they have distorted mentalities like caged animals. This point is reinforced throughout Atwood's writing but in this case it is done through the observation and behaviour of Marian and Duncan.

Hence, Marian sees her co-workers in the commercial business environment as either "in turmoil or in a dead flat calm". Sometimes they run "around like a herd of armadillos at the zoo". She senses that "something had gone embarrassingly wrong in the West" (108-109). Duncan perceives those in the "intellectual" world are stuck "in a welter of commas and footnotes" (96) as frenzied armadillos going around in figure-eights -- "they say all caged animals get that way when they are caged, it's a form of psychosis" (95). They regard themselves as no exception: Marian identifies herself with dead animals as Peter's prey and thus develops a phobia about food. Duncan declares forthrightly: "I'm not human at all, I come from the underground" (141). His self-image emphasises this point: a bony creature in a grey furry dressing gown, eating pumpkin seeds meant for birds. What they share, indeed, is a tendency of being reduced to animals by society's mechanism. In short, the image of caged animals is Atwood's literary embodiment of modern subjectivity in the West.

The Edible Woman is preoccupied with the commodification of individuality. It is concerned with victimisation of no specific gender and reveals that the system poses a situation of mutual predatoriness among individuals. The situation of male characters is no better than that of their female counterparts. Young males in the book share similar frustration. Len's profound psychological disturbance can be traced back to Ainsley's ruthless seduction. Duncan, as well as his fellow postgraduate students, suffers from material insufficiency in a materially affluent society, and their intellectual work is doomed to remain on the floor of their living room. Although Duncan declares an open challenge to the social system, he achieves little in terms of his self-fulfilment. Neither does society undergoes much change. The same goes for Peter, or Len, or the

Underwear Man, although Peter, rejected by Marian, stands out as an "accomplished" victim of society.

The alienation of individuals and the reduction of their subjectivity in the process of social reification remain the focus of the book. The fact that Marian stands for no specifically gendered individual is reflected in Alan Dawe's introduction to the New Canadian Library edition:

> the book is about what anyone - male or female, with or without a college degree - can do to maintain his sanity and humanity in the plastic over-packaged world that exists in the second half of this century.

All characters in the book demonstrate "a form of psychosis", as everyone is invariably distorted and disturbed. Indeed the alienated individual is the disturbed subject. This irreversible reification of the individual by the social system is to be further examined in Atwood's later published fictions. A striking development of these themes is to be found in *Handmaid's Tale*, which is the focal point of the next chapter.

The Self in Confinement in *The Handmaid's Tale*

If *The Edible Woman* is Atwood's first fictional attempt to explore the Cannibalism of Western society in the depth of psychological trauma and distorted relationships of individuals, *The Handmaid's Tale*, the sixth novel published by Atwood, explores the same political agenda, though it is examined in broader aspects. The central theme of the fiction is clearly a development from that of Atwood's previous novels, which remains "the broad critique of consumer capitalism" (Langer 97). The book represents Atwood's continuous effort in revealing connections between the political, the psychological and the personal. Social alienation of the individual is presented in its extremes in the book.

Featuring also a depiction of a political dictatorship, Atwood's analysis is analogous to George Orwell's in *1984*, especially in that political fantasy is projected to sharpen the reader's knowledge of the present. The fiction conveys the message that the present Western social system which manipulates and denies individuality may degenerate into a disastrous dictatorship in which personal autonomy is completely demolished. Hence, instead of re-creating a realistic fiction of society as in her previous novels, Atwood constructs an imaginary future based on the system of the present United States but situated one step ahead in the reader's immediate future. The fiction, as Amin Malak points out, inherits a tradition of dystopia as it illustrates the possible absurdities towards which the West is moving. It calls for vigilance in order to prevent current Western indulgence

from turning into nightmares, though the writer aims at revealing the potential dangers within a built social system rather than emphasising horror in itself (Malak 9-16). The fictional discourse of *The Handmaid's Tale* is designed to magnify the basic conflict in the structure of the Western social system and its possible future ramification. Given that the social structure of Gilead is akin to contemporary Western society, Beryl Langer says: "In *The Handmaid's Tale,* Atwood constructs a future in which all of the disasters spelled out by William (a character in *Life Before Man,* who is an ecological engineer) have taken place" (Langer 82-83). Atwood affirms her perception of this potential disaster in her interview with Langer:

> I think people tend to think that how they're living is how eternity is going to be, that things will always be like that. In fact a very small shift in, for instance, gross national product, or mean temperature, or a stock market collapse in Japan, or in the middle east -- there are all kinds of things that aren't under your control whatsoever -- can have drastic effects on the way you're able to conduct your daily life. (Langer *IN* 131)

The Handmaid's Tale fictionalises Atwood's warning that Gilead is a possible human disaster deeply rooted in the West.

While critics generally accept *The Handmaid's Tale* as a political fiction, some regard its focus on women's slavery as an indication of the failure of the contemporary feminist movement. Atwood is interpreted as either "anti" or "pro" the present feminist tendency, given its central issue is that of "body politics". However, *The Handmaid's Tale* can be regarded as a perverse feminist Utopia, as Gilead in the eyes of Offred, its protagonist, is an ironic answer to her feminist mother's desire:

> Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies. (137)

Nevertheless, underneath the exposure of the extremely patriarchal structure of Gilead lies still, as I would argue, a revelation of the profound contradiction in the West, namely, the value of the individual is denied as a result of its compulsory acquisition of a market value. Such social commodification of the individual remains the basic concern of *The Handmaid's Tale.* Since women's biology as destiny is only one of the many aspects of social reification, Gilead foresees not only a failure of feminism, but also a necessary intensification of all conflicts in Western society. On the whole Gilead should be considered as signifying the possible failure of Western humanism, including humanist feminism. Undoubtedly women suffer the most in such political structures as Gilead's, but the oppression of one group is always at the expense of humanity of the whole society. I therefore regard Gilead as signifying the possible failure of Western humanism, including the feminist movement. My discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale* will focus on the relation between the individual subject, represented by Offred, and Gilead society, a derivation from the present phase of Late-capitalism. The conflict between Offred and the state of Gilead is a magnified version of that between the individual subject and the social system.

Atwood's narrative reflects the situation, as Jameson suggests when he tries to "coordinate a Marxist and a Freudian criticism" (Jameson *IT* 75), that "the human reality is fundamentally alienated in more than one way" (ibid 105). The ways of alienation interact and affect the being of the subject externally and internally. *The Handmaid's Tale* examines the condition in which the individual subject experiences the extremes of alienation in a number of different ways.

The Handmaid's Tale is situated in an imaginary theocratic and military state named the Republic of Gilead. It shows how such historical degeneration can be carried through political administration, especially in aspects of linguistic or ideological manipulation. The characters are caught by the state when social commodification reaches the stage that individuals are valued against their biological functions and political attitudes. They are hence tightly controlled under the military-household system in Gilead. The Gilead state indeed reflects Althusser's notion of ISAs[1], which, accepted in the light of the Lacanian conception that the subject is inescapably determined by language, provides an overall view of how social reification "constructs" the subject by means of language.

Rigney emphatically attributes the disasters in Gilead to the individual's "non-involvement" in social politics. She claims, "Not paying attention, in fact, is the great fault of Offred's entire society, and the price exacted is the loss of freedom" (Rigney 113). This may be correct; but blaming victims for what they fail to do does not necessarily provide a deterrent to the possibility of Gilead. On the other hand, the pre-Gileadean time has been, as the narrative indicates, well prepared for such an historical restitution. Economically, the electric banking system gives the regime a ready access to financial

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[1]. ISAs is a concept proposed by Althusser in his paper "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", which is collected in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. ISAs is the acronym of the Ideological State Apparatuses, which, in contrast to the Repressive State Apparatus, are composed of mainly educational institutions in society such as churches, schools, family, legal system, political parties, trade-union, media and cultural ventures. "All Ideological State Apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation" (Althusser 146). "The Repressive State Apparatus functions by 'violence', whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function 'by ideology'". He declares, "no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the Ideological State Apparatuses" (ibid 138-139). The ISAs all help to "represent and reproduce the myths and beliefs necessary to enable people to work within the existing social formation" (Belsey 58).

control. Ecologically, the country suffers from disastrous radioactive explosions. Politically, Western democracy has always been very fragile. Technically, the development of high computing technology lends a powerful hand to any form of dictatorship. The book foreshadows the day when the reduction of individual subjectivity to an economic value as dictated by the present capitalist system extends to a degree that individuality can be completely denied. Hence in a dictatorship, the self, though so much valued and appreciated at present in Western culture, even if only at a superficial level, can vanish irretrievably.

Gilead's severe ecological problems have caused a crisis of fertility among its already dwindling Caucasian people. The foremost priority for the state therefore is to raise its population, which can only be achieved through manipulating fertile women. The latter aim in turn calls for a tight control of its whole population, because such large-scale social reification cannot be carried out without a complete removal of every individual's autonomy. Therefore, in order to ensure that fertile women become biological tools of the state, the regime needs to control the sexuality of both men and women.

Like all dictatorships, the regime insists on a system of surveillance and hierarchy, separating people in terms of gender as well as class distinctions. Men are Commanders, Angels or soldiers, Guardians or chauffeurs. Secretly they can be Eyes. Women are Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, prostitutes or even Unwomen. Women can be True Believers who work for the system by telling on others in return for limited personal privileges. In any case, the sexuality of both male and female is strictly controlled, even though women's potential reproductive ability remains a constant

major target. There is no fundamental distinction between genders in the oppression of individuality by the state, so that each person, whether male or female, is placed into a certain group and undergoes surveillance from other people, although some men in power may have a degree of flexibility.

The target of a complete control of the population is realised through measures carefully designed and carried out by the "Sons of Jacob", a secret club in pre- and post-Gileadean time which motivates the subsequent political change. Initially, the regime cuts off women's capacity to work or own property, which turns them immediately into men's dependants. Then the state soon declares all second marriages and non-marital liaisons are adulterous and therefore immoral. Later even all non-church-contracted marriages become illegal. Therefore a large proportion of the population is pushed into an illegitimate status and is thus at the mercy of the government. Children of such couples are confiscated by the state and adopted by childless couples of the upper echelons. The fertile women are soon arrested and assigned to top officials as Handmaids for the purpose of reproduction. Handmaids are also transferable among the top officers to ensure a full exercise of their breeding ability. Infertile women, apart from the Wives of the Commanders, are allotted various duties. Aunts, or supervisors of Handmaids, are responsible for female discipline and re-education. Marthas are domestic servants in the Commanders' households. Econowives are working class women. Unwomen, or female dissidents critical of the government, are sent to the radioactively polluted islands to collect toxic debris. The situation for men looks better but they do not live without restrictions. In fact everyone, without exception, lives under certain political horror. As is

indicated in the "Historical Notes" at the end of the book, the Commander himself is purged in two years time. Gilead assigns or does not assign its men or military soldiers to female partners in accordance mainly with their social status. Commanders are entitled to have Handmaids as well as Wives to increase their chance of having children but not indulgence of sexuality. Angels and Guardians may not be able to have women at all.

In order to eliminate any individuality or even desires for it, the regime allocates uniforms to its population. Everyone is uniformed to work with assigned responsibilities under strict control of the government. The clothes the Gileadeans wear are colour-coded to dramatise their social roles. Gilead allows no cross-colour dressing because the social hierarchy is made visible in the system of cloth colours. Men all wear black military uniforms to indicate their power and control. Women are wrapped in gowns of different colours. Wives wear pale blue, and their daughters are dressed in white. Marthas wear drab green, while the Aunts are clothed in khaki. Unwomen are dressed in grey garments and Handmaids are in red. This is exactly "a society which one day took off its old clothing of individuality and diversity and assumed the uniformity of a theological dictatorship" (York 8). Gilead prepares to give the individual practically no choices because the regime wants to change the pre-Gilead system, which, as interpreted by Aunt Lydia who plays the role as Gilead's spokesperson, was "a society dying ... of too much choice" (35).

The revealing power of *The Handmaid's Tale* is demonstrated by the author's comprehensive examination of Western culture and the development of Western social systems. The magnified conflict

between the individual and society is shown as embedded in contemporary Western society and rooted in its history. Atwood ostensibly blames Christianity for its negative effects upon social evolution. This attitude of hers in particular informs the political construction of the Republic of Gilead. Hence Gilead's reactionary emphasis on theocracy and its exercise of Old Testament law to enslave women.

Lucy Freibert regards the plot of *The Handmaid's Tale* as establishing "the idea that long ago religio-political pressure to procreate set society on a collision course with personal autonomy, and will continue that oppression into the future" (McCombs 282). It is true that the Republic of Gilead recommends "a return to traditional values" (17), which is a system of exploitation based on its interpretation of biblical precedents. The fictional plot is structured in parallel to the handmaid stories in Genesis, as highlighted by the biblical epigraphs at the beginning of the book. The ritual of reproduction in Gilead is called "Ceremony", which is copied from the Old Testament. The Republic of Gilead serves as a future parody of the historical theocratic past, as it bears its reference to the city by the same name in the Bible: "Gilead is a city of them that work iniquity, and is polluted with blood"[2]. Likewise, the place where Handmaids are brain-washed and disciplined is called the "Rachel and Leah Centre" to indicate its role in shaping women into subservience to patriarchal power. "Jezebel", the place where high-ranking officials and foreign businessmen are entertained, is the name for Gilead's secret brothel. The loathsome Aunt Lydia is named after "a woman, who was not a Jewess by birth, but who became a proselyte to Judaism" (Jobes 1028). In

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2. Bible: Hosea 6 [8].

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a similar manner, Aunt Lydia becomes a proselyte instrumental to male authority. She is the conductor of the ceremonious "Salvaging", the execution of dissidents and an act of political requirement for general Handmaids, through which they may save or betray themselves when condemning others to death.

Offred is also the narrator of the fiction. She is a Handmaid. Her personal profile is an illustration of how the acceptance of governmental manipulation leads to a complete removal of personal autonomy and a denial of the self. "In the time before", she worked as a librarian, married with one daughter. At the beginning of the Gilead regime, she and Luke, her husband, attempt an escape which fails. She is immediately arrested and forced into being a Handmaid. Their daughter is taken away. Luke's whereabouts remain uncertain to the end of the book. Offred has a mother, who is a radical feminist and soon pooled by the regime and sent to work in the Colony, which are uninhabitable areas of heavy nuclear pollution. Being categorised as Unwoman, she is supposed to be exposed to nuclear pollution and to experience a living death there.

As a Handmaid, the narrator's real name is unknown and has been supplanted by her assigned name "Offred" to indicate that she is "offered" as a handmaid to Fred, who is the Commander of the Household where she belongs. Bereft of any personal attachments, her personality is entirely reduced. Existing in the margin in the Household, she is depersonalised into an item of housework. As she informs the reader: "I'm a household chore, one among many" (58). She merely needs to perform her biological functions in the Household.

By going through severe hardship and surviving a number of dramatically staged trials, Offred finally manages to flee the country and record her story on tapes. Towards the end of the 22nd century, these tapes are unearthed and become important materials for scholars of the Gileadean periods. The originally untitled transcription of the recorded narration is given the name *The Handmaid's Tale* by one of the scholars. Partly, the intention of the title is to set up a connection with Chaucer's work, with its "expectations of a medieval setting with lords and ladies, retainers and handmaids" (McCombs 281). Alternatively, the title is intended as a pun on the word "tail" to imply the sexual politics dealt with in the story. It also implies the loose narrative structure of the fiction which allows the narrator to digress into a reminiscence of her entire life.

Practically and ideologically, the Republic of Gilead maximises restriction in almost all aspects. Limitations on spatial movement are enforced right from the beginning and apply to almost everybody. Individuals are allocated living places according to their social status. In place of families, households are established to function as political units, since personal life is not supposed to exist. People are pooled to live in households according to their social roles. Each household is governed by a Commander, an executive of certain state power, who controls soldiers and guardians as well as his Wife in many ways. But the Wife has separate "household" duties, which can extend beyond the Commander's power, such as the "ceremony" and some others concerning general household maintenance. Daily supervision of Marthas and Handmaids is normally the Wife's responsibility. The power structure of Gilead is reflected by its miniature in the shape of the household, which is, as summarised by the 22nd century Gileadean

scholars in "Historical Notes", "although undoubtedly patriarchal in form, occasionally matriarchal in content, like some sectors of the social fabric that gave rise to it" (320). The system is built on the basis of gender confrontation. The households certainly give the government better control as they repeat the pattern of organisation in public life.

Offred lives in one such household. Her situation recalls the image of "caged animals" which appears in Atwood's previous novels. That the individuals are cornered like "caged animals" with no choices has been a central theme in Atwood's writing, deriving from her preoccupation with victimhood. In both *The Edible Woman* and *The Bodily Harm*, the image of "caged animals" is the narrative axis. Here its continued presence is embodied by Offred. Marian is encaged while being a "public figure". She longs for ways out of the system, since she feels suffocated by the lack of personal space. Rennie in *Bodily Harm* is trapped in a Caribbean jail when she escapes from the threat of her own society. Offred suffers the extreme of imprisonment as she is absolutely cut off from any personal attachment. She resembles very much a "caged animal" as a political victim in her physical and psychological conditions. Offred is very conscious of her being neither the Commander's mistress, nor his concubine, since the Handmaids exist simply "for breeding purposes" as "two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (146). Since Marthas are responsible for the housework she generates, including food preparation, washing and attending to her personal hygiene, Offred's only daily routine is the shopping so that "there is time to spare, ... the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing". In her void existence, she sees herself "washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig"

(79). Consequently, Offred keeps identifying herself with imprisoned animals, forever yearning for stimulation even at the risk of death: "caged rats who'd give themselves electric shocks for something to do" (79). The psychological pressure on Handmaids is enormous, since they are faced with the fundamental change of self perception as a result of the complete reduction of their personality. In fact some of them lose their sanity, like Janine, another Handmaid in the book. Janine is frequently humiliated at the Red Centre by Aunt Lydia when she has to admit that she is responsible for her own rape. Janine manages to get pregnant through a doctor but her baby is deformed and later removed from her. Janine eventually becomes psychotic.

The image of "caged animals" is automatically associated with the imposition of walls so that walls in the narrative become literal and symbolic restrictions on an individual's desires. The Wall in *The Handmaid's Tale* is an imposing and protruding element on the psyche of the individual. Once again, Atwood's imagination connects fantasy with historical reality. In this case, walls are erected for political segregation and tyrannical control of individuals. Literally and metaphorically, Offred is imprisoned within walls of political enforcement. Her movement is officially restricted to the minimum of space within her room and in some parts of the house, which is also located within the "Wall" where the execution of dissidents frequently takes place. To Offred, the Wall blocks both her physical and mental outlets:

> There are the red bricks, there are the searchlights, there's the barbed wire, there are the hooks. Somehow the Wall is even more forbidding when it's empty like this. When there's someone hanging on it at least you know the worst. But vacant, it is also potential, like a storm approaching. (174)

The Wall openly and visually stands for political horror.

The system of "Eyes" and spies generates invisible walls between Gileadeans so that individuals are isolated under psychological imprisonment. Everyone is watched and in turn watches, but Handmaids, as scarce and precious national resources, undergo the worst restrictions. Offred is required to take a partner when she does the daily shopping routine. She knows well the real reason for such partnership: "The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (29). Therefore, fear of betrayal dominates any personal interaction. The ever present surveillance is the manner in which the system works to enthral its people.

In addition, there is the ideological enclosure. The endlessly repeated indoctrination of the Gileadean ideology penetrates everyone's sanity. As Offred points out, "like other things now, thought must be rationed" (17). In other words, Gilead also aims at changing the individual's internal being. Aunt Lydia, in this respect, turns out to be a useful tool of the state for the imperative brain-washing. In order to "lick the Handmaids into shape" (124), Aunt Lydia preaches but two stories: conversion and torture. Firstly she attempts at the conversion of those women into passively accepting their roles as Handmaids. Hence she teaches the merits of obedience and propagates the Gileadean ideology through the use of slogans such as "From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs" (127). But Offred realises the purpose of those doctrines as "what we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies" (203-204). In short, Aunt Lydia injects spiritual anaesthesia into the Handmaids so that "they will accept their duties with willing hearts" (23).

Otherwise, Gilead is ready to punish any dissidents. Like any other totalitarian regime, horror is indispensable to its control. Physical torture is both a vision in the movie and a reality of life. Therefore, there are the "Salvagings", where Aunt Lydia plays the part of a prominent persecutor. As Aunt Lydia has every reason to argue, ideology can be internalised because "the Republic of Gilead knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (33). Consequently, this forces the Handmaids adapt to fascism: "Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure" (143). Walls certainly encircle not only Offred's body but also her mind. Although she never stops carrying her imagination beyond the Wall, her desire may have ceased to go "overboard". She gradually loses her desire to escape Gilead and becomes contented with her situation, especially after she attaches herself to Nick, her lover in Gilead and the Commander's chauffeur. There is a gradual but dramatic change in her reaction towards her walking partner Ofglen, a member of the underground organisation Mayday. The first time when they make eye contact, Offred feels "hope is rising in me, like a sap in a tree. Blood in a wound. We have made an opening" (179). But later she becomes apathetic, she no longer listens to Ofglen's instructions from Mayday. She admits "the fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom"183). The change in Offred proves Aunt Lydia successful, as Offred has passively accepted the Gilead reality.

However, that reality is an absolute reification of individuals, regardless of their gender difference. Because the state is set above the individual, there is no fundamental difference in its treatment of men and women. When women are reduced to "wombs on two legs", men are inevitably turned into "seed pots". Both men and women are

tightly controlled by the State and hence victims of current policy. Although in possession of the Handmaid, the Commander is not allowed any personal attachment to her. His role is to some extent also limited in the biological sphere, even if in Gilead reproduction may be a political and religious action. The Gilead system is not only a tyranny to the female body but also a desecration of humanity, when the roles of Nick and the doctors are all taken into consideration. When Nick is chosen by Serena Joy as a seeding substitute to the Commander, he has hardly any choice, even though it may not contradict his will to pair with Offred. The doctor, who offers himself to "save" the destinies of the Handmaids, desires to prove his biological capability. Gilead's extreme patriarchy ironically reduces its dominant value to that of the body. As a society based on absolute materialism, Gilead conveys Atwood's warning of the potential danger to both male and female members inclusively.

Entrapped by the walls as a Handmaid, Offred is defined by her body since it is her breeding ability that determines her role. Gilead reduces her personality to that of a mere "breeder". Her body is tattooed to signify her being an important and scarce national resource. Precisely the virtue of her bodily soundness makes Offred vulnerable, because her subservience to the nation reinforces her submission to the condition of the body and its biological functions. Thus, the body becomes ostensibly alien to the self as it functions against the self. "Once I owned my body, now my body owns me" summarises well Offred's mixed responses towards her own body:

> I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons, of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

> Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I am a cloud, congealed
> around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real
> than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping...(83-84)

The value of the Handmaids to the state, however, contrasts with their loss of individuality. Inevitably Offred confronts the split between the mind and the body. The double significance of her body as state property and the material basis of the self complicates her psychological situation, since such a contradiction brutally violates her knowledge and perception of the self.

Catherine Rainwater illuminating points out that "in Margaret Atwood's fiction the human body is often a war zone, a prairie of flesh ravaged by disputes between the self and a variety of invasive influences including disease, other people, and culture in general" (Mendez-Egle 14). Rainwater notices that Atwood's characters exhibit severe conflicts concerning their bodies, which she terms as a "low boundary" experience -- extreme feelings of psychological and physical vulnerability. In a sense, the body can be, and surely is in Offred's case, a hindrance to self-fulfilment. The fragmentation of the self confronted by Offred is different from the usual split within the physical and psychological boundaries of Atwood's protagonists. Take Joan Foster in *Lady Oracle* for example, her dilemma between the self and the body is different from that of Offred's. Though Joan Foster also fights over her body, she uses it as a weapon against her mother in regard to establishing her own identity. Her body is still within her control (through overeating or starvation) and therefore she is able to fight for self-assertion. In Offred's case, she is in effect expatriated from her own body because it becomes state property. The only exit from bodily bondage lies in her suicide, but elaborate steps are taken to prevent this from happening. Therefore Offred possesses a stronger sense of desperation due to her helplessness over the outside

penetration of her physical boundary. Offred, in a way, sacrifices her body to protect her self.

Handmaids experience the extremes of social reification as practiced in Gilead, although individuals have invariably lost their power over their own destiny. The personality of Handmaids is reduced to merely the bodily function of reproduction. Such inextricable connection between biology, destiny and politics consequently necessitates a hostility between the subject and the body, as the body denies the subjectivity. In a similar way to Marian of *The Edible Woman*, who becomes anorexic when confronted with social reification, Offred loses her appetite and refuses the food so necessary to reproduction. Offred consciously feels the separation between her self and her body:

> My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated ... I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely. (72)

Offred is also wishful of such expatriation from her own body. Frequently and consciously she tries to "steel herself" and to "pretend not to be present, not in the flesh" (169). The self detached from the body and yet unable to escape it shows the power of the state machine and the helplessness of the individual subject.

The gown the Handmaids wear also contributes to the separation of body and mind. The nun-like medieval garment with its ankle-length and loose folds is specially designed to endorse Gileadean ideology, which dictates a complete removal of personality. The gown hides the shape of the female body, covering both femininity and individuality. Apart from encasing the self, the dress also limits its bodily power. Negatively the red colour defines the Handmaids, as Offred herself is aware: "Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for

when it comes it means failure" (83). Offred's name thus acquires an alternative significance in that it implies the Handmaids are "off red" or "of red".

In fact all the steps taken are aimed at ideological indoctrination. The function of language upon the individual subject is another predominant aspect that Gilead attends to in its ideological reinforcement. Special efforts are made to ensure language functions supportively to its enthralling of the people. Gilead authority fully recognises the power of language in the ideological sphere. Since "it is language which offers the possibility of constructing a world of individuals and things" (Belsey 4), Gilead actually plans to create specific discourses to suit its totalitarianism. Its practice recalls Althusser's suggestion that

> ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' (Althusser 163)

The interpellation of ideology is largely performed in language, or rather, in various forms of the commonly accepted signifying system. Because "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 153) and it is "a system of representations (discourses, images, myths)" (Belsey 57), the ISAs are ultimately realised through language. In other words, manipulation of language is a means to manipulate people, when language carries out the ideological operation of "'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects" (Althusser 160).

Only from this stance is the significance of the treatment of language in *The Handmaid's Tale* to be fully understood. The role of language constitutes a very significant part of the fictional plot, because

the relation between the individual and the state central to the concern of the narrative is directly reflected in the usage of language. Textual politics becomes an important aspect of the power politics in Gilead, since the individual subject is directly targeted by the government in its indoctrination campaign. Making the language it inherits from the past work for its present politics soon emerges as Gilead's urgent task.

This task involves the removal of linguistic associations with the past as much as possible and the establishment of a desired discourse for Gilead authority. On the one hand, Gilead enhances the instrumental cooperation of language and exercises its ideological function. On the other, it suppresses language as a means of communication between individuals in order to isolate the individuals and cut off their links with the past. Censorship applies to every general usage of the language. "Context is all" (154), as the narrator informs the reader, so that who can speak what and when is prescribed by the state. Conversation, whereas it has to be absolutely necessary, is restricted within sanctioned lines. Discourses are predetermined on occasions when verbal communication cannot be avoided, as in the formulaic speech patterns the Handmaids use for greeting each other: "Blessed be the fruit", "May the Lord open", "Praise be" (29), etcetera. A selective vocabulary is enforced. Some words, like "sterile", become unutterable in the Gilead context, although marginally there is still room for organisations like "Mayday" or "Maidez" to play with words. Books are burned or stored away from public access. Reading and writing are banned for most people and becomes a privilege for the few in power. Thus, "Pen is Envy" (196), because access to language means power and a special privilege. All the restrictions and regulations concerning the use of

language serve to perpetuate the nature of the Gileadeans' roles as slaves to the state. In turn their roles perpetuated in the language reinforce the social structure.

Another linguistic exercise Gilead authority undertakes to consolidate its control is its endorsing of fresh titles and new names to people and places. It certainly recognises the power of naming and makes it one of the linguistic frontiers in its political campaign. Naming together with the dispenses of names as a means to constitute a desired political context is utilised to its full extent by the government of Gilead. Institutions are reorganised and renamed. Shops are relabelled with signs, symbolically reflecting the functions assigned by the authority. The narrator informs the reader: "lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops are too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone" (35).

Inclusively, the renaming also applies to the Gileadeans. Handmaids are named after the Commanders they are assigned to, such as Of-Fred, Of-Glen or Of-Warren. Ordinary people are addressed by their first names, which, under the circumstances, should also be prescriptions from the government. Their family names become non-existent since families are already demolished. Even the real identity of Offred's Commander is in doubt, which remains a difficulty for the 22nd-Century Gileadean scholars. Due to the situation that the individual's function is confined to prescribed social roles indicated with assigned uniforms, individual identity becomes irrelevant in Gilead. The individual's status as being one of a group invalidates personal identity so that it is possible for the regime to bring family names to dysfunction. Renaming proves to be very useful to

disconnect people's psychological and ideological association with the past. Hence Gilead accomplishes its mission of eradicating individuality.

Therefore, as Rubenstein points out, Offred is in a state of "disconnection with the past and the future", "of perpetual ambiguity, boundless and terrible" (Rubenstein 103). The name "Offred" signifies her humiliating role which contradicts and violates her self-esteem. In other words, the non-I has replaced the I. On the other hand, Offred counteracts such disconnection in a similar manner. She keeps the knowledge of her previous name, though it is forbidden in Gilead, "like something hidden, some treasure" that she "will go back to dig up" (94). Actually, Offred does not wait too long for this revelation. In her attempt at self-confirmation, she tells her "real" name to her lover, Nick. To Offred, her real name means the unique self she cherishes, although its concealment from the reader still implies the impossibility of true identity. The battles over the names show that language possesses the hegemony to intervene in the sense of the self. This, surely, is a Lacanian notion, which Jameson confirms by saying that "the result is a determination of the subject by language", because "the subject mediated by language is irremediably divided", "as that reality of the subject has been alienated and repressed through the very process by which, in receiving a name, it is transformed into a representation of itself" (*IT* 91-92).

The Wife of the Commander is a typical example of how the self can be alienated by the acquisition of different names or identities. The changes of her names step by step bring about her impersonality, even though she is a complete conformist.

> Serena Joy was never her real name, not even then. Her real name was
> Pam. I read that in a profile on her, in a news magazine, long after I'd

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> first watched her singing while my mother slept in on Sunday mornings.
> By that time she was worthy of a profile: *Time* or *Newsweek* it was, it
> must have been. She wasn't singing any more by then, she was making
> speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the
> home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this
> herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers
> as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all. (55)

The historical degeneration goes hand in hand with her personal transition, as her change of names indicates the stages where the past moves into the present. In her new role as the Commander's Wife, her pseudonym, Serena Joy, indicates not even her present ambiguous social function. The transformation of a woman from Pam to Serena Joy to the Commander's Wife, from performing, singing to making speeches, to the final stage of speechlessness, personifies the process of the societal alienation of the individual reflected in the linguistic sphere. As the Wife of the Commander, she herself has been transformed into the doctrines she propagates in the time before:

> She doesn't make speeches any more. She has become speechless. She
> stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she
> must be, now that she's been taken at her word. (56)

Her personal profile reveals how a sense of interiority is precluded by the need to conform to socially imposed roles. She is not, in effect, in command of the Handmaids, since the role of public supervisor, which is meant for the Aunts, is more important than domestic leadership for women. Aunt Lydia plays the more powerful part -- making speeches, while Serena Joy is left to practise personal control, if she can, in silence and in secret.

Language, power and personality are once again shown as interactive. Access to language can mean power to manipulate others. In turn, linguistic performance relates closely to the sense of self, although, in Offred's case, the "story" is a shattered one. She is quite frank about this. She says: "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" (279). The sense of fragmentation is as strong to the self as to the narrative. The subject is helplessly dominated by language in relation to the much desired self-confirmation and self-identity. Still Offred finds it necessary to give an account of her life. Exercising language helps Offred with her mental survival:

> ... I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or if you escape, in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place.... 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)

The self in construction experiences social alieanation in the very act of constructing self identity, since language is the inevitable medium which works on the basis of contrasting the self with the Other. This has been a dominate theme in the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* and recurs frequently in Atwood's works. Either as writers or visual artists, most of Atwood's heroines are at least partly in control of linguistic power so that they do not feel so powerless and are able to resist social reification to some extent. Unlike her peers, Offred is deprived of normal access to language. However, she does not give up. In her superficial conformity to authority, she grabs every chance to cling to the power of language. She certainly takes some advantage of the narrative to reveal her feelings and desires. She considers such practice a means to escape the hardship and a way to maintain her psychological balance. Certainly Offred's ability to utilise the language gives her hope for the future, even if it is only a self-created linguistic illusion. With the sense of self dismantled into fragments, Offred needs such illusions to console herself. She pulls the language to her side so as to construct or reconstruct a discourse of her

own in the hope that the sense of the self could be located within it. The construction of the narrative is thus a construction of the self. This is why she says:

> I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born. (76)

Indeed, the self is constructed in language. Hence Offred's conscious composition of her self by means of discourse, even though her text is her memory, which is again to be reconstructed. But the very act of self construction in language is a political reaction against the state. This again shows that textual politics is an aspect of power politics.

It is true that politics is practised as seriously in the linguistic sphere as in military and administrative matters in Gilead for both the authorities and for individuals. From the regime, as discussed earlier, there is the enforced indoctrination and the wishful alteration of the linguistic environment. Moreover, deprivation of the right to access language also means the reduction of the essential humanity. However, restrictions placed on access to language in turn push people to desire linguistic exercise, as its deprivation urges its necessity. Therefore, while the authorities control language in order to strengthen their political power and to reduce individual subjectivity, individuals on the other hand try to maintain a flexible use of language as much as they can as a means of survival. Gilead's power politics is thus focused on textuality, even though sexuality remains central to its political necessity.

This textual feature certainly characterises Offred's relationship with her Commander. Her position as slave to a house-master is repeatedly emphasised as it is formulated in language. Initially, there is her name and the tattoo on her foot as indications of her status.

Then there are the Biblical antecedents for her story and the Bible studies as justifications of the demand of the state. Also, the nights when Offred is summoned by the Commander to play "Scrabble", the game of words, reinforce this textual characteristic. Sitting at different ends of the same desk, the Handmaid and the Commander seem to share the same language, "a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world" (164). Hence there comes the opportunity for her to share the power and to have some temporary victory, as she is allowed into this forbidden domain. Nevertheless, his absolute authority is not to be challenged: while she has the knowledge he has the power. She knows how to spell and read and write, but he has the dictionary and the books and the pen. Quite ironically, he also expresses his approval of her by letting her have a read of an old *Vogue*.

The Commander's position, which enables him to determine the context of his interviews with Offred, is directly connected with his political power over his victim. Offred's predecessor in the room passes her the important message in Latin inscribed with fingernails on the cupboard: "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*", meaning "Don't let the bastards grind you down!" (197). But Offred does not understand this until her Commander deciphers it for her. His explanation significantly highlights the nature of this sexual/textual politics: his superiority is inscribed in a language to which she is traditionally denied access. The Gilead system continues to exclude women from knowledge: books are stored away as in the Commander's study. "No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden" (147). Language is incontrovertibly suppressed in support of the existing political oppression.

The Handmaid's Tale unveils the innocence of language in order to show the nature and form of social reification. The function of ISAs effected through language is a vital aspect of social alienation. This explains the importance of the textual politics displayed in Gilead. Language is often suppressed and abused for political purposes. Language by nature contains ideological elements that deny individuality, but the individual also relies on language for self-assertion and establishment in society. Such a dilemma is faced by everyone in society. This is why the Commander himself fails to escape the tyranny of language. Depriving other people of access to language means isolating himself in a non-communicative environment where he fails to find the chance of self-fulfilment. Powerful as he is, being a member of those in control, he is helpless as an individual. Desperate for empathic responses from the others, he even begs Offred to kiss him as if she "meant" it. Ironically, the Commanders themselves are politically dependent on such linguistic abuse: their Wives have to order "Soul Scroll" to help their husbands' careers.

As an imagined literary setting, Gilead exemplifies the possible extreme intensification of the basic contradiction in Western societies, that is, individuality and sense of the self are highly valued by individuals in the culture but denied by the capitalist system which demands their compulsory acquisition of a market value. This "monetary" alienation is paralleled by a linguistic alienation, which in turn penetrates the inner being the individual subjects and induces traumatic psychological symptoms. Hence, individuals experience reification and "the human reality is fundamentally alienated in more than one way" (Jameson *IT* 105).

However, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not meant to preview the future exclusively but to examine the present. Offred's frequent flashbacks are made part of her life in the past previous to the Gilead period, therefore becoming the reader's present. Her memories do not reveal many positive qualities of the reader's present but serve to show those negative elements that lead towards the Gileadean reality. Her childhood is rather unhappy with her single, radical feminist mother, who seems to be an incarnation of political ideas rather than a loving mother figure. Offred's experience with her mother takes a different pattern of political indoctrination. She remembers witnessing her mother with her feminist friends burning pornographic magazines (a form of censorship) and participating violent demonstrations. Her mother tells her "man is just a woman's strategy for other women" (130) and remains critical of her marriage. Offred's close girl friend Moira, whose friendship Offred enjoys more in the Red Centre and the brothel, is another radical feminist. Heroic and rebellious against both pre- and post-Gileadean societies, her political passion is yet doomed to failure. Janine, another woman Offred knows, is gang-raped and goes through an abortion in pre-Gilead time. Family is obviously diminishing. Offred's marriage, the only marriage mentioned in the fiction, seems to be problematic -- "We thought we had such problems. How were we to know we were happy?" (61).

There is certainly some truth in the comments on the pre-Gilead time made by the Commander:

> Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles bars, the indignity of high-school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. (231)

Although this can be no justification for the Gilead revision, those situations poited out by the Commander are social problems that need to be attended to in the contemporary West. The solution as designed by the "Sons of Jacob" is disastrous, but Gilead's totalitarianism is easily traced in the system represented by the United States. The commercialisation of individual subjects taken to excess inevitably speeds the loss of basic humanity, as may happen in Gilead.

The Introspective Self in *Cat's Eye*

Cat's Eye undertakes a further exploration of the interaction between society, language and selfhood. The novel marks Atwood's continual effort to comprehend the notion of selfhood in contemporary Western society. In *Cat's Eye* the concept of selfhood is viewed from various perspectives in relation to the functions of language, including language as the political and ideological instrument of the social system, the necessary communicative framework and the discourse for self perception. *Cat's Eye* exposes the impact these factors bring upon the notion of selfhood and shows that the self confronts language as an insoluble dilemma, since both the perception and the alienation of selfhood are realised through language. Especially in terms of language as the indispensable tool for narrative, *Cat's Eye* has indeed manifested the various qualities of language. The novel condemns the linguistic distortion of the subject but the narrative itself is an illustration of the power and indispensability of language, which demonstrates Atwood's continual effort to expose the polarities in language itself.

Language has always been an important theme in Atwood's fictions. It often plays a fundamental role in the plotting. Most of Atwood's protagonists take writing as their profession, they are obsessed with language and its possibilities for personal transformation. A typical example could be *Lady Oracle* , in which the protagonist writes to change her identities. However, it is with her most recent novels that Atwood becomes more and more critical of the political dimensions of language. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the functions of language are clearly differentiated

between communication and ideology. The Gilead authority suppress the former but promotes its ideological indoctrination. Gilead's linguistic exercises compose a large part of the narrative. Individuals are located in the extremes of political turmoil and thus vulnerably subjected to the distortion of dominant social ideology.

In *Cat's Eye*, the complexity, subtlety and political nature of language dominate the narrative flow and determine the characterisation of the protagonist. Elaine's growth is concomitant with her gradual understanding of the nature of language. In the process, she experiences the worst of agony, humiliation and isolation. If, as Sherrill Grace has suggested, Atwood writes about violent dualities, the polarity and tyranny of language is the most violent of all. Frank Davey also sees there are "two orders" of language and he differentiates the polarities between the genders:

> Certainly Margaret Atwood has created a difficult theoretical framework within which to write. If conventional language is a second-order language, rational, and male, and its alternative is aphoristic, "wordless", and gestural, then Atwood's choices are only to give up conventional language altogether, perhaps in favour of a kind of mime or one of the plastic arts, or to work subversively in the alien medium to combine it with her own. She has chosen the second, writing words which paradoxically affirm the silent and wordless. (54)

In her confusion about language, Elaine perhaps is the most silent and wordless of all Atwood's characters.

Elaine's confrontation with language is certainly a climactic illustration of this major Atwood theme. Compared with Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Elaine's environment is less overtly political, though it is similarly disorientating . She is constrained and pressured by her lack of knowledge of conventions of language. She suffers a crisis of identity in relation to her need to communicate on a social level and her desire to do so outside the constraints of language. She undergoes more serious

testimonials of the self in crisis as she is torn between simultaneous needs to use and dispense language.

Many critics have noticed the connection between psychoanalytic theory and Atwood's characterisation in terms of her writing on the relation between the self and language. Lorraine M. York points out when she discusses the issue of "uniform(ity)" in Atwood's works:

> In this respect, Atwood investigates the basis of some well-known psychological theories of child development and acquisition of language -- that is, that the child leaves behind an undifferentiated world, a world wherein the difference between self and non-self is not clearly distinguishable (Lacan's realm of the "imaginary"), and enters the realm of difference. For Atwood, entry into the social order and entry into language are analogous incursions into the frightening world of social uniformity (or what Lacan called "The Law"). (10)

When commenting on Elaine's growth in *Cat's Eye*, Douglas Glover has observed: "Atwood has adopted the psychological truism that our personalities are more or less set by the time we are five (or six, or nine)", (his parenthesis) (11), although Atwood's emphasis is not on the biological age but the time when the child enters society. It is obvious that Atwood has adopted the Lacanian notion that the subject is irretrievably alienated in the Symbolic, but she extends the linguistic boundary into the social and political domains. Atwood never regards language as purely a framework devoid of social or political content. For the purpose of an implicit challenge to the central tenets of psychoanalysis, the most influential period of Elaine's growth arises when she is nine and not at the Oedipal stage between three to five years of age.

The point Atwood tries to make is that language alienates the individual subject particularly through its social and political content. This explains why Elaine's identity crisis occurs after her acquisition of language, when she has developed beyond the early years of identity formation specified by psychoanalysis. In making Elaine's experience at nine crucial to her development Atwood tries to explain how social

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ideology functions through language to construct the subject, which is seen as the site of a rather drastic interaction between the self with language and social ideology.

In order to illustrate the different functions of language and their impact upon Elaine, Atwood advocates a sharp contrast in Elaine's personal experience of language in different social contexts prior and subsequent to the age of nine. Her early childhood seems worry-free in the Northern Quebec forests with only her parents and her brother Stephen. The family constantly travels in the forest to help their father, an entomologist, collect insect samples. Elaine's part is restricted to her family role as either a daughter or a sister. Literally, Elaine does not have any social contact apart from the family. Nor does she have any chance to experience language as an implicit ideological instrument or a means of social interaction. Elaine, as child of a scientifically oriented family living outside society isolated in forests, understands only the most limited aspects of language uses.

The contrast between the wilderness and the city constitutes an ideal situation to examine and test the impact of different contexts of language use. The importance of this contrast is to show Elaine's discovery that language exists as a system outside of, and prior to, her existence. Even though it cannot be said that the language they use at home is devoid of social content, this aspect of language is far more highly developed in an urban environment, where specific groups may develop their own linguistic conventions. There is a significant difference between the language used among family members in the wilderness and that adopted for social interaction by others in an urban environment. In the family, language is basically used for communication whereas in larger social units language is more instrumental to the social system. Although

society demands individuals to conform unconditionally to its dictates, the linguistic impact upon a child whereby social control is established, varies in different discourses. This is shown through the traumatic experience of Elaine, when she learns to adjust her tongue to the needs of social interaction. Atwood here reveals that the impact of family upon the child through language is minimal when compared with that of society at large. Therefore, Atwood's characters, raised up in the wilderness or within isolated environments, seem to carry the burden of a particular innocence which is inevitably exploited and manipulated to their disadvantage when they enter society.

Many of Atwood's protagonists, including Elaine and the narrator in *Surfacing*, can be viewed as the stereotype of the innocent girl -- a type of Miranda figure. Such a comparison is drawn by Frank Davey when he categorises Marian MacAlpin as "the ingenue who may yet grow out of her limitations through experience" (60). This is true of most Atwood's characters, and it is especially applicable to the protagonists of *Cat's Eye* and *Survival*. They share with the Shakespearian character Miranda a radical innocence due to a carefree childhood in a state of nature, a state free from the anxieties of the social world, although they never seem to grow out of the limitations of innocence. Elaine herself realises this through her own daughters, of whom she says "seem to have been born with some kind of protective coating, some immunity", which she confesses, "I lacked" (114). This "immunity", can be achieved only through contact with society at a formative stage, and corresponds with Noam Chomsky's notion of LAD[1] (Language Acquisition Device). A delayed

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[1]. Chomsky considers there is a special innate linguistic competence in human beings which enables children to acquire language from their parents or other members of society and to make utterances which they have never heard before. He calls this ability the Language Acquisition Device, and believes it can be permanently impaired during the formative stage i.e. before 12 years old, if the child is out of touch with language.

contact with society may impair a child's social competence. As such, Elaine and those like her remain extremely vulnerable to manipulation when confronted by society. Consequently, they long to escape from society and the trap of language.

When her father is appointed professor of entomology in a university in Toronto, Elaine and the family leave the green world for the city. Toronto means a life entirely different from the nomadic isolation to which she and her family have been accustomed. Finally at the age of nine she is placed in a social context which has a distinctive importance for her. She begins to experience the complex dimensions of social control through language. From being the younger child in a nuclear family she is transformed into an individual with social experience. This transition broadens Elaine's experience with language to include social interaction and ideological formation. Her role as a daughter and a sister is immediately extended to include her new social roles as a pupil and a playmate of her peers. The sudden and radical changes in roles and discourses make Elaine conscious of her inadequate experience with language, and this distinguishes her from her peers. Unfortunately her inadequacy subjugates her to the tyranny of their language use.

All this happens as soon as Elaine enters school, when she interacts with enormous difficulty with Cordelia, Grace and Carol, three girls from school, who offer to befriend her. However, they provide a process of comprehensive education into the hierarchical structures of society, culture and religion. She sees the royal visit, watches the Christmas parade, attends Shakespearian plays put on at school, experiences the family life of her friends and visits a Catholic church. She is taught about imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, and Christianity among many other things. To her, they are "the real girls", since she does not

understand the social and cultural codes of behaviour in these dimensions to which they belong. She does not know how to relate to them and her time with them only serves to highlight her isolation and her alienness from them.

To begin with, language fails her when she is introduced to the rhymes of school with their gender codes and violent content. For example she cannot comprehend the following ditty:

> Not last night but the night before
> Twenty-four robbers come to my back door
> And this is what they said ... to ... me!
> Lady turn around, turn around, turn around,
> Lady touch the ground, touch the ground, touch the ground;
> Lady show your shoe, show your shoe, show your shoe,
> Lady, lady, twenty-four *skiddoo*! (140)

Both the sexual and textual contexts in the language assumed by the girls are extremely puzzling to Elaine as they belong to unfamiliar codes of behaviour. She is a stranger to their games, games which require comprehension beyond her knowledge of the words themselves. She admits she has to "re-learn the importance of underwear, which has a liturgy of its own" (77). Vaguely Elaine starts to detect in the school girls' language an "obscure dirtiness" (140). In the meanwhile she is ruthlessly tormented by the girls, because of her lack of understanding of their different expressions. Gradually she realises her problems with the girls are actually problems with language, because she has not mastered the language:

> I'm not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around
> them, I don't know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys, but
> with girls I sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen,
> calamitous blunder. (47)

Language certainly undermines her self confidence and falls short to her needs in social interaction. Her inability to see the implied connotations of ambiguities of language places her in a problematic situation so that

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she is always marginalised in relation to her peers. Unable to find a place for herself in her social milieu, she feels extremely confused and left out.

Indeed, contact with the girls proves dangerous and damaging to Elaine, as they seem to have language at their disposal and repeatedly reinforce her social and linguistic inexperience. Elaine is therefore placed under severe psychological pressure, since she is obliged to be the "subject who knows" and to conform. She lamentably realises: "Not knowing is the worst thing I could have done" (126). "Not knowing" has certainly shadowed Elaine's starting of school. She recalls "there are days when I can hardly make it out of bed. I find it an effort to speak. ... I feel I am without worth, that nothing I can do is of any value, least of all to myself" (41).

The depression which follows her experience at nine years old with other girls remains influential and harmful throughout Elaine's entire life. Significantly, there is the photo taken at her eighth birthday which is proof of her prior innocence and serves as an index of how things would change afterwards. "Get me out of this", the middle-aged Elaine calls out even after she becomes an "eminent" artist, when she feels "I'm locked in. I don't want to be nine years old forever" (400). Such a feeling is constant as Elaine believes that "everyone else my age is an adult whereas I am merely in disguise" (14). The linguistic and social impact upon Elaine's growth and development of her experience at the age of nine becomes a milestone and continues to be influential in Elaine's life.

In many ways language plays a fundamentally negative role in the growth of Elaine, which is particularly evident in her contact with Christianity. Elaine encounters Christianity through a linguistic framework of ritual and indoctrination. In contrast to oriental religions such as Taoism or Buddhism, Christianity places special emphasis on

verbal performances, such as Bible reading, sermons and confessions. She is taught to say grace, recite Sunday school poems, sing the psalms and, of course, she is made to read and memorise Bible. In the realm of the loving God in whom she is urged to believe by the Smeath family, she invariably finds herself entrapped in language, unable to find the right words to say or to follow norms used by others, or to grasp the complex implications of blasphemy. The route to higher spirituality seems to be lost in the tangle of words beyond Elaine's reach. In addition, she is bitterly baffled by religion as practiced by the Smeath family, as it entails hypocrisy. This experience emphasises her linguistic "inadequacy" and undermines her self-perception. Consequently her contact with Christianity results in her immense dislike of its forms of expression and its tenets, and ultimately in her rejection of it as a religion. Atwood's criticism of the Smeath family as individual practioners of Christianity is a continuation of her criticism of its practice on a collective level in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In the same way as Grace and her family try to convert Elaine through religious and linguistic practice, Cordelia tries to control her through the language of power politics. Cordelia is the one who gives orders for the other girls to obey and decides which of them needs to be improved. Usually it is Elaine. "What do you have to say about yourself?" is a question Cordelia frequently addresses Elaine. Elaine feels the question undermining her self-esteem tremendously, as it automatically induces her to answer "nothing", resulting in a negative conception of herself. Cordelia's superiority is established on the basis of her knowledge of "girl talk" (since she has two elder sisters) and her command as a speaker. Therefore Elaine is silenced, supposed to be inferior and doomed to be manipulated. Certainly, Elaine's endless difficult time with Cordelia arises from her apprenticeship in the social

uses of language. Similarly, Elaine's revenge is achieved through her later mastery of a "sharp tongue".

The impact of language upon Elaine's growth is also shown through the "negative importance" (103) that attached to her self image in relation to other people, either collectively or individually. With her brother Stephen, she is granted "the importance of a blank sheet of paper", because she does not "count" (103). With the girls, she is silenced and rendered dumb and therefore become the one to be bossed around and found wanting. She admits that "*Nothing* ... was a word I came to connect with myself, as if I was nothing, as if there was nothing there at all" (41). Even a successful career does little to alter the negative tune. Her first art show is widely acknowledged because Grace throws a bottle of ink on one of the paintings, and this incident hits the headlines: "FEATHERS FLY AT FEMINIST FRACAS". Her art is initially acknowledged through "*Henfighting*" (354). As Elaine recalls, "The show itself attracted bad adjectives: 'abrasive', 'aggressive' and 'shrill'" and her paintings were labelled "naive surrealism with a twist of feminist lemon" (354) by the critics.

At a later stage media reports on Elaine's retrospective exhibition adopt the same negative tone, though tempered by an acknowledgement of her fame. CROTCHETY ARTIST STILL HAS POWER TO DISTURB is the title, followed by descriptions, with "the inevitable *eclectic*, the obligatory *post-feminist*, a *however* and a *despite*" (225-226). Elaine neither disapproves of these comments nor censures it as inappropriate. The poster advertising her retrospective is overdrawn with a moustache on her face. Elaine remembers drawing such moustaches herself and notices "the spite that went into them, the desire to ridicule, to deflate, and the

feeling of power. It was defacing, it was taking away someone's face" (20). She evaluates her fame in deprecating terms:

> I have achieved, finally, a face that a moustache can be drawn on, a face that attracts moustaches. A public face, a face worth defacing. This is an accomplishment. I have made something of myself, something or other, after all. (20)

Eventually Elaine seems to be able to face her own "negative importance", and becomes accustomed to a negative self-assessment. Indeed, she habitually adopts a negative perspective in viewing herself, although she is ready to assert herself in reaction to the dominance of language. She quarrels with a newspaper review in which she is called an "Eminent artist", because "*Eminent*" is a "mausoleum word". "I might as well climb onto the marble slab right now and pull the bedsheet over my head" (226). Such ironical self-assertion is ultimately negative.

Judging herself on negative terms corresponds with the "victim" psyche that Atwood finds among Canadians. In fact, the notion of "negative importance" recalls Atwood's argument in *Survival* that Canadians can only define themselves in negative rather than positive terms because of their ambiguous historical position between a dominant neighbour and colonial powers. While they do not achieve positive responses from society, Atwood's protagonists continue to be "cerebral, unfeeling, separated from a lost real self" (Woodcock *Intro* 34). This probably accounts for the impression that Atwood's "characters never achieve anything other than partial being, the *appearance* of identity. They remain in a remarkably comfortable state poised somewhere between acting and nothingness" (Powe 146). Indeed for Atwood's characters it is impossible to gain positive identities in both linguistic and social discourses.

In regard to the relation between selfhood and language, Elaine shares the same feeling as the narrator in *Surfacing*. The latter claims

"Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole" (172). In the same way Elaine says "Language is leaving me behind" (42). Language remains alien throughout Elaine's life from the time she enters society. At different stages of her life, language alienates her in different ways. At a later stage Elaine finds journalistic jargon equally dangerous and threatening with the school girl rhymes of earlier times. In the scene where Elaine is interviewed (ch.16), she has an extraordinary reaction to the journalist's attempts to define her, an episode that also demonstrates the extent to which she is disturbed by language. The relation between her self identity and social discourse is inevitably problematic, since language always fails her. In a way similar to the narrator in *Surfacing* when she calls out her refusal to be a victim, Elaine's refusal to be defined either by language or by the social system shares the same motif.

Elaine's situation embodies Atwood's increasingly overt concern about the linguistic alienation of individuals. Typical of a Lacanian subject, Elaine is acutely conscious of society's ideological prescription through language. Unlike her articulate predecessors in Atwood's other fictions, Elaine is rather clumsy at language, though she later develops a "mean mouth" as a weapon of self-defence. The harsh suppression of her inner self and the cruel distortion of self involved in her construction by language make her distrust it. Consequently, she rejects the pen and picks up the brush, seeking to express herself and communicate with others through visual images instead of words. Her difficulty with and distrust of language leads her to seek to operate outside its influence. "The rejection of language is closely bound to the narrator's rejection of cruelty, violence, sexism, and all that is destructive and mechanical in 'civilised' human life" (Mendez-Egle 89). What Mendez observes about *Surfacing*'s narrator and her resentment of language applies equally to Elaine.

The interaction between society, language and selfhood is also examined through Atwood's treatment of narrative background as a discourse. She dramatically exposes modern society as a foreign and alien territory for its inhabitants. Her description of Toronto is exemplary of this negative quality of the city as a place where people suffer a hostile relation between language, society and selfhood. Her protagonists are fugitives and Toronto is the place they escape from in particular. Her characters are constantly trying to run away from Toronto into the Quebec forests or some other isolated location. Toronto is forever in contrast to the Quebec forests in Atwood's fictions. It is vague, unattractive and threatening, while Quebec forests are refreshing, peaceful, and soothing. However, the most significant difference between the contrasting environments lies not in the varied physical conditions but in the absence or presence of language. Atwood's characters love the wilderness not because they are conservationists but because it offers an unthreatening discourse in relation to the self.

In commenting on Atwood's treatment of Toronto, B.W. Powe, in his book *A Climate Charged*, righteously questions "Where is Toronto, with its clean, slick city-streets? Where is its constant construction, its artificiality, its new technology, its big money?". He suggests that "like her characters, Atwood's cities are phantoms" (151). Powe has certainly grasped the essence of Atwood's portrayal of the urban life. However, he may have missed Atwood's primary intention here. Atwood simply disregards Toronto as a landmark of the sophistication of Canadian nationality or as a glorious symbol of Western civilisation. She treats Toronto as a discourse, a context, a framework in which language works for the social system. Toronto is abstracted to illustrate the point that urban life is to a high degree the necessary result of capitalism and a

vehicle of the social mechanism. The bigger a city, the more isolated its residents, the less language is used communicatively and the more the individual feels threatened by it. In the city language constitutes society's primary means of creating individuals as social subjects. Hence city life reinforces the manner in which the individual succumbs to the social system. Atwood's protagonists are very conscious of this and of the way language undermines their individuality. In brief, Toronto has been depersonified by Atwood to show the interaction between language, society and selfhood.

Hence, Elaine, like most of her counterparts in other Atwood's fictions, finds herself in crisis in Toronto and frequently attempts to escape from the psychological depression associated with the city. "In my dreams of this city I am always lost" (14), Elaine admits. In this respect, *Surfacing* serves as an astonishing parallel to *Cat's Eye*. Both Elaine and the narrator in *Surfacing* experience in childhood a period of harmony with nature. As Elaine acknowledges: "Until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (21). Both of them in a sense "abandon" the "green world" only to find themselves unable to fit into an urban environment. Both of them identify with an harmonious nature to whose soothing and reviving effect they succumb. Like Miranda they have to enter society eventually and lose their innocence, while their initial ignorance of the social dimensions of language soon disadvantages them. Although they have to face the problems raised by the relationship between language, society and selfhood, they try their best to avoid the inevitable confrontation with society.

For this purpose, the protagonist in *Surfacing* travels back to the wilderness. She avoids anything possibly linked with that city since it represents social restraint and is therefore an impediment to achieving a

unitary self, albeit an illusion. She rejects clothes, shelter, food, along with everything that purports to be civilised, especially language and intimate human relations. Always detached from her partner as well as from her other acquaintances from town, she lives very much in an internal world of her own in an effort to develop a direct communication with nature and to gain a sense of wholeness. In the end, free from the human world and its linguistic bondage, she seems to have reached a desired state of "being one with the universe", when she declares, "I lean against a tree, I'm a tree leaning" (175).

Elaine escapes Toronto by moving to live in Vancouver, "the suicide capital", which is as far as she can go from Toronto. Elaine also returns to the wilderness a few times when her father collects insect samples during vacations. She looks forward to each trip, because Toronto gets unbearable. She feels that "despite my cat's eye I know I can't stand to be here in this place much longer. I will burst inwards" (142). When approaching the North, she relaxes:

> I've begun to feel not gladness, but relief. My throat is no longer tight, I've stopped clenching my teeth, the skin on my feet has begun to grow back, my fingers have healed partially. I can walk without seeing how I look from the back, talk without hearing the way I sound. (143)

Away from Toronto, Elaine acquires the regaining of a positive identity as she reasserts her connection with nature. Language in the Quebec forest becomes redundant and hence temporarily dispensable. Understandably Elaine goes "for long periods without saying anything at all." She rejoices in her liberation from language and the social hierarchy that language conveys: "I can lapse back into wordlessness, I can sink back into the rhythms of transience as if into bed" (143). Elaine's ease and pleasure in doing away with language certainly reassures her of a positive sense of self.

Becoming an artist seems a natural choice and the only one for Atwood's major characters when they find language threatening. Anxiety over language is the reason Elaine becomes an artist by profession. As she explains it: "A lot of my paintings then began in my confusion about words" (268). In this sense, Elaine seems to confirm Freud's hypothesis that art is a means of wish-fulfilment, at the same time as she confirms herself as a character of a "Freudian type" (Davey 67). For Elaine there are at least two significant points in becoming an artist. Firstly, her paintings are proofs of the importance of her earlier life and its connection with her personality. Secondly, they indicate that her art is a reflection of her life and that it draws heavily on the repression that she experiences. Frustrated and uneasy with language, Elaine finds expression in painting. As she discovers the source of her anxiety in things themselves, her feelings become images. Her experience is then cast in visual symbols of colours and framed into visible shapes. To her mind, visual images convey messages and emotions more "truly" without the necessary linguistic distortion of the "truth" and the self.

So far language has played an important but negative role in the plotting of *Cat's Eye*. There is another side of the story, which is that the narrative itself is a distinctive linguistic exercise and an integrated part of the narration and characterisation of the fiction. After all, a fiction is a linguistic construction and everything in the fiction has to be presented in language. The fact that *Cat's Eye* is a novel itself illustrates the power and indispensability of language. Although Elaine as a character may try to do away with language, as a narrator she is obliged to utilise it. The dilemma between language and self is further demonstrated through the narrative structure of the fiction, which is constructed on the basis of the

author's understanding of time, its expression in the English language, and how both of these factors are related to the notion of self.

Atwood starts by introducing some radical ideas about time in new physics in order to help with the understanding of the perspectives taken in *Cat's Eye*. For this purpose, *Cat's Eye* uses a quotation as its epigraph from *A Brief History of Time*, by Stephen Hawking, a contemporary physicist. The citation asks: "Why do we remember the past, and not the future?" and thereby leads the reader into a quest of the nature of time, which Atwood regards as affecting our and Elaine's perception of the self.

According to Paul Davies, whom Atwood contacted when writing *Cat's Eye*, the present is unmeasurable either by scientific instruments or by mathematic calculation and hence the present remains an illusion. Against our present common knowledge of the flow of time from past into future, Paul Davies argues in his book *God and New Physics*:

> ... subjective time with its emphasis on the now has no objective meaning
> ... the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, however persistent.
> In the external world there is no past, present and future. How could the present ever be determined with instruments? It's a purely psychological concept. (128)

That the concept of time is psychologically shaped is interestingly reflected in the phenomenon that different languages show different attitudes towards time and have developed different ways in which to express the concept of time. In the Chinese language, for instance, the time furthest away (yiqian) is regarded as "the time in the front or ahead" whereas the time closest to the present (yihou) is seen as "the time behind". This contradicts the English concept of "before and after". By all means, the concept of time is subjective and hence it is possible that any point in the development of linear time becomes coterminous with the present in the subject's mind. This is the conceptual bottom line for *Cat's Eye*'s deliberate obliteration of the distinction between past, present and

future. Basically, *Cat's Eye* sees time as a dimension which comprehends the being of the subject within the psychologically ever-present "now".

As a matter of fact, time and the concept of the self have always been inseparable in life as well as in literary works, although traditional literary treatment of time and self stresses the linear succession. Hans Meyerhoff, author of *Time in Literature* claims:

> What we call the self, person, or individual is experienced and known only against the background of the succession of temporal moments and changes constituting his biography. ... What is man, if he is nothing but a victim of temporal succession and change? What, if anything, endures throughout the constantly changing stream of consciousness of the individual? The question, what is man, therefore, invariably refers to the question of what is time. The quest for a clarification of the self leads to a *recherche du temps perdu*. And the more seriously human beings become engaged in this quest, the more they become preoccupied and concerned with the consciousness of time and its meaning for human life. (2)

In other words, the quest for selfhood is a search for identity as experienced in time. In literature, time has always been a subjective matter as well as a theme. This is readily discussed by Margaret Church in *Time and Reality* that

> The understanding of the form, content, thought, and motif of fiction depends on the understanding of an author's attitude toward time and space. ... In turn, an attitude toward time and space is conditioned by matters of personal adjustment ... Let it suffice to say here that a self-styled "extravert' like the early Aldous Huxley finds a reliance on the outer world of objects and events a necessity whereas a man like Kafka retreats to an inner world where he finds refuge from the very objects and events sought out by the extravert. Time, therefore, for the early Huxley is clock time; time for Kafka is the time of the dream where past, present and future have no meaning. (4)

Hence, it is important to differentiate and understand the writer's approach to time. Attitudes towards time influence the author's use of language and alter the protagonist's perception of the self.

Cat's Eye's understanding of time results into its special usage of the present tense of the English language. Most of the narrative adopts the present tense disregarding the narrated time. Although this is not unique in Atwood's own writing, it is not so common in the conventional

usage of the present tense. According to Geoffrey N. Leech, Professor of

Linguistics and Modern English Language in the University of Lancaster,

> It is customary for novelists and story writers to use the past tense to describe imaginary happenings (whether past, present or future with respect to real time), so that the employment of the Simple Present in fiction (except in direct speech) strikes one as a deviation from normal practice. (13)

Conventional interpretations of English verb tenses is largely based on Western common sense which regards time as being divided into three parts, past, present and future. The English language requires its speaker to locate an action or a situation in a specific time. Therefore, in order to articulate the immediacy of a situation or an event which occurred in the past, or to erase the remoteness of past reality, the speaker needs to make a conscious effort to expose some potentials in the language. In the case of a psychological situation, which relates to both past and present, it is difficult for the narrator or the narratee to specify the time, because there is no clear dividing line between past or present. This, however, has been dealt with innovatively in Atwood's fictions, particularly in *Cat's Eye*. *Cat's Eye*'s narrative is mostly conducted in the present tense, which presents a fuller image of Elaine's inner self and the complexity of her internal world is carried out through the concomitant presentation of her experience at different times.

As a matter of fact Atwood has been exploring possibilities with English from the very beginning of her fiction writing. Since she writes within the genre of "psychological realism", as John Moss terms it, she needs to discover alternative means of expression for the psychological activities of her characters. She needs to transform the bondage to time in the conventional manner of English thinking. Verb tenses, a most subtle and effective area of English, necessarily becomes one of her experimenting grounds. A close look at all her novels will reveal the

extent to which Atwood has explored the question of time and its expression in the English language. Marian informs the reader right at the beginning of *The Edible Woman*: "I know I was all right on Friday when I got up". This sentence can give linguists a hard time. In *Surfacing* the narrator takes the reader along in the present tense as much as she can, but sometimes the tense goes back to the past tense, although the past tense does not necessarily mean that the narrated time is in the past. In *Life Before Man* there is also the implicit issue of time and its impact upon personality.

Compared with the Chinese language, which does not have verb tenses at all[2], the English language shows a much stronger emphasis on the division of time into past, present and future. With its subtle and complex system of verb tenses English can be restrictive and prescriptive when it comes to descriptions related to time. The location of the temporal space of an event or a situation is helpful in conventional English linear thinking, if one is accustomed to thinking in the English language. This is also consistent with Christianity, which assumes there is a past, a present and a future in relation to the universe at large as well as the individual. But when it comes to describing a person's psychological status or a situation that does not follow the "normal" direction of time, the language needs to be "reformed". The dominant use of the present tense is one of the reforms carried out by Atwood in *Cat's Eye*.

Cat's Eye's reveals how notions about time affect the usage of language and our understanding of the self. In fact, the one-page first chapter of the book is completely devoted to explaining the narrator's understanding of the nature of time and how that affects her self-perception. Elaine's brother Stephen, also a cosmotologist, is actually the

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2. In Chinese, modifiers are used to denote temporal differences if necessary, although I suspect the Chinese may regard time as an eternal present in their collective consciousness.

articulator of Stephen Hawking's ideas. Hence the book begins with the following lines:

> Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backwards in time and exist in two places at once. (3)

In other words, the key issue concerning the nature of time is its subjectiveness so that the perceptive from which it is observed is decisive in determining time. Another point is that one can bring the past forward to the present so that the self can be seen as split into two, or seen to "exist in two places at once".

Elaine's perception of herself is hence shaped and dominated by notions of subjective time. The language used in *Cat's Eye* not only effaces the past, present and future, but also distinctively prolongs the present so as to stress the "now". The following is sample of sentences taken from various chapters in order to illustrate the overwhelming sense of present in the narrative:

> Cordelia and I are riding on the streetcar, going downtown, as we do on winter Saturdays. (4, ch.2)

> I'm lying on the floor, on a futon, covered by a duvet. ... This is the middle of my life. I think of it as a place, like the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge halfway across, halfway over. (13, ch.3)

> Until we moved to Toronto I was happy. ... I sit by myself in the back of the car, among the suitcases and the cardboard boxes of food and the coats, and the gassy, dry-cleaning smell of the car upholstery. (21, ch.4)

> On Saturday we take Carol Campbell to the building. When we walk into it she says, wrinkling her nose, "is this where your father *works*?" (50, ch.10)

> Jon comes back tomorrow, from Los Angeles and his chainsaw murder. I can hardly wait. We'll circumvent his wife, go out for lunch, both of us feeling sneaky. (87, ch,16)

> Black cats and paper pumpkins gather on the school windows. On Hallowe'en Grace wears an ordinary lady's dress, Carol a fairy outfit, Cordelia a clown suit. I wear a sheet, because that 's what there is. (106, ch.20).

> In September I leave the Swiss Chalet and return to school. I also return to the cellar of my parents' house, because I can't afford not to. Both of these

> locations are hazardous: my life is now multiple, and I am in fragments.
> (316, ch. 57)

> I'm on the plane, flying or being flown, westard towards the watery coast,
> the postcard mountains. ... I have the window seat. In the two seats beside
> me are two old ladies, old women ... (420, ch.75)

It is obvious that the narrator treats the narrated time as invariable,
because in Elaine's mind, all of the past is relevant to the present or is
actually present itself.

Even her father's image at different stages is presented in the
present tense with a similar detachment:

> Our father walks into the forest, carrying his axe, a packsack, and a
> large wooden box with a leather shoulder strap. He looks up, from tree to
> tree to tree, considering. Then he spreads a tarpaulin out on the ground,
> underneath the chosen tree, wrapping it around the trunk ... (22)

> Our father has changed his job: this explains things. Instead of
> being a forest-insect field researcher, he is now a university professor ...

> My father sits in an armchair in the evenings with a board across
> the arms of the chair and the drawings on the board, going through them
> with a red pencil. Sometimes he laughs to himself while doing this, or
> shakes his head, or makes ticking noises through his teeth. (34)

The narration shows no evidence at all that these memories have gone
into the past. The father exists in the mind of his daughter as lively and
unchanged as ever.

In terms of the use of present tense in fiction, Leech writes

> Some writers use the Present in imitation of the popular historic present of
> spoken narrative. For more serious writing, transposition into the fictional
> present is a device of dramatic heightening; it puts the reader in the place
> of someone actually witnessing the events as they are described. (13)

But with the first-person narrative in *Cat's Eye*, the present tense enables
the reader to experience the event or situation simultaneously with the
narrator and the narratee. While "dramatising the events" fits into the
category of "Imaginary Uses" as termed by Professor Leech, the adoption
of the present tense can also be seen as conveying "eternal truth" or
statements made "for all time", as is often found in scientific writings
(Leech 2).

The "eternal truth" for the narrator of *Cat's Eye* is the simultaneity of Elaine's inner feelings and activities. This explains why in *Cat's Eye* events of different narrated times are gathered together but the narrative does not explicitly specify any change in the conventional sense of past and now. The separation of one time from another, if it exists, is reflected by means of wider blank spaces between paragraphs. The narrator only uses the other tenses when it is absolutely necessary, or dictated by grammar, or when she is obliged to contrast a previous action with the present one. Even in those cases, she switches back to the present tense as soon as possible. The present tense is very effective in establishing psychological realism, in particular the sense of internal pain as a constant experience.

Only when it comes to recalling Elaine's adolescent confusion, does the narrator seek a variation in narrative stance. Elaine's psychological confusion is thus represented through frequent changes of verb tenses. This is particularly evident with regard to her perplexity about her art teacher Josef Hrbik. As a student of his, she is grateful to him for leading her into the domain of art. However, she never forgives him for drawing her into a relationship, though it is also a consequence of her own inner turmoil concerning her own sexuality. This is reflected in the section of "Life Drawing", especially in Chapter Fifty-three. When reassembling Elaine's experience with Josef, the narrative starts with the present tense, then sinks into the past tense and later comes back into the present tense:

> I sit in a French restaurant with Josef, drinking white wine and eating snails. They're the first snails I have ever eaten, this is the first French restaurant I have ever been in ... (292)

> Josef kissed me, standing up this time, but I felt awkward. I was afraid someone would see in through the window. (294)

> Josef has gone on all summer. Sometimes he takes me to restaurants, with checked tablecloths and candles stuck in Chianti bottles; sometimes to foreign films about Swedes and Japanese, in small uncrowded theatres. (295)

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There are a few more instances that follow this pattern. Sometimes paragraphs in different tenses are simply joined together. Occasionally, they are segregated with a wider blank space. Past and present are merged together, as if they refer to the same period of time. In a way verb tenses become less relevant to the narrated events or the situation. The narrative simply captures the past and locates it within the present. Therefore the idea that the past is in the present is strongly intensified, which is a very effective illustration of Elaine's adolescent bewilderment. I see that the occasional narrative in the past tense is adopted to indicate Elaine's deeper memory, which is meant to be forgotten. None of her descriptions of the past events appears necessarily "retrospective". Retrospective is actually her chance for self introspection. In a way time stores up in her mind and gives her the freedom to peel away any layer and dwell on it. In her internal world, time certainly is coherent and there is no sense of past, present or future.

Since the real length of certain periods of time seem to be decided by subjective feelings, the distribution of narrative space becomes most disproportionate. The accent on the relation between the time of narration and the narrated time is another way of showing the importance of certain periods of time. The length of the narrative around age nine of Elaine corresponds with its importance to the protagonist's growth. *Cat's Eye* in fact is devoted to only two major temporal moments in Elaine's life, namely the beginning of Toronto school life and her later return for the retrospective exhibition. The larger space allocated to the more "important" events enables the narrative to recapture Elaine's feelings of pain, humiliation and agony with detail and accuracy.

Hence the decisive period when she was nine in Toronto stays in Elaine's mind with such a strong sense of immediacy that she literally calls

out that she does not want to be nine years old forever. Neither in the narrative, nor in Elaine's mind is there an interruption of her sense of herself at nine. "Here and now" mixes up with "there and then". The narrative voice remains in the present tense, or rather, the present "tension", which reflects the constant and current status quo of Elaine's psyche. To herself, all her experience constitutes an "eternal present", as the narrative effaces the remoteness of the past reality from her view. The prolonged narrative time over this period shows Elaine's past as continually active in the present and generating the feelings of a self that is irretrievably lost. Naturally the present tense used in the narrative reinforces this quality of immediacy. Dimensional depth is therefore given to the protagonist's inner world. Rather than an enduring or consistent unity, however, the person in question is revealed to be a combination of temporal moments, each of which reveals different aspects of self, even contradictory ones at the same time.

Atwood's treatment of the concept of time in *Cat's Eye* is remarkably like Oriental thinking, especially Zen. Here I admit with pleasure that my understanding of this link has been enlightened by Douglas Glover's comment in his review: "Still another will say she (Atwood) has adopted some notions about Zen and modern physics, that we are all one with the universe" (Glover 14). Whether coincidentally or intentionally, Atwood's writings contain elements that are present in Zen. Her understanding of time is connected with both Zen and modern physics, and this connection has been revealed in the book *The Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra. Central to these diferent schools of thought are the notions of subjective time.

Notions of subjective time correspond with Atwood's intention to explore the sense of eternal present in our psychology. The dominant

present tense becomes her tool and best describes the inner world of Elaine. This, to a large extent, coincides with the Chinese way of looking at internal experience. Elaine's present is an amalgamation of her experiences and her imagination at any one time, including all her biological growth, her adjustment to social conditions, her psychological disturbances, and her future state of mind. Somewhere in her life, she is enlightened with a change of perspective, when she looks at herself through a "cat's eye": "I look into it, and see my life entire" (398). The lines Elaine says to herself, when going back to the bridge where she nearly drowned and froze to death in the punishment inflicted by Cordelia, sound exactly like a Zen Buddhist practitioner:

> There is nothing more for me to see. The bridge is only a bridge, the river is a river, the sky is a sky. (419)

The parallel is more than obvious, compared with Zen's saying:

> Before you study Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; while you are studying Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers; but once you have had enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and rivers again rivers. (Capra 134)

Even though Elaine cannot in the real sense become a Zen and experience life as Zen, her feelings and her way of expressing them readily show a similarity with this other language and culture.

Cat's Eye's link with Oriental philosophy does not stop at the notion of time. Distrust of language is another aspect of this connection. Linguistic alienation, whether elaborated by Lacan or fictionalised by Atwood, finds its parallel in Zen. Zen regards language as a hindrance towards self-perfection because language is not only ideologically operative but also inadequate and inaccurate, particularly when it comes to one's inner being. Fundamentally, Zen advocates a way of self-perfection to counteract social alienation, hence the core of Zen involves the rejection of language. Here I haste to add that in my opinion Zen's

ideas look rather odd in English, since language basically distorts or rather "ostracises" the philosophy and the assumptions behind its expression seem to exclude the philosophy. When put in a "foreign" language and described in different tenses, Zen itself becomes extremely alienated. Zen believes that it is impossible to convey its ideas even in its native language whether written or spoken. There are hardly any written scripts for Zen practitioners to consult in the way the Bible is constructed by Christians. They consider the only way to get to the "truth" is "from one heart to another, no place for language"[3]. Hence meditation is quintessential for Zen, by means of which they seek to reach an ideal state of being one with the universe, a project for which language is indeed too artificial and too alien to be the medium.

Atwood herself understands that language is an inadequate and inaccurate reflection of human experience, especially of the inner and therefore the "unspeakable" world. This too is a distinctive Zen notion, as D.T. David points out when commenting on Zen's description of inner experience: "The contradiction so puzzling to the ordinary way of thinking comes from the fact that we have to use language to communicate our inner experience which in its very nature transcends linguistics" (Capra, 53) Moreover, "being one with the universe" refers to a state in which the subject transcends language, a situation not dissimilar to that of the Imaginary. the notion that language alienates individuals and prevents them from achieving knowledge is common to both Zen and Lacan. This, I would argue, remains a fundamental motif in Atwood's writing. It is hard to deny that there is an element of "being one with the universe" in the "green" mentality of Atwood's protagonists.

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3. This quotation is taken from a note to the classical Chinese novel, Hong Lou Meng=A Dream of the Red Mansions. The quotation used here is my own translation. The bibliographical details are: Cao, Xue-qing et Gao, E. Hong Lou Meng. Zhong-guo Yishu Yanjiuyuan Hong Lou Meng Yanjiusuo ed. Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1982, p 308.

Cat's Eye is centrally about the roles of language in relation to selfhood in contemporary Western society as has been analysed in this chapter. The title itself suggests the motivation of the book is about perspectives and perception. There are certainly contradictions in language itself: as an ideological instrument it threatens individuality by programming our thinking and behaviour; as a communicative tool, it is inadequate and inaccurate and fails in its fundamental role to produce inevitable linguistic distortion. *Cat's Eye* shows that the contradiction between the self and the language is aggravated by the contemporary Western social system, in which language is constantly penetrating the individual's life and psychology. Individuals find themselves in need of escape from linguistic discourses. Language becomes an area of contention in the individual's struggle against social alienation. *Cat's Eye* presents dilemma of human language as the most fundamental duality that confronts individuals in modern society.

Conclusion: the Enduring Self

An overall view of Atwood's novels reveals two visible patterns. One is her "thematic network" and the other is her "character similarity". Both arise from her consistent focus on the effect of social reification, which determines the distinctively similar characteristics of her major characters and induces a continual thematic development in her writing. Indeed certain themes are central to Atwood and remain the axis around which all her writings evolve. These themes bridge her fictions as well as her poetry and short stories. They underpin the recurrence of her metaphors, symbols, images, and more importantly, her characters.

The resemblance of Atwood's major characters is most significant. Frank Davey, among the others, has observed significant similarities among Atwood's protagonists. Commenting on Atwood's treatment of the characters, Sherrill Grace correctly insists

> Atwood conceives of the self not as an individual ego, defining itself against its surroundings, but as a place or entity co-existensive with its environment. (*VD* 2)

> The idea of the collective as opposed to individual hero is consistent with Atwood's view of the self, and her heroes -- the chief protagonists in her fiction ... should be approached in this light; while they are particularized, especially in the fiction, they are not highly individualized, three-dimensional characters so much as representatives or symbols of social concerns, archetypes and myth. (ibid 6)

Atwood's protagonists in the seven novels to date resemble each other in many ways, as they are "particularised" but not "individualised".

From Marian MacAlpin to Elaine Risley, Atwood's protagonists are exclusively middle-class intellectual women, whose age grows with the author as they move through similar career paths. They all have

tertiary education with professional skills. Their peers can in no way be compared with them in terms of their "intelligence" and "moral superiority". As a result they have in common an inability to fit in both social and personal environments. Either as visual artists or writers of all sorts, they are social critics, observant of the commercial nature of their society and their own situation as powerless victims of that society.

Most of Atwood's women have very superficial family relationships and unfulfilling friendship. They are frequently associated with the absence of parents, death of brothers, the evil of aunts. Their lovers are always unreliable and love is "just a circle game of words" (Davey). Their partners provide no real alternatives. Reluctant to show any emotions, they appear to be cold, detached, aloof and unconcerned with their immediate interactive relationships, although they demonstrate a constant anxiety over manipulation from society and other individuals.

Atwood's protagonists, however, possess complex inner activities corresponding to their unfruitful social interaction and share an acute awareness of the self under threat. All of them invariably undergo a traumatic experience of self division and are deeply concerned about social alienation. Dissatisfaction and repression from society cause psychological disturbances in those "sensitive" protagonists. They likewise appear to be "abnormal" or "psychic". Their lack of adaptability explains their readiness to escape into nature, even if it is only a temporary retreat from society. They invariably choose flight as their rejection to imposed social identities. Refusing to conform to social demands remains a characteristic stance of Atwood's women.

Interpretations of the shared characteristics among Atwood's protagonists seem to agree that Atwood's themes or her points of view precede her invention of protagonists and narrative events. The latter are only created in the second place to embody and convey the themes and stances. Hence her characters appear to have "flat" rather than "rounded" personalities in their resemblance to each other. As Grace points out, the commonality renders Atwood's heroes as less three-dimensionally realistic, symbolic of various social concerns. Nevertheless, the recurrent images of the Atwood woman invite more convincing and adequate explanations than mentioning autobiographical elements or simply as-a-matter-of-factly.

Some critics may have misinterpreted the mechanism of Atwood's characterisation. For instance, Frank Davey holds, Atwood's women have been emptied of history and specificity, and become "mythologised" representatives of abuse and oppression. Also, there is "the lack of specific characterisation and the overt disregard for historical accuracy" (108). In fact what Davey maintains as Atwood's "emptying the women of historical specificities" is, on the contrary, her effort to abstract them in order to emphasise historical specificities. By means of this "abstract characterisation" Atwood is able to implement her political viewpoints within the characters. Their collective image reflects the present general situation of middle-class Western women. It is true Atwood women lack specific individual characteristics, but historical accuracy prevails throughout Atwood's writing. Their detached family relationships, their career and ambition, their marriage and love, and their psychological activities are exclusively contemporary Western female.

Fredric Jameson's study on narrative forms in the age of reification, which is another important aspect in his theoretic construction of the political unconscious, serves as an insightful explanation to the manner of Atwood's characterisation. Jameson argues that literary characters have become a "point of view" as a result of "the textual institution or determinant that expresses and reproduces the newly centred subject of the age of reification". He claims that "the effects of reification -- the sealing off of the psyche, the division of labor of the mental faculties, the fragmentation of the bodily and perceptual sensorium -- also determine the opening up of whole new zones of experience and the production of new types of linguistic content" (*PU* 160). In this way Jameson identifies a further link between social reification and contemporary literary characterisation. He sees that social reification becomes a direct source of the individual's anxiety. As a result of this, individuals develop a tendency of inward retreat and subsequently experience social reification in the dimension of psychology. Such experience has become a dominant subject in contemporary Western literature and has produced "the semic production of characters, or in other words into what we will call a *character system*" (*ibid* 161). Hence literary characters have become reproduction of the self-centred subjects and this reproduction is institutionalised in literary texts of our time in a manner that literary characters cease to function, like, say, characters in Romantic literature, as individualistic egos. Instead, they can be illustrations of opinions and bear resemblance to each other as a result of the institution. In short, in Jameson's view there exists a "character system" within whose boundary contemporary literature proliferates. Hence Atwood's characters can be seen as to have historically become

"points of view". As representatives of the self-centred subjects, their resemblance should be understood in a wider social context.

Atwood's protagonists are distinctively conveyors of her themes. Their resemblance corresponds with her thematic development. George Woodcock, Judith McComb, Frank Davey, John Moss, to name only a few, all have noticed and commented on the recurrent themes in Atwood's writing. Sherrill Grace, an earlier explorer of "Atwood's system", in her introduction to *Atwood: Language, Text and System*, classifies four major themes in Atwood's writing, namely, the self, duality, nature and language (*M A* 4). However, rather than developing the themes separately, Atwood has integrated these elements into an essential unity, namely, the interaction between society, language and selfhood. The interplay of the personal, poetic and politics has been correlated into a central motif as to reveal the effects of social reification. Hence, Atwood's writing continues its focus on the linguistic framework of society and its manipulation of individual subjects as ideological instrument. Language is portrayed as playing a vital role representing a major alienating element of social system.

In accordance with her perception of language being instrumental to social reification, Atwood creates a series of images and metaphors to illustrate how the self is entrapped in language. Thus, the self as "a word in a foreign language"[1] becomes a metaphor implemented throughout Atwood's writing. The image illustrates an awkward and sensitive relationship of the individual towards the social system and language. Most of her protagonists, either by profession or by some other means, are obliged to play the game of

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[1]. This is a line in Atwood's earlier poem *The Journal of Susanna Moodie*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970. (p11)

words. They can be good at writing and aware of the dominance of language at the same time. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they see language as an alienating and threatening Other and develop hostility towards language. They frequently find language distorting and manipulative.

Throughout her seven novels, there is an abundance of events, relationships, plots that are developed around daily practice of language by individuals or by institutions of society. In *The Edible Woman*, social reification as demonstrated in the prevalent consumerism is largely through exercises of semiotics, such as labelling, packaging and advertising. *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on the nature of language as political instrument. In order to serve the open propaganda of the state, language is practiced as a powerful weapon of state control. Consequently the individual is restricted in terms of linguistic exercises. *Cat's Eye* explores the issue confessionally more on the individual level, but the protagonist surely bears the imprints of an alien word that does not fit in the social context. She is highly sensitive to anything, language in particular, that misrepresents or threatens the ego.

Atwood's other images or metaphors consequently function like a discourse in support of her central theme. They are designed to exemplify the individual's relation to the social system as a context at large. The most frequent are those which stand for dismemberment, imprisonment and bewilderment of both body and mind, such as trick mirrors, dungeons, mazes, travelling on the road or confinement in a jail. Atwood's spatial symbols convey especially the individual's sense of bewilderment and entrapment. For instance, the Royal Ontario Museum, jail, rented flats or houses, enclosing walls, restaurants and

kitchens, fridges, bathtubs, toilets, buses and cars. All of them represent discourses of one kind or another in which the individual is either trapped or confused.

To conclude, Atwood's writing is an organic system in itself. The Atwood woman grows with the development of her themes and yet she retains her essential characteristics. The whole complex of her novels, short stories, poetry and criticism reflects Jameson's theoretical framework of the political unconscious in many respects. Her character system and her thematic development manifest that literary form corresponds with its subject theme, a notion that Jameson repeatedly emphasises. According to Jameson, the forms of human consciousness and the mechanism of human psychology are historically produced. "It follows, then, that neither the reader's reception of a particular narrative, nor the actantial representation of human figures or agents, can be taken to be constants of narrative analysis but must themselves ruthlessly be historicised (*PU* 152). Hence, "... modernism is itself an expression of capitalism, and in particular, of the latter's reification of daily life ..." (*ibid* 236). Indeed Atwood's characterisation and her narrative technique constantly undermine traditional categories of character and narrative time. An understanding of Atwood's literary works as a historical phenomenon consonant with stances suggested in *The Political Unconscious* should contribute not only to a thorough grasp of her character system and her thematic development, but also to our general comprehension of contemporary Western literature and the bewilderment of individuals in the West.

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