Chapter Eight

Conclusion

This chapter summarily traces the arguments that have been put forth in this thesis. Audrey Thomas works to advance women’s knowledge of themselves. Her writing has been described as feminine; her forte is the minutiae of women’s lives, and she has claimed to strive “to demonstrate the terrible gap between men and women” and “to give women a sense of their bodies” (Coupey 98, 107). She documents the strictures on women’s lives and attempts to articulate this experience in women’s own words without positing alternate worlds. It is against this background that the thesis examines the short stories of Audrey Thomas from a feminist perspective to show that her protagonists confront all the adversities with courage and fortitude. They are involved in a grim struggle to attain “freedom and full human status after millennia of deprivation and oppression.”

This study of Audrey Thomas’ short stories began with discussing the reasons for the failure of traditional relations between men and women leading to the breakup of the two major social institutions – Marriage and Family. Incompatibility between the husband and wife was found to be one of the major issues for this breakup. It showed that this broken family syndrome lead the women to go in their search for fulfillment. Hence Audrey Thomas’ heroines all undertake a search in order to better comprehend themselves and their relation to the mad world they inhabit.

Audrey Thomas’ stories are about marriage, disintegration, human relations, and how women cope with solitude and parental responsibility. Her protagonists both as mother and writer are vibrant images of female heroism, while male characters function only in supporting roles. Her protagonists are independent, vibrant, and are also keen to take risks in
their lives to assert their individuality. However, her heroines need warmth, company and human attachment despite having an established sensibility and a feeling of self-assuredness. They refute the awful truth that women require husbands for social and economic security.

Throughout Thomas’ fictions is the constant fact of suffering, and an acute awareness of the psychological results of suffering – its power to distort our perceptions and our memories. A recurrent situation takes us to the appalling borderland between sanity and madness; on that knife edge of mental anguish appears the terror that haunts all Thomas’ fiction. Yet, the essential quality of her work does not lie in the nightmare that shadows her psychologically complex characters and loosens their grasp of experience; but rather in the precarious equilibrium, which they achieve so intermittently, between the fear and the joy of existence.

Audrey Thomas’ narratives stress gender issues. They celebrate a maternal domain that presents an alternative structuring to that of patriarchal systems. Each of her short story is a new voice, a new experience which is a record of the protagonist’s personal ‘her story’ to converge, fracture, deconstruct and rewrite male centered discourse. Her female characters are involved in the quest for self-definition or redefinition in the turbulent socio-political context of women’s and men’s rapidly changing roles and expectations. In a statement made to the Conference of Inter-American Women Writers at the University of Ottawa, Audrey Thomas remarked:

There are female images and female ways of looking at the world, interior or exterior. For if there is one thing that unites all the women at the Conference, that needs no translator, it is our biology . . . Where Philip Sydney’s muse told
him to look in heart and write, our muse has been telling us to look a little farther down. Our visceral imagination is now coming to the fore.

(My Craft 153)

There are no absolutes in Thomas’ work. Instead it is full of endless movements of giving and receiving. Each character, each word, reinscribes something, each constructs the web it tries to decipher. When lost in her worlds, one must pay attention to not only that which is visible and present, but to the non-text as well, the unknown that is always being conquered and always conquering, to that which lies beyond the boundaries of society, the silences. In these images of grotesque ideas of familial bonds and honour, in examples of love and selfishness, in battles between various kinds of truth and lies, Thomas seems to reveal many of her perplexities about the society in which she lives, but she does not offer solutions to these internal and external contradictions. This perhaps, is exactly what makes her works, timeless masterpieces of perpetual questioning.

There is no solution to be found in Thomas’ work, for she offers no clear answer; however, in what Coldwell refers to as “the calm of acceptance” (149) with which *Intertidal Life* closes, she does offer a confidence in humankind. As Rachel concludes, “It seems to take a whole lifetime to learn how to live, and then we need another one to put it all into practice” (172). Though reality is itself undefinable in a lifetime, one’s appreciation of it improves with experience. But Thomas does not present an image of life as being rooted in chaos, preferring to offer what she has defined as “that sense that things are operating according to some kind of plan” (Bowering, Songs 9). It is the presumption that individuals can interpret that plan objectively which Thomas hopes to weed out of human perception.
Thomas’ female protagonists have encountered chaos, fear, defeat, loss and death and have attempted to come to terms with their past or the concepts of guilt and evil. Her characters’ experiences are grounded in the real and their learning consists in accepting both their own shortcomings and life’s inconsistencies and cruelty and how they fight against it. Her women keep on going and try to make progress in their quest for their fulfillment and attempt to organize the chaos pertaining to it.

Audrey Thomas, in an interview admitted that she “sort of believe(d)” (Wachtel, Room 60), there is a kind of happy ending which “may or may not involve” another person or thing. “It’s got nothing to do with some stranger coming into your life.” What is needed is to “come to terms with yourself . . . decide that you like yourself and you’re quite a reasonable human being for all your flaws . . . and you make your own happy ending” (61).

Audrey Thomas’ response to an interviewer who asked her whether her stories were a conscious search for the self, was to equate the quest for self with the frustrations of the early explorer’s quest for the North West passage, when, not finding it where they thought it would be, they concluded it did not exist; but what they got out of it was the search itself. For Audrey Thomas, it was not so much the quest, but the action involved in the quest, that was important. The question is not whether Thomas’ search is successful, but what it is she has found.

As she has recorded on the back cover of Real Mothers,

Women are busy charting new seas and fixing new boundaries, fearful that perhaps the world is flat after all . . . . But still questing, still moving, still sailing on. These are the women I am particularly interested in.
The point in this feminist revision of the heroic explorer image is that the uncharted seas are inside as well as outside the female psyche; the woman telling the stories is both the sea and the ship, and these stories with no sense of an ending are pages out of a logbook written while the explorer is ‘all at sea.’

Further research can be undertaken to include a wide study on her short stories from a feminist deconstructive perspective. It would also be rewarding to look at the stories following a feminist dialogical perspective. Thomas has repeatedly spoken of her interest in the visual arts and in surrealism. An analysis of the visual elements of her craft particularly might lead to greater appreciation of her writing. Yet another field for exploration could be to study Thomas’ transformation of her short stories into novels – what key elements of language, structure, form bring about the re-shaping and expansion. A fulfilled comparative study of Audrey Thomas and women writers in India would also become a welcome addition to the hitherto neglected short stories.

This study will have contributed towards an advancement of Canadian Literary studies in India and elsewhere, if it has encouraged further interest in Thomas’ works, and if it has motivated more readers to newer paths to explore her fictional works. Such a rewarding venture should yield greater insights into the writing of this author who has courageously walked the often difficult and lonely road of the creative artist and who is undoubtedly one of the foremost female voices in Canadian Fiction.