Chapter Six

Quest to Overcome Fear

“I’m afraid,” said Isobel to the shrink, “I’m afraid all the time. Of everything.”

(Blown Figures 20)

Sometimes I wake up frightened in the middle of my mind. (Mrs. Blood 193)

As George Bowering rightly states if anything may be said to be Audrey Thomas’ consistent theme, it is private fear (Snow 28). Her women are usually bewildered, afraid of not being loved, unable to cope and dependent on men, though resentful of them. For Audrey Thomas it is in this context that events happen to the women protagonists. Her women are usually trapped alone in the self, resentful or fearful of failing at their roles somewhere in the society, an identity thrust at them out of the dark. They find themselves ineffective and terrified of their old age, coupled with their inability to cope with life.

“Tear Here” is the story of an old woman who has a strange habit of collecting plastic bags. She goes to the Super-Valu at least three times a week and tears off an inordinate number of plastic bags quietly and furtively. She would have gone more often but “some residual instinct” warns her not to make herself too conspicuous (L&E 108). She finds her own obsession with plastic bags queer. Although the bags are free and no limits are imposed on the number of bags a customer can have, and the bags are kept there only for the customers to use, she is still frightened that she might get into trouble.

She does not seem to have any friends, or even acquaintance. So she experiences a sense of insecurity. She does not discuss her reasons for collecting the plastic bags with anybody. All that is known of the old woman is that she is not very well off; she wears the same coat, the same shoes and the same stockings, day in and day out. Only a bit of an old
silk dress of dark and nondescript print is seen hanging down at one place below the hem of her coat. The fact that she is very old is known only because she does nothing to hide the grey in her hair or the cross-hatch of wrinkles on her cheeks or the liver spots on the back of her thin hands.

The narrator of the story wonders why the old woman has to make so many attempts to collect the plastic bags when she could have easily taken a whole roll in one attempt on an afternoon when the produce manager and the water boy goes to have a quick cup of coffee. She’d have saved all that anxiety about being caught. Although at her age it might be risky to face the five minutes of tachycardia, she still could have had enough plastic bags to last a year.

After successfully collecting 144 dozen plastic bags, the old woman slips one over her head and fastens a rope of dull green twisters around her skinny neck. All the 144 dozen bags are later found to be used and neatly refolded in the bureau drawers. She has been practicing this for 144 dozen days before taking the final step. The harmless pastime of collecting plastic bags has ended up in the self-annihilation of the old woman who is not courageous enough to face life all alone in her old age. Although she succeeds in overcoming her fear by committing suicide after 144 dozen attempts, she has disastrously failed in encountering her fear of life stirred up by her loneliness and old age. Thomas’ talent is for writing about states of mind that are tragically bleak.

Similar to this old woman is Mrs Hutchison from “The Survival of the Fittest,” who has to take up a journey all alone from France to England. The story records the claustrophobic account of the widow’s harassed journey. The fear of having to travel all alone makes her terribly ill and light-headed. Although she has taken a paracetamol, as a
precaution just before boarding the train, she feels very feverish and her headache begins to get worse everytime she closes her eyes. This fear in her brings before her, the mental image of a Mammy cloth printed with eyes, just like the fabric printed by a Manchester textile factory where her late father used to work. Whenever she closes her eyes, she is only able to envision the variations of the cloth. “Sometimes the eyes were brown, wide open against green palm branches and a blue sky; sometimes the eyes themselves were bright blue and set into the tail feathers of yellow birds; sometimes they simply grew on red stalks and were every colour of the rainbow” (WBY 148).

Her daughter, Heather is very much worried about Mrs Hutchison travelling alone. She helps her by arranging her bags on the rack above her head, so that she could keep an eye on it throughout the journey. She even comes forward to go with her as far as Boulogne, where she is supposed to take a connection train. But since she is only six weeks out of hospital with her baby whom she is breast-feeding, Mrs Hutchison does not want to trouble her with the pressure of travelling.

The journey is not so much fearful as she dreads. She is to get off from the train at the last station and follow the crowd who would lead them to the Hovercraft. This is the fastest way that she could take to reach her destination. This much Heather assures her. But Mrs Hutchinson, grown up during the war and apprehensive as she is, is reminded of the V1 rockets when she hears the word ‘hover’craft. She reminisces her life as a young girl when she and her mother used to wait in the “awful silence and darkness, holding hands and counting” (149). Senesced as she is, it appears impossible to her to make all the connections; first the train, then the hovercraft and a boat-train to Charing Cross and at last a taxi to King’s Cross. Also she would be too ill to manage the tube.
While on journey she thinks of her husband who had been a good man and a good provider. She wishes with all her heart that he were there beside her. The thought of her dead husband and the fear of having to handle things alone, adds to her prior suffering from headache which now has become terrible and sickening. In her fear she even wonders whether she would be able to get through the day.

With the rocking of the train aggravating her headache, she slowly falls asleep. When she wakes up she finds the countryside shrouded in fog. She gets even more frightened that she has become too ill to see things properly. It takes her quite sometime to understand that the fog, rolling in across the fields and farmhouses, is real and that she must be getting near the coast. With the headache still troubling her like “a growling dog behind a gate,” she stands on the seat to take her things down (152). Not wanting to exasperate her headache, she moves as carefully as she possibly can. Affirming to her opinion of football fans being mean and nasty, behaving “like idiots, egging one another on” (153), the crowd of male football fans shouts and sings in the corridor directly outside her compartment. They cause her great distress, perhaps threatening her life by undermining her inability to survive her fearful journey.

Brushing aside all this, she gets down from the train and follows the instructions that Heather has given her before departing; she follows the crowd to Hoverport. When all the other passengers head towards the Duty Free, all that she does is to sit down and wait until the flight is announced. Terrified that the fog might make her sick, she keeps her woollen scarf wrapped tightly around her neck. When an elderly couple informs her that they may get stuck there, as the hovercraft cannot operate in fog, she feels panic-stricken and
incapacitated. Unable to bear the delay, she wants to weep out aloud and earnestly wishes her
husband back from the grave. She yearns for somebody known and beloved to lean on.

In a deranged state, she is reminded of a china headed doll that Heather’s godmother
had presented to her daughter when she was small. Mrs Hutchison had decided to put it away
until the child was old enough to take care of it properly. She had felt that it was far too fine a
gift for a child of three. She had wrapped the doll, which had real hair, tiny white teeth and
clear blue eyes that opened and shut, in a tissue paper and had put it safely in a drawer.
However, after a few months the child had managed to get the doll from the drawer. She had
banged the doll’s head on the bathroom floor until the smiling face was all in pieces.
Frightened, the child had admitted that it wanted to see how the eyes worked. They turned
out to be attached to rubber bands. The memory of this doll, with its eyes attached to rubber
band, perturbs her already terrified mind. When she shuts her eyes against the re-emerging
pain of her headache and the noise of all people talking and shouting, she sees dozens and
dozens of blue glass eyes held together with rubber bands. She visualizes her own face
-cracked in several places just like the doll her daughter had banged years back. She finds the
image of the cracked face, sinister, frightening and even worse than the image of the mammy
cloth which threatened her earlier.

Although she is a practical woman who doesn’t give in to fantasies, the journey
makes her nervous. She even considers the possibility of postponing the journey until next
day and taking a room in the town to have a good sleep. She is gravely in need of rest and
peace of mind to overcome her fear as the image of the rubber band held eyes keeps
reverberating in her mind.
An announcement of the cancellation of the hovercraft, followed by the arrangement of buses to take the passengers to the ferry terminal makes her about to fall over. Now she has to take a ship to Dover and then a train to London, all this alone and by herself. Distressed by the noise and shouts in the departure hall, added to the clanking sound of the hundreds of liquor bottles in plastic bags from the Duty Free shops, she feels herself “drowning in a gigantic swimming bath” (155). The commotion and confusion caused, makes her struggle for breath. The fear in her brings several disturbing images into her mind. Her lungs feel scorched as though she has swallowed fire just like the fire-eater whom she had seen at a country fair. She envisages the fog as smoke and deadly gases that have seeped into the building. She wonders how her husband should have felt years ago, when he was struggling for his last breath, in the middle of the crowd, before dying of a massive heart attack.

Outside the hovercraft, it is even worse. The fog is so thick that they are unable to even see the water and the wind blows sharp sand all over. Mrs Hutchison boards the bus which is by now overloaded with other passengers. Annoyed by the journey, she tries to keep her mind stable by thinking of her cozy flat back in Edinburgh, where she can have a comfortable cup of tea, as soon as she gets home. She diverts her mind from the present turmoil by thinking of all that she can possibly do once she reaches home safely.

Compared to her other female protagonists this woman has the least control over herself and her environment. Signs (“CONTROLES’), slogans (“MINI MINI LOOK AT ME”), rude songs, shouts, “a disapproving voice from behind her left ear” (157) intrude upon her, breaching the line that protects her privacy and the line that distinguishes the world of formal narrative from unframed chaos. The protagonist sees eyes and flashes of colour
everywhere because of her hallucinatory fever, but no one can really see her pain and illness. Sound and noise “bounced off the walls,” there are “shouts[and] a babble of French and English” (155), but no one will listen to her pleas for help. Still, the flashbacks and disruptions are worked fairly smoothly into the fibre of the narrative as it progresses from when the protagonist’s daughter settles her on the train in Paris, through the turmoil of her journey, to when she is put on another train bound for her home in London. Unable to face the challenge, she ends up fainting in the train.

Contrary to the old women in “Tear Here” and “The Survival of the Fittest” who fail miserably in overcoming their fear, “Miss Foote” is the story of an elderly British traveler who has the courage to face, quite literally, her nightmare. She is a spunky world-travelling spinster who finds death in the form of a young punk barring her intrepid path and overcomes her fear by facing it bravely. Miss Foote is a very daring woman who faces the challenges audaciously irrespective of her oldage. Though she is alone, she never succumbs to loneliness or to the fear caused by it. Not only is she bold but also a very adventurous woman who loves to travel a lot, especially travelling alone so that there will be no one to consult or complain if she wants to “pop down one more narrow passage in the bazaar or to get up at dawn to see the sun rise over the Ganges” (GHGL 27). There is nothing that she likes better than being in a strange city and with a map in her hand, sorting things out for herself. She has also practiced to say a few common things in eleven different languages which may come handy in a foreign land like, “‘Where is?’ ‘how much?’ ‘too much,’ ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’” in addition to “That man is following me everywhere” (28).

That Miss Foote is a very brave lady is manifested in one of her encounters with a strange man in Athens. The man, in a ragged coat, steps from behind a bush and exposes
himself. Miss Foote is not a person who can be easily threatened. Bold as she is, she raises her walking stick against the stranger and the man flees in fear. The walking stick, which once belonged to her father, has the image of dragons elaborately carved, with their mouths wide open and ready to breathe fire. Miss Foote is also a dauntless lady who faces the threats in her life just like the dragon in the walking stick.

Although she is little bit frightened of her by now weak heart, she does not allow her condition to bind her free spirit. Regardless of her doctor’s suggestion to take rest and unmindful of the warning of the man in newsagents that the footpath is only for experienced hikers, she sets out on her journey to Cornwall. She calls a small hotel inn and makes prior arrangement for her stay and starts packing her bags with the walking stick strapped to the outside of her suitcase. Singing songs she walks down the street to the bus-stop. She does not care for what people think or say of her. She wears a ‘Women For Peace’ button in her lapel and tramps along the Cornish coast path.

Miss Foote has a strange dream. It is Sunday morning and she has started up the path which will lead on to the cliffs. It is about 9:45 and the recorded church bells are ringing. Miss Foote finds it very strange that the church uses a tape of church bells instead of a real bell. The tape gives out a ridiculous and mechanical sound which is more like a silly racket. Then, as she stops to rest a minute and take a picture of the little fishing boats in the harbor down below, the bells stop and a recorded hymn begins. Hearing the hymn, Miss Foote stands puzzled as it is a hymn which is usually sung only on Easter Sunday.

Dismissing her thoughts, she resumes her walk. As she nears the top of the hill she sees a young man, dressed all in black except for his white plimsolls, standing right in the middle of the path and reading a newspaper. Finding the climb a bit difficult, she does not
want to stop until she reaches the top. So she calls out cheerily to the young man but he does not move. Wondering whether he is really absorbed in his reading or he is deaf, she is annoyed at the young man’s behaviour. Now she has to go around him and step off onto the grass to proceed with her walk. So she moves to the left. Without looking up he too does the same. Already breathless from the climb and her heart pounding heavily, she is even more confused and makes her think that he might be on drugs. She moves back on to the path but he is too quick for her.

Forcing herself not be frightened, she pleads him to let her pass. But the man ignores her pleas and without looking up, reads out a headline from the newspaper reporting of a headless corpse kept in a sauna for five months. Not giving in, Miss Foote raises her voice and takes a step forward, speaking slowly, loudly and distinctly: “Please – let – me – pass” (34). The boy lowers the newspaper and stares at her as though he has just become aware of her presence. Miss Foote observes that he has painted his face white and thinks that he matches up, in his black suit, white face and white shoes, with the black-and-white cows munching contentedly on the hill beyond. The only difference that she notices between them is that the cows are fat and the man is as thin as a rake.

Without acceding to her request, he stares at her for a long time. When Miss Foote stares back at him, he says that the pathway is closed. Genuinely indignant she says that it is a public path and that it is always open. She further adds that she has come up there for a walk and that she intends to have it. Saying this she forces her way up the hill. But the man is obstinate and continues reading his paper. Miss Foote looks behind to see whether there is anybody else coming up the path but there is no one. The man lowers his newspaper again
and addresses her. He animadverts that the world is nasty and terrible and that there is no chance for a bloke like him to survive in it.

Annoyed by the young man’s behaviour, she retrieves her courage and speaks out firmly that she is not prepared to discuss the state of the world with him and that she only wish to get on with her walk. But he continues graveling her by blocking her path. The only way to get rid of him is to give up and get down the way she climbed. But even the thought of getting down that long way makes her feel dizzy. Threateningly he takes a step forward. Frightened and furious, she steps back and decides to get down the hill. Miffed by his demeanor, she decides to jeopardize him by making a report to the authorities. But when she turns around to start back down the path, he gets down and continues to block her path. This makes her panic and her heart which is already weak, starts to beat very loudly.

On the spur of the moment, unmindful of her heart condition, she gets enraged and decides not to tolerate the insolent behaviour of him. She courageously raises her father’s cane and starts beating his head incessantly, all the while screaming at him. She stops only with the loud knocking of the door by the landlady. Only then does she realize that her encounter with the young man is just a dream and that she is not on the cliff but in her bed, with her right hands still clenched as though holding tight to her walking stick. The nightmare makes her drench in sweat and her sheets are soaked.

Miss Foote realizes that her body has betrayed her and that she has wet herself in her terror of the dream. The dream has been so intense that it does not seem very much a dream but a very real event from which she has been saved only by the landlady’s knock. The power of the dream combined with the humiliation of the wet bed reduces her to tears. She weeps as she hasn’t wept in years. In a perplexed state, she gets out of bed and changes her
dress. Not knowing what to do with the wet sheet and mattress she feels dizzy. However she pulls herself together and decides to turn the mattress to hide the large wet stain made by her. She rinses out the bottom sheet and hides it at the back of her wardrobe. She tidies up her room and has a leisurely bath to overcome the resulted tautness.

She gets down and tries to help herself to tea at the breakfast table. But she is completely horrified when the guests at the table discuss the scandal of a millionaire who killed his wife by cutting off her head and kept the rest of the body in a sauna for five years. In her dreadful state, she makes a wreck of her piece of toast and there are torn bits and crumbs scattered all around her plate. But she does not succumb to her fears. She decides to take a brisk walk around. She sets out to Lobber Hill, where the path up to the cliffs begins. Smiling at everybody passing her, she tries to find solace in the famous lines of Robert Browning from “Pippa Passes”: “God’s in His Heaven . . . all’s right with the world” (GHGL 40). She strides through the narrow streets and courageously walks up the hill.

Miss Foote relives every detail of her dream. Just as in her dream, she hears the recorded church bell ringing which breaks off and is followed by the hymns. Disregarding the fear caused in her dreams, she moves bravely up the hill towards the dark figure standing right in the middle of the path, reading the Sunday paper. She successfully overcomes her fear by making up her mind to climb the hill and to face the danger that lay ahead. Not giving in to fears, she encounters the situation courageously.

Some of the women in Audrey Thomas’ short stories are completely dependent upon others. They find it very difficult to play their roles when they have to face their lives alone, even if it is for only a few days. Even mere existence comes as a challenge for such women when left alone. The protagonist of “One is One and All alone” is one such woman who is
sorely tried in her role-confidence. She is a young wife of a British official in Africa who is trapped alone in the self, insecure about her role in the family. She is afraid of the responsibilities laid upon her when her husband goes up-country for several days. She sees it as a heavy burden to bear. Every morning she crosses out a date from the small calendar that she keeps above her dressing table, thereby keeping count on the number of days left for her husband to return and to relieve her from the trouble of taking care of the family. “Two days, two nights already over – only twelve nights to go” (TGB 100).

Once on her walk with her husband around the lanes, she spots a Victorian doll’s house. She longs to reach out, touch it and own it because it looks safe as in the saying “Safe as houses” (100). She wants to be always safe and protected. Sending off her eldest child in a school bus, she wonders whether she would be safe on her way. She even bothers about her daughter not wearing a cardigan and is terrified that she might catch up a cold, a little flushed as she was in the morning. Even little things like her daughter crossing the roads safely terrify her a lot. Hence the prospect of taking care of a family all alone for fourteen days comes as a threat to her.

In this instance the fear is complicated by a particular kind of guilt. She sees that she has inherited the habit of her timidity from her mother, who kept her “always safe – and always afraid” (101). Now she fears about passing her habitual anxieties to her daughters. She “sometimes wondered why her children did not sense the fear which lurked, like a ground fog, around their mother; why they didn’t smell it – as animals are said to sense and smell fear in a human being” (101). A real mother, it seems, is a guilty mother. Even her fantasy of suicide is rejected because of her fear of shame and embarrassment which would be loaded onto her surviving family. She is terrified of passing her fear of life to her children.
She has a consciousness of being on edge: “a cracked wife” (102). Samuel, the servant becomes a passive recipient of her projected fears and is endowed with threatening images. She seems to be affected by paranoia. She finds herself “encircled by black sweating faces” (104) and observes the black man as a threat in the dark when the lights failed one night. She wants him out away, in his own quarters at the back of the house. Her fear for him grows into hatred that she wants to avoid him entirely. She deliberately ignores his knocks until the last possible face-saving moment. When he wakes her up in the morning, informing her that the time is six-thirty, she is even more irritated by his presence as she finds his act as a reproach to her laziness. She envisages the slapping sound from his slippers as a literal slapping from him for waking up late.

In the Thomas’ repertoire, this story is the widest examination of the varieties of fear – there is a thunderstorm, a dentist’s appointment, the embarrassment of falling to pieces in public – and a stream of symbols, such as ground-fogs, cracked sculptures, a safe Victorian doll’s house, and so on. But running through the text one becomes aware of another element that seems crucial. That is hatred. The question is whether the hatred of her own fear will lead toward self-hatred or toward a strength that will defeat the neurosis. But this story does not so quickly resolve the question. The self-assured self that she enacts to mask her pervasive feelings of fear and ineptitude is shattered when she loses a filling from a tooth. This fabricated self, like the tooth, crumbles and exposes the ‘raw nerves’ of her irrational fears. At the end the woman faints in the dentist’s office, thus becoming as uncomplicated as she believes the lives of others to be.

Some of the women characters in the short stories of Audrey Thomas are unable to live a happy life due to their loneliness. Constant isolation/separation drives them to imbibe a
fear syndrome. The protagonist of “One Size Fits All” is a lonely and neurotically affected woman whose problem stems out of a dream sequence. She develops a sort of fear which makes her imagine everything that she sees as a threatening message to her. The fear gets reflected in her dreams; dreams that are unclear and full of fog. A face appears out of the fog and speaks to her. (Usually) The face addresses her only in phrases with not more than one phrase each night. The messages left by them in her dreams are very strange. They read as “EXPECT CHANGES,” “AVOID SCANDAL,” “EVERYTHING MUST GO” (GHGL 173). The messages reflect the fear she undergoes in her life due to loneliness. For three days at a stretch she dreams of the face. The messages left by the face are so threatening and disturbing that at the end of the third day she stops dreaming. But the problem is not with her dreams. It is because of the loneliness that she is made to suffer with. She says, “Something had gone wrong in my life. Something was going going gone” (173).

Though she succeeds in giving up her dream, thereby moving a step further in winning over her fear, the messages start appearing on her kitchen table. The first message is attached to a straw and reads “THIS IS THE LAST STRAW”. The next day also she finds a message, but this time it is attached to a rope. It says “YOU ARE AT THE END OF THE TETHER”. The third message is attached to the handle of a measuring cup and it reads “YOU’VE HAD IT UP TO HERE” (174).

All these messages disturb her and leave her deeply distressed. Wanting to overcome her suffering she decides to go to Kingston, Ontario, because according to her that is what people usually do when their lives fall apart in their hands like a badly bound book. The next day at 11am she leaves to Kingston. While on journey, the thought of her dead baby keeps reverberating in her mind. When she reads a note on the taxi, she feels her heart freezing. It
says “Human remains and pets not handled” (175). The very word ‘human remains’ makes her think of her baby which is no more. The journey that she has been looking for very much did not turn out well for she feels that she is freezing. Even the climate which was too hot for her earlier has now turned too cold that she feels frozen to death.

She gets off at Kingston and heads straight to the Prince George hotel. There are lots of old buildings in it filled with multitudes of people locked up inside. Her heart reaches out to them as she thinks being crazy is hard work. She sympathizes with those crazy people and the place seems to be very noisy to her. When the desk clerk at the hotel informs her that her friend is waiting she is totally confused, for she is so sure that there is no friend of hers there or a friend who would know that she would be there. She is not sure who her friend is. So she goes and waits at a small white table. She sees a lot of tourist mother, father and tourist children climbing aboard a tourist train. They all wear a strange cloth, the kind given while leaving a certain type of hospital and they all say “Goodbye Dear, good luck, keep your chin up” (175).

The friend that the desk clerk informed her of comes and sits down across from her. Seeing her mind occupied with the tourist train nearby, he informs her that it is a train made by the prisoners. He even suggests that she should take a trip on that train as it would be lots of fun. Later he shows her pictures of his family and his dog. It makes her think of her dead child. She informs him that she has a ghost child who wouldn’t stay with her for very long. She also adds that no matter how much she informs of her deep love for the child, it would never stay, for, her ghost Mama, standing on the other shore always succeeds in calling the child.
The man suggests her that she should visit Smiths Falls where there is a big hospital and a home for the retarded. But she, who pines for a clear world, all the time living in one haunted and transformed by her fears, excuses herself and retires to her room saying that she is tired and wrung out from the journey and the conversation. She arranges to meet him for dinner. At dinner there is another message for her on a paper placemat. It reads “BOP TILL YOU DROP” (177). The protagonist, who initially sets out on a journey to defeat her fear, now continues on her quest to overcome the same. After the last message, she packs her bags and carries on her journey. She may or may not succeed in her quest at the next destination. It is left open to the readers’ imagination. The women in Audrey Thomas’ stories thus become stronger. Instead of grappling with internal demons, the terrors inside their heads, they venture to engage the outside world and face the challenges it thrusts.

Some of Thomas’ women are very conscious of their role as wife and as mother. They take pride in being the maker of the family and they cannot accept another person usurping the role, even if it is just a male servant. “Xanadu,” narrated by a female protagonist, gives a somewhat sarcastic portrait of a woman who is a wife and mother. She feels these positions threatened by the male African housekeeper, Joseph who does the jobs more efficiently than she does. The story focuses on the woman’s initial self-congratulatory feeling for having acquired Joseph, a treasured genie and a “perfect jewel set carefully and expertly into her golden chalice of contentment” (TGB 36), a “paragon” (39) compared to the incompetent, lazy, thieving stewards of the other women. The title and the description of Joseph are all intended equations between the fabled exotic dream palace of “Kubla Khan” and the woman’s state of initial bliss. She feels secure in the certainty of Joseph’s “pleasure”, which was to “serve her and ‘the master’” (40).
Although at first she delights in the ‘pleasure dome’ which she finds herself in, with a servant who cooks, cleans, shops, and takes care of the children to perfection, she comes to resent the servant’s superior ability later because his domestic skills put her to shame. She is distressed and feels somehow awkward and shamed by the presence of help in the house. An accumulation of Sundays, when the “huge black Prospero” (41) was not there to perform his magic so that she had to exert herself, establishes her as “an incompetent, albeit delightful woman” (44) in the eyes of her family, a feeling she does not like.

She notices that her family has come to rely more on Joseph’s attentiveness than on her own homemakerly negligence as Sunday, Joseph’s day off, becomes a weekly ordeal of burned toast, cold potatoes, and tears. “After all,” she whines, “in the terrible heat, with a cantankerous stove, they could hardly expect her to be perfect” (41), something as infinitesimal as a grain of sand in an oyster “begins to pick at the back of her conscience: jealousy” (42).

Joseph therefore is constantly changing costumes in the narrator’s feverish view: at one point he appears “like a huge black Prospero”, a few paragraphs later he has changed into “another Ariel with hosts of spirits at his command” (34). She feels that Joseph has smudged the line between master and slave: “He serves without being servile” (40) she remarks.

Still as in Eden, “except for the incident of snake, things might have gone on, indefinitely, very much as before” (42). One morning when the protagonist goes out to dry her clothes, she sees a large python sluggishly uncurling itself from the clothes pole, just three feet away from her. Hypnotized with terror, she stands there rooted to the spot. Unable to face the threat, she runs into the house, screaming. She locks herself in the farthest
bedroom until her husband and children come home for lunch. She ventures out only when they assure her that the snake has been killed. The dead snake, killed by Joseph is stretched out on a pole behind his quarters. Her son’s statement that pythons don’t bite and that it crushes its prey to death, bounces off her consciousness. She interprets it as a warning to her. She imagines Joseph to be the snake, crushing her and diminishing her power in front of her family.

The encounter with the snake leaves her very much disturbed that she is unable to be her normal self. She does not even thank him for saving her as he sees him to be a menace even more threatening than the snake. Secretly she wished that the snake had managed to get away. She feels somewhat embarrassed by Joseph’s help. The embarrassment is not because of her screaming at the snake but it is because Joseph has made her feel indebted to him. She realizes that she owes “something [everything] to this dark man who could cope with anything.” Her realization that “she belonged to Joseph and not Joseph to her” (43), poses a threat to her identity as the mistress of the house.

The incident of snake is just one example of the way in which Joseph has gradually made himself indispensable. On Sundays things always go wrong and her children always tease her brutally and mercilessly criticizing her as Joseph’s stand-in. It begins to hurt her as her husband and children start to patronize him. One Sunday when the youngest child sheds bitter tears as there is no Joseph to cut her eggs in a special way, she leaves the table infuriated and later unable to bear his predominance starts weeping. She fears Joseph more and more deeply than she fears the snake because he interferes with her own sense of herself as a person, as a woman. Until Joseph she was able to entertain comforting and easy assumptions about who she is: she is a housewife and a mother. ‘Housewife’ in this context
takes on a dangerous dimension because of the identification it makes between her house and her body; Joseph threatens her role in the house, and therefore becomes identified in her mind as a threat to her body.

Each time Joseph “increased in importance, she diminished” (44). The youngest child in his anxious voice asks his father whether Joseph will kill all the snakes. The father comfortingly assures him. The child continues questioning him as to who will save them on Sundays as there will be no Joseph then. To console the weeping child, her husband jokingly says that they can throw some of the mother’s burnt toast at the snake and hit it right between the eyes. This comes as the crowning blow and it is too much for her to bear. Not only has Joseph made himself a necessity in their household, but has made her a family joke and this makes her stifled and frightened. All the little helps which Joseph has performed for her and all the larger duties which he has removed from her weary shoulders now seems like a golden thread that is binding her tighter and tighter to a conception of herself as a totally incompetent woman. She feels as though she has been tricked out and deceived of her rights.

Lying down on her bed and smoking she examines the problems, “exploring the wound the way a child will explore with his tongue the raw hole where a tooth should be” (44). The next day after sending Joseph to the market, she stands at the window for a long time and watches his erect figure grow smaller and smaller until he turns the bend in the road and disappears. After making sure that he is gone, she opens the silver chest and selects three coffee spoons almost regretfully. Holding the silver in her hands and hating to part with it even a few hours she makes her way slowly and determinedly across the courtyard towards the servant’s quarters at the back of the house. The crossing of boundary space is only to reinstate the seeming power imbalance. Joseph’s “regal” look has to be humbled (40), and
the slave made to retain his assigned space. Joseph, who remains the silent inarticulate absent presence “like a cool shadow” (39-40) has to be erased because of daring to become too valuable, the value itself assigned by the eraser. To her surprise, she finds herself resorting to subterfuge to get rid of him. To expiate her guilt of being indebted to Joseph, she compounds it by planting three silver spoons in his room so that she can accuse him of theft and dismiss him. Thus she overcomes her neurotic fear of losing her power and importance by getting rid of the man who poses a threat to her.

This neurotic fear takes a somewhat different standpoint in “The Slow of Despond” which records the fear of Sarah MacLeod of losing her frail baby. Sarah who has already faced two abortions is frightened when her missionary husband, Gordon talks of Acts of God. She tells him that she saw a golden axe, and that it was the Axe of God. Sarah feels that the loss of her unborn child is a punishment for not loving her father. But she does not share this with her husband. Things which has not bothered her earlier begins to bother her now – the sun, the snakes, the noise of drumming in a nearby village, the silly jumping games of the school girls. She senses that certain words detached themselves from ordinary conversation and floated on the wall above her head: “‘knife,’ for example, or ‘fever’ or ‘blood’” (WBY 28). Neurotic as she is, she is so much terrified of losing her child that she even goes to the extent of killing it to overcome her fear.

Some of Audrey Thomas’ women are also frightened of the prospect of their husbands leaving them. As already discussed in the second chapter, women are devastated and are left frightened when their married life is posed with a threat. “Compression” is a story that explores a woman’s mind and its wanderings. It describes the psychotic condition of a woman named Veronica who has been diagnosed with a malignant breast tumour. She
tries to deal with her anxieties and fears about a mammogram and the possible results. Sitting in Norma Jean’s Restaurant she contemplates on how to disclose this to her husband. She is frightened that her husband might leave her if he comes to know of her tumour. She is so much disturbed and frightened that she starts thinking of the word game that she has played with her husband, the previous summer, when they were driving along the narrow Cornish lanes. “‘St Ride, he looks after the horses.’ . . . ‘along with St Able, he’s the handyman about the place’” (WBY 163).

What starts for her as a game generated from bp Nichol’s The Martyrology ends in the contemplation of “St Ag,” “The Stag at Even,” “St Agatha with her breasts on a platter holding her other symbol, the dreadful pincers which had cut them off” (164). The word-particles separate and multiply, paralleling the lopped-off body parts and cancerous growth: What if the answer is cancer? What if the cells split? C-answer. “Cancer. An ugly word. It began with a shape like a sickle or a breast with a big bite out” (170). The particles compress language, revealing conglomerate thoughts in parts of words. Similarly, Veronica’s breast is compressed by the X-ray camera, causing her to remember images and stories of death (“Death as a male stripper”) and mass murder at a picnic site in Hungerford – hunger-ford-death. She sees the breast as a source of food, with the clinic as the restaurant: “today’s special” was always the same at Atomic-Paradise Café (171). She is aware of the irony of carcinogenic X-rays entering the body to probe for tumours.

Thomas employs right and left body and brain imagery to explicate her fear. When Veronica’s right breast is being X-rayed, she uses mental exercises to distract herself: “Veronica is a woman who dealt with scary situations by telling herself jokes or by talking too much” (164). While her left breast is being X-rayed, she thinks of sexual energy, death,
and murder. She has to come back to have the left breast, the “sinister breast,” X-rayed again, and so certain questions arise: Why? Did she move? Did they see a tumour? (171). The combination in the story of images of right and left sides, of verbal and emotional components of self, acts to identify the breasts as complete or inclusive signifiers, like a name: “‘Ma Ma,’ the breast, a doublet, like what it signifies” (169).

Although the narrative imagistically comes full circle when Veronica is served “a single poached egg” (172) at Norma Jean’s Restaurant, reminding Veronica of the Atomic-Paradise Café and of a breast with a lump in it, the results of the exam have not yet been received. This story awaits completion while the text spirals off toward another circle, another story, in the brief last paragraph where Veronica waits fearfully for the bus. This lack of closure is typical of a spiralling structure in which one story continues into another and is highlighted by the ironic perspective from which we see the egg. Women have commonly been associated with circular structures of death and birth because of our gender function of bearing children. Eggs are typical symbols of this cross-species gender role. Veronica orders the egg, a life symbol, when she is contemplating death, evoking the traditional search for life beyond mortality. But this time Audrey Thomas clearly notes that the egg is poached, which destroys any true life-giving function. The ironic perspective on the poached egg that looks like a breast with a lump in it also symbolically indicates the life-saving benefits of mammograms and the hazards of accumulated low-level radiation (slow cooking, “poaching”) from frequent exposure to X-rays, especially of the breast and chest area.

Rather than succumbing to self-pity, Thomas’ characters tend to persevere with spirit and humour. Veronica in her attempts to overcome her fear of possible breast cancer tries to divert herself with elaborate word games about real and imaginary saints. She is, Thomas
writes, “a woman who dealt with scary situations by telling herself jokes or by talking too much” (164).

The fear of the prospect of husband leaving them is also recorded by the protagonist of “Galatea,” who is frightened to part her husband even for a minute. At the Gare d’Austerlitz he asks her to take a picture of him walking towards the train. She is to wait until he has gone about twenty-five yards and then click the shutter. As she watches him through the viewfinder, her hands begin to shake. She conceives of him walking away from her forever. Terrified to see him walk away she panics and presses the button quickly knowing the picture won’t turn out. She also consciously tries to eliminate any signs of loss from her landscape. She fails to share two observations with Peter. The first observed secret opens the story: “Two swans went down the river, but only one came back” (RM 35). She discovers the second detail on her walk. It’s the message left on a footbridge in chalk: “Je suis obligé d’aller a Bergerac, Sylvie” [I have to go to Bergerac, Sylvie] (38). She represses both these signs of separation fearing that offering them as evidence might once again evoke her husband’s discontent with her, as he has already left her for over a year. Her unwillingness to divulge these signs hints her fear of her husband leaving her. So she overcomes it by erasing off everything in her life that may remind him of it.

“Out in the Midday Sun,” an ironically titled short story, traces Frank’s wife’s fear while living in Africa. From the very beginning she is very disturbed and frightened. She feels as if she has swallowed a stone, as though someone beside her has silently laid a heavy hand on her bare shoulder and that it followed her even through locked doors. She even envisaged him blowing the back of her head. This fear is stirred in her with the arrival of a crucial letter which the woman knows will spell the end of their marriage when she tells her
husband about it. The woman’s secret is presented in the language of an illicit affair. She is frightened that her husband might leave her when he comes to know that she has been writing in secret. As she contemplates her decision to show him the letter, (presumably a letter of acceptance from her publisher), she realizes that her fear of her husband’s leaving her is really her fear of the knowledge that she must leave him. (a very Jane Eyre like transference here; Mr. Rochester never left Jane, though in her dreams she dreaded that he would), just as the threats that she feared from outside are really threats from within herself. She realizes that her fear in the form of dark, hostile eyes watching her from every alley and recessed doorway and the heavy hand on her shoulder is her own.

Her fear had nothing to do with Africa. . . . Africa, like a dream, had simply provided the symbols. She had refused to recognize the reality behind them.

(RM 95)

Like so many of Thomas’ female protagonists, Frank’s wife confounds the challenges of living in Africa with her personal mental distress. There are gaps between the befuddled character’s cognition of symbol and reality, between African reality perceived as menacing or favourable. Throughout her African stories, Thomas’ characters appear unable to negotiate their way through hallucination and reality in African settings. Thomas’ Africa is a troubling mixture of dream and reality. The inability of Frank’s wife to recognize the reality behind frightening symbols of Africa is indicative of Thomas’ own conscious tendency to distort the images of Africa and Africans.

Africa in itself is jeopardized in many of her stories. It is attributed to all that is fearful and scary. A man in “Joseph and his Bother” rightly warns the protagonist: “Take it slowly at first . . . Africa can eat you” (L&E 20). The African wind is also terrible and it
makes one look like paprika, covering the skin, hair and even eyelashes with the red dust, if
the windows of the car are kept opened while travelling through an African landscape. Even
mere signs in front of gas stations look like a threatening message to the protagonist. The
sign reading: “Rex 8.30 Tonight/Pay up or die” (20), which refers just to the name of the
local cinema, sounds horrifying to her. She clutches her husband’s hand out of fear.
Surrounded by taxis, lorries, walking figures and the noise created by them, she feels a kind
of strangeness catching at her throat. The very idea of entering into Africa threatens her and
she is scared of the prospect of the African steward not liking them and poisoning them. But
all this fear is just the product of her imagination. She wonders:

  Did a cook-steward protect you against the darkness and the drums? . . . If a
  Revolution came, would he protect us? (21, 23)

Her fear of Africa and all that associated with it, real or imagined, is kept in check by
her steward Joseph. But when he announces of his brother’s illness and his need to return to
his village, she is horrified and the fear sets in once again. In her fear she even thinks of the
possibility of Joseph being fed up of all the menial work and wonders whether the letter is
just a hoax to deceive her. The reality of Joseph as someone temporary in her life comes as a
threat to her. Frightened that he might not return, she tries to dissuade him from going to his
village.

As Atwood observes, “Audrey Thomas’ heroines are terrified of Africa because it is
terrifying, and because – like sexual love – they can neither understand nor control it. Part of
the darkness is in them, but if we are to believe Thomas’ work at all, part of it is really there”
(25). Africans are reputed to be savage, primitive, primordial and cannibalistic. Africa
becomes the source of the unconscious, the metaphorical heart of darkness, a landscape quite
so alive with danger. Thomas’ stories depict Africa and Africans as frightening spectres.
Matheson strengthens the idea by stating “Africa is strange, surreal. The colours are intense
and the people are black” (3). The grotesque lives of her characters find their counterparts in
the actual images supplied to them by Africa itself. Africa is used as a metaphor for their
fears in all of her African stories – “Xanadu,” “Joseph and his Brother,” “Out in the Midday
Sun,” “Timbuktu,” “One is One and All Alone.” It is also a character in several of these
stories, menacing and beyond comprehension.

Reflections of death, destruction and cemeteries that generate fear recur throughout
her short stories: the spectre of a mutilated St Agatha mirrors the protagonist’s fear of a
mastectomy in “Compression;” dead children in African graves destroy a young mother’s life
in “The More Little Mummy in the World;” A lonely widow’s ecstatic monologue
recounting her meeting with a stranger on a Scottish train is transformed into a tale of doom
by a twist at the start of the narrative in “The Blue Spanish Eyes.”

In “Elevation” Clayton’s daughter is accidentally left in a coffin when her class has a
workshop on dying and death. But she does not panic even when all the students and teachers
leave the room. She keeps saying to herself, “Now then Em’ly, now then Em’ly” (GHGL 8).
She overcomes her fear by taking deep breaths the way her father has taught her to do when
she is in a tight situation. When the teacher rushes back, she is taken by surprise as she finds
Emily sound asleep in the coffin.

In “Sunday Morning, June 4, 1989,” images of death’s door. She says that it is black in colour with a fanlight
attached to it and that it resembles a Gregorian crescent. She feels that the shadows of the world events have darkened her seemingly insignificant life.

In “Still Life with Flowers,” the protagonist is frightened of facing her ex lover’s death. This fear brings to her the memory of her teacher’s death when she was in her sixth grade. The teacher had died of cancer and the principal had made all the students attend the funeral. They were made to throw a single rose into the open casket as a token of respect. When her turn to pass the casket came she was so frightened that she ran off from that place with the rose still in hand. Terrified as she was, she ran all the way home and buried the rose in the garden, and even wondered if the teacher would somehow get a message to the principal. She was very much scared that she even dreamt of her dead teacher that night. In her dream, the teacher pointed her out as the enemy in the school assembly and the principal and all the other children ran after her, pelting her with roses. This makes her feel very guilty that even after several years she is unable to come out of this fear of attending funerals. After that day she has never gazed upon the face of death. Whenever there is a death in her family – “A multitude of aunts, uncles, cousins – even my grandmother . . .” (TGB 19), she tries to conjure up a false ailment or any excuse that she could think of and avoids the funeral.

In “Still Life with Flowers,” childhood memories are given, playing of ‘Dead Man’s Body,’ that scary game in the dark, where one is the isolated victim, of looking at sleeping parents and fearing that for this time they aren’t there. So she is afraid to look at the dead youth’s body, embarrassed at her own presumptiveness should she spy on him who cannot look back or even know that she is watching. Her memory of her teacher’s death instills in her the fear and terror of death.
Images of mass murder recur in her stories. In “Bear Country,” Wilma is haunted by thoughts of Marc Lapine, a mass murderer who killed around fourteen women and left thirteen injured before killing himself, because he felt that feminists had ruined his life. In “Miss Foote,” there is the scandal of a millionaire who killed his wife, cut off her head and kept the rest of the body in a sauna for five months as the wife had teased him about his sexual prowess.

From the discussion it is established that fear of old age, of incompetence, of unattractiveness, of death and of the unknown dominate her stories. They have a psychological bearing and project the difficulties faced by her characters in shedding their fear and insecurities. Some of Audrey Thomas’ women, although they have a difficult life trying to overcome their fear, they eventually come to terms with their fears and encounter it courageously. Still few others, make ceaseless attempts to overcome it; they try to slough off their fear syndrome and to make advancement in their process of the Quest.