Chapter One

Introduction

The English Canadian short story is a relatively recent literary phenomenon and it joined the realm of world literature only in the twentieth century, with Morley Callaghan’s development of the modernist Canadian short story in the 1920s. Several Canadian short story writers rank among the world’s best contemporary writers of short fiction, such as Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood. These authors have been awarded major international literary prizes for their works like the Booker Prize (Atwood) and the W.H. Smith Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award (Munro).

Apart from such international achievements, the contemporary Canadian short story is also a lively and productive genre. The annual Governor General’s Award(for fiction), which is Canada’s most important literary prize, has for almost thirty years been granted one out of three times to Canadian short story collections rather than to novels. As has been very correctly assessed by Reingard M. Nischik, surprisingly, “little literary criticism has been devoted to the Canadian short story” (2). This prompted me to take up a full length study exclusively on the short stories of one of the leading women fiction writers, Audrey Grace Callahan Thomas, whose short stories have not been sufficiently studied to bring out its several literary qualities. The fiction of Audrey Thomas, though much less well known than that of other contemporary Canadian women writers including Adele Wiseman, Sheila Watson, Margaret Laurence, Atwood, and Marian Engel, richly repays investigation.

Canadian women writers since the mid 1960’s are in the process of mapping out a new geography of women’s experience, of creating new, female answers to Northrop Frye’s famous Canadian question, “Where is here?” (220). These writers are actively defining their
subjectivity, or at least, in good postmodern form, troubling the waters of traditional reflections of them. Such troubling has not necessarily, as Hutcheon has remarked, “led to the discovery of Woman” (108), but to the complex and differing literary evocations of female experience.

Audrey Thomas refers to specifically female experiences which women can and should explore. In bringing critical attention to Audrey Thomas’ work, this chapter explores the major concerns and interests of her writing. Thomas is concerned with women’s experiences and women’s expression of the world. She is interested in the female identity, creativity and the constraints to their development. In order to critically analyze and study the works of Audrey Thomas it is imperative that her life and works should be studied together, as autobiography is ubiquitous in her fiction and provides a rich background.

Audrey Thomas’ father was a teacher and one of her aunts was a professor of mathematics. Her maternal grandfather was an engineer and inventor with IBM in Endicott. His big summer house in Adirondack Mountains of northern New York was a peaceful abode for Thomas during vacations. She was very close to her maternal grandfather who provided the thread of gold in her otherwise drab brown life. Her grandfather’s punning and philology aroused Thomas’ interest in words and provided her lessons in “reality and illusion” in her literary career (Stanley 7. A).

Her family life was not smooth; it was strained due to constant quarreling by her parents about financial troubles. Contrasting the relationship of her mother and father with that of better-suited couples, Thomas stated: “It was years before I realized that husbands and wives actually shared one room.” Furthermore, she has observed the influence of their unstable marriage on her own development: “When you have parents who behave like
children, parents who refuse to take charge of their own lives, then how can you ever be a child yourself?” She often felt lonely and misfit. In later years, nonetheless, they expected her to write “stories that ended happily” (Appelbe 34A).

She started school at the age of four with a weak eyesight. She grew up during the war years preoccupied with death. At the age of fifteen, she won a scholarship to a girls’ private school in New Hampshire. This was followed by another scholarship to Mary A. Burnham School in Northampton, Massachusetts. She took admission in Smith College on a tuition scholarship in 1953 and received her B.A. degree in 1957. In order to afford a year abroad studying in St. Andrew’s, Scotland, Thomas worked for two summers as an orderly at the Binghamton Asylum for the Chronic Insane, which locals referred to as The Hill. About her job then she observed: “If anything made me a writer (if writers are made, not born) I think it was The Hill. For although my family life was pretty terrible emotionally, I had, in fact, led a sheltered existence. . . . I had not known there were people like this in the world” (Nakamura 352). While in college, she travelled to Spain, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland and Scandinavia during holidays. She went to Britain after graduation and taught in the Birmingham slums at Bishop Rider’s Church of England Infant and junior School.

Audrey married Ian Thomas, a sculptor and art critic at the Birmingham College of Art, in 1958. In 1959, after the birth of their first daughter, they moved to Vancouver, British Colombia. She enrolled in M.A. programme in English at the University of British Columbia. Her thesis “Henry James in the Palace of Art: A Survey and Evaluation of James’s Aesthetic Criteria as Shown in His Criticism of Nineteenth Century Painting” was completed in 1963. She began doctoral work with the support of a Canada Council award. Her thesis “An Archetypal Reading of Beowulf” was not accepted. It was considered more like a novel than
a dissertation. After this, Thomas opted out of academia. She taught English at the University of British Columbia from 1959 to 1963. She met numerous writers involved in the emerging Tish poetry movement, but always felt separate from them as a prose writer.

Audrey Thomas accompanied her husband to Africa. Her husband taught at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana, from 1964 to 1966. Her first published story “If One Green Bottle . . .” appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* (1965) while she was in Africa. After her return to Canada in 1969, she took up writing full-time and bought a house on Galiano Island, in the Gulf of Georgia, British Columbia, where she had lived since. Two more daughters were born to her during this period. She again visited Africa – French West Africa, Senegal, Mali and Ghana for three months of research in 1971. She separated from her husband in 1972 and got divorce in 1979. She took up teaching assignments to support her family.

Audrey Thomas has several honorary degrees, including an honorary SFU doctorate, conferred on her in 1994. She has written nine novels and seven collections of short stories. Thomas served on the panel of judges for the 2002 IMPAC Dublin Literary Arts Award, the most lucrative literary prize in English. Her books have been translated into several languages and she has twenty radio plays to her credit, several of which have been broadcasted on CBC Radio. She has also written numerous travel articles, some of which featured in Air Canada’s in-flight magazine. A special issue of *Room of One’s Own* (1985) highlighted her works and life. She lived in Greece, France, England and Scotland, but has chiefly resided at the north end of Galiano Island since 1969. During the 1970s, Thomas served on the Arts Advisory Board of The Canada Council and on its Reading Tours Committee. She is also a member of the Writers Union of Canada, on whose national
executive she has served, and P.E.N. All this helped her in getting Canadian citizenship in 1979.

Thomas as a child had a romantic dream of being “A Writer,” desiring “to be known and all those things” to compensate for being shy (Coupey 94). She was an ardent reader introduced by her maternal grandfather to the magic of words, and a listener of her “Shanty Irish” father’s storytelling (Hofsess 16). She wrote some poetry when she was about twelve, adding fiction at about nineteen: “I wrote several stories . . . when I was living in England” (Bowering, Songs 7). None of her tyro work was published and Thomas considered them “really terrible stories” (Wachtel, Guts 5). It was the stimulation at the University of British Columbia that turned her “on to words again” (Coupey 95).

Audrey Thomas’ writing spans nearly three decades, beginning with her collection of short stories Ten Green Bottles published in 1967. In the stories, the characters grope for meaning, which would give them reassurance of their existence in a seemingly absurd world. According to Anita Raskia, it is the work of an author who “has clearly arrived” to give an effective creation of a “mood of anxiety among the ordinary” (Kay 30).

Audrey Thomas’ first novel Mrs. Blood (1970) is the story of Isobel’s complicated pregnancy resulting in a miscarriage. Although first to be published, Mrs. Blood is second in a triptych about Isobel Cleary. Songs My Mother Taught Me (1973), and Blown Figures (1974) complete the series of which the latter is a recollected journey to Africa, which in turn becomes the catalyst for the narrator’s journey into her own foreignness and sense of profound dislocation. The two novellas Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island (1971) examine the relationship between the mind of the creator and the product of her creativity and explore the interpenetration of illusion and reality.
The stories in Thomas’ second collection *Ladies and Escorts* (1977) are coextensive with her earlier periods of writing. The publication of this book along with a reissue of *Ten Green Bottles* made reviewers to comment that they are “companion volumes” (Scharbach 49). The stories can be classified into two categories. The African and Mexican stories focus on violent conflicts of culture, whereas other stories take up issues raised in *Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island*, exposing the fake pastoralism of the hippy retreat to the islands and exploring the relationships between the quality of an artist’s life and of his or her creations. Marion McCormick comments, “years have given greater confidence and skill” to Audrey Thomas (5).

*Latakia* (1979) depicts the portraits of two artist protagonists, one male, and the other female. Jane Rule who nominated *Latakia* for the Governor General’s Award contends that Thomas “perfects her method of maintaining multiple time streams for a marvellous economy of narrative” (10). The title for Thomas’ collection of stories *Real Mothers* (1981) comes from a line in *Latakia*: “I didn’t measure up to their ideal. Real Mothers weren’t supposed to have obsessions like writing or separate identities” (51). In these stories, women characters relate to the issue of being a true mother, one who is loyal, self-sacrificing and carries out the tasks necessary to assure her children’s well-being. However, these women are often unhappy, caught up in complex and conflicting emotions. They search for authenticity to displace the traditional notions and reconstruct new ideals. The stories narrate the actual experiences of ‘real mothers.’ These experiences are not the essence of motherhood but the actuality of it. Helen Hoy is appreciative of Thomas’ “metafiction[al] aims” (332).
Two in the Bush and Other Stories (1982) contains a selection of stories from Ten Green Bottles and Ladies and Escorts. These two books have close connection with respect to linguistic slippage of meaning between men and women. Some stories deal with the creative endeavours of both partners in a relationship; other stories show women’s revolt against myths or conventions circumscribing their lives and language. The publication of Two in the Bush and Other Stories prompted Eleanor Wachtel to comment that Thomas now appears “relaxed,” though her informality is “carefully crafted.” This is a result of the more performative mode of the stories, anecdote having replaced “elliptical, personal imagery” for narrative transitions (Contemporary 52).

In 1984, with the publication of Intertidal Life “an ambitious, complex work,” a major shift occurred in the critical evaluation of Thomas’ writing (Kareda 50). This novel was short-listed for the 1984 Governor General’s Award in Fiction. Goodbye Harold, Good Luck (1986), a collection of short stories, is introduced by an essay in which Thomas explains her method of composition through “correspondences” (GHGL xvi). Reviewers have preferred her short stories as Joel Yanofsky writes:

Comparing this accomplished book with her last novel, Intertidal Life, an uneven, difficult work, it’s easy to see why. Like Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant, Thomas is at her best working within the boundaries of the short story; she is at her most effective creating a fiction that is subtle and fragile, that is made up of hard choices and vivid moments. (14)

The Wild Blue Yonder published in 1990 is another collection of stories written by Audrey Thomas. The stories in this collection are compact and self-contained narratives. Although the central characters in these stories are white, her minor characters represent a
variety of cultures and races. These stories provide subtle analyses of emotional lives, often with a witty ironic touch that eases the pain of failed human relationships.

*Graven Images* (1993) builds on the motif of the lost child, but is equally a story about family history and about mothers and daughters. This is done in the process of writing a collaborative family history with Charlotte, incorporating her own autobiography and her mother’s biography. *Coming Down from Wa* (1995) is another version of the return to Africa, again in search of family history, but this time with a male protagonist. The Ghanaian scene is vividly evoked, as are the traveller’s discomfort, sickness, frustration, exhilaration, and joy. Audrey Thomas’ novel *Isobel Gunn* (1999) is a fascinating exploration of history, culture, and the psychology of choice and loss. The novel is based on a few Hudson’s Bay documents from the nineteenth century fur trade, which refer to a Scottish apprentice who turned out to be a young woman instead of a young man.

In *The Path of Totality: New and Selected Stories* (2001), Audrey Thomas describes female protagonists in Africa, Mexico and Greece as the means of exploring their identities. The stories are tales of female experience of life, power and fascination for words. Settings in non-English speaking countries frequently allow her to exploit her fondness for wordplay. Thomas ends this collection on what she describes in the preface as “a note of quiet contentment” with a love story (ii). The writer is in a mellow mood at a late stage in her career. The most outstanding quality of Thomas to cherish is her ascorbic wit, the sometimes savage indignation, and the bitterness that remains on the palate like a dish of good vinegar.

Her 2005 novel, *Tattycoram*, recreates Charles Dickens’ character Harriet Beadle (Little Dorrit), making her a maid in the Dickens’ household and ending the novel with a confrontation between Harriet and Dickens himself. Apart from these, Thomas has written
plays for CBC Stage, broadcast on CBC Anthology another half-dozen uncollected pieces, including a children’s story. She has published more than a dozen book reviews in periodicals such as Canadian Literature and Books in Canada. She has also contributed essays to academic journals on subjects such as art criticism on women writers. Talon Books of Vancouver and Penguin Canada of Toronto have mainly published her books in Canada.

Audrey Thomas is the recipient of several awards and honours. Some of her stories like “If One Green Bottle . . .” won Atlantic First Award from the Atlantic Monthly in 1965. “Harry and Violet” won second prize in the National Magazine Awards fiction category in 1979. “Natural History” won second prize in the CBC Literary Contest fiction division in 1979-80. “Real Mothers” won second prize in Chatelaine’s Fourth Annual Fiction Competition in 1981, and “Untouchables: A Memoir” won second prize in the CBC Literary Contest memoir division in 1981. She has also won the British Columbia Book Prize for fiction three times: for her novel Intertidal Life, for the short story collection The Wild Blue Yonder and for the novel Coming Down From Wa. A three time winner of the Ethel Wilson fiction Award, Thomas also received the Marian Engel Award in 1987, awarded annually to a female Canadian author for her contribution to Canadian literature. She has been internationally recognized with the Canada-Scotland Writer's Literary Fellowship (1984-86) and the Canada-Australia Literary Prize in 1990. She has twice been nominated for the Governor General’s Literary Award and Commonwealth Literature Prize in 1996.

In 2001, Audrey Thomas was awarded the W.O. Mitchell Literary Prize and in 2003, received the ninth Terasen Lifetime Achievement Award for an outstanding literary career in British Columbia. The audio book version of Isobel Gunn, read by Vancouver actor Duncan Fraser, was nominated for an Audio Award in 2003. She was honoured with the $20,000
Writers Trust of Canada’s Matt Cohen Award in honour of a distinguished body of work. In 2008, she was made an Officer of the Order of Canada. Though signalling excellence and attracting a wider audience, for Thomas, prizes are far from the whole story. Nonetheless, these honours and awards support Priscilla Galloway’s contention that Audrey Thomas has moved definitely into the top rank of Canadian writers (203).

Thomas has taught creative writing at the University of Victoria and at the University of British Columbia. She has been writer-in-residence at Concordia University and at Simon Fraser University and Scottish-Canadian Exchange Fellow in Edinburgh. In 2004, she delivered the Margaret Laurence Lecture at the Writers Union of Canada AGM in Victoria. Thomas has a large variety of experience to share with readers because of having travelled widely. Landscapes to which she has travelled are spread through her works. Thomas is a writer whose world is surrounded by family, flora and fauna.

Audrey Thomas has selected Africa as a setting for several of her short stories and novels. This displays her fascination for the country where she has lived for several years. The foreignness of the land and its customs provide a metaphor for emotional alienation, the threat and challenge of the unknown, and exploration of the dark side of the self. According to Edward Said, Africa is one of the “deepest and most recurring images of the Other” that helped to define the West “as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1-2).

In Africa, the dream and the nightmare are substance and lie close to the surface. However, the surface itself is a cacophony of bright distracting images. The imposition of modernity on traditional modes of behaviour, the adoption of these western styles into indigenous rituals, the continuance of the rituals, and the resultant incongruous
juxtapositions, all produce confusion. The Africa that meets the eye is complex, contradictory and a great camouflage for the real Africa.

Africa has appealed to Western and European writers because it is so unlike European. It is where the European culture meets with the primitive, where dream and reality are confronted and the European intellect is replaced by the African superstition and magic. In Africa, the red hibiscus is a symbol of blood, the vulture of death, etc. they constitute what is tangible, sensuous and real in Africa. The expatriates seek the source of the unconscious, unknown and unknowable in Africa. Audrey Thomas herself admits:

Africa is a metaphor for the unconscious. I think for a white person, you can never know Africa as an African . . . Everything in Africa that I encountered was bigger, brighter. There’s the sun to deal with; the colours are very intense. There’s the terrific heat; there’s a whole culture and background of superstition and ritual and myth which is so close to the surface – we keep ours for funerals and weddings but there’s is everyday. (Komisar 63-64)

In the late 1960s, travelling to Africa the “Shadow Continent” became a new twist in the Canadian myth of the noble savage (Monk 3). This brings the works of Thomas within the orbit of archetypal, which has been a marked feature of Canadian fiction in the 1960s and 1970s. Barbara Godard has commented on Thomas’ “innate archetypalism” (Audrey 6). Thomas did an archetypal study of Beowulf for her incomplete Ph.D thesis. The presence in her stories of innumerable archetypes is explained as “unconscious because I certainly never consciously put in any . . . I don’t consciously use symbolism” (Bowering, Songs 12). Her works attract academically oriented readers. However, she resents “being made into an intellectual writer. Because I’m not” (Wachtel, Fences 68).
The major influences on Thomas’ writing are those of modern writers like James Joyce, Joseph Conrad and Henry James. While she absorbed from James a preoccupation with perception, she also adopted several closely related themes which are central to her work: the traveller, the interface of civilizations complicated by the blind innocence of characters, and the personality in flux. Thomas is intrigued by the moment when one thing turns into another. For her protagonists, travelling becomes a metaphor for the process of transformation, for self-discovery, just as Africa is often a metaphor in her works for the paradoxical intermingling of “dream” and “reality” (Bowering, *Songs* 10). In this context, her works find comparisons with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, though she admits that the real “darkness is in Canada” (Coupey 88). Like Conrad, she is primarily interested in questions of perception. This marks her difference from her contemporaries among Canadian writers who have also developed the expatriate theme.

In her earlier writing days, Thomas saw herself as a failed poet. Her relationship with the Tish poets group comprising George Bowering, Frank Davey, Fred Wah and Daphne Marlatt was distant. She told Bowering it was difficult to “enter what you people were doing . . . because it was all poetry”. Now she thinks her prose is close to poetry “meant to be read aloud” (Songs 8). Thomas also shares with the Tish group an inheritance from phenomenology: “a real articulation of your experience of the real” (Coupey 107).

Thomas’ many stories are set in foreign countries, especially Greece and Africa, where she lived for a short time. In these stories, the characters, most of them on vacation in Greece, experience a sense of estrangement, dislocation and displacement. Being in an unfamiliar environment compels them to face their own sense of unfulfillment, to find a meaning to their lives, to dare challenge their fear of life and death in stories like “Miss
Foote,” “Local Customs,” “Crossing the Rubicon” and “Two in the Bush”. Death and cemeteries are also present in a number of stories like “Miss Foote,” “The More Little Mummy in the World,” “The Streets of Laredo” and “Joseph and His Brother”.

The sea provides both a theme and a setting for some stories like “Local Customs,” “The Man with Clam Eyes” and “The Wild Blue Yonder.” In Audrey Thomas’ short stories, same characters appear in several stories, although the stories come from different collections like “The Albatross” (TGB), “Breaking the Ice” (TPT), “Ascension” (WBY), and “Local Customs” (RM), thus providing the collection with some kind of coherence, a sort of loosely connected network of themes, characters and images.

Audrey Thomas’ works deal mostly with the complexities of family relationships, especially, filial love between mother and daughter and thus pain is always involved in these relationships. In her works, “there is no single story of family life or marriage” (Godard, Audrey 67). There are as many stories as there are individuals involved. Each character brings his or her story with him or her. The emphasis is not on the description of characters but on the act of telling stories. The characters leave the dominant impression rather than the landscape.

The many allusions in her works range from the Metaphysical poets, through the Romantics, to the great Modernists. Thomas has used writing to bring order to her varied existence, giving her a context through words. Thomas’ awareness of remote literary traditions has been a source of technical innovation in her writing. Studies of Old Norse and Old English gave her an interest in philology and a sense of the instability of the word as sign. Her break with the “linear stuff like medieval” form of the organic novel was stimulated by her interest in the cumulative forms of folk narrative and the circular forms of
“Renaissance” fiction (Bowering, Songs 13). This broadening of perspectives is also evident in the works of another contemporary writer Hugh Hood, who, like Thomas, prefers “writing a roman-fleuve with recurring characters and motifs” (Godard, Audrey 6).

If Audrey Thomas’ roots were in the United States, her branches are in Canada. She has been there since 1959 and her first book, while published in the United States, was written in Canada and in West Africa. As a person, she is both very domestic and a wanderer. A reflection of this can be seen in the heroines of her novels. Her fiction finds its closest parallels with the works of writers such as Rudy Wiebe, who is interested in voice, or poet-novelists Leonard Cohen, Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Laurence, whose narratives also avoid traditional expository links and development occurring instead through a flux of images.

Thomas is concerned with the body, its foreignness and self-reflexivity, and with the process of writing. Thomas’ writing is self-reflexive and autobiographical like that of Alice Munro and Rudy Wiebe. These writers question the representation of reality through words and this mode of fiction is popular in Canada. Munro makes a distinction between “autobiographical” works defined as being “life in its incidents,” and “personal” works which “draw on experience” to point out the impossibility of erecting definitive boundaries between truth and fiction (Hay xii). Writers like Munro, Laurence, Blaise and Ondaatje play with this paradox yet build credible characters, whereas Thomas’ sense of writing as lying leads her at times to dissolve even this comfortable mimetic illusion.

Audrey Thomas is a highly skilled writer of short stories, a genre that has been very vital in Canada in the last three decades. Critics compare her writing with the best short story writers of the country like Hugh Hood, Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro. Thomas, like these
writers, builds her stories layer upon layer, generating paradoxes, ironies and creating a
density of texture which “demands much more of her readers than most writers” work do
(Novak 20). Her short stories are experimental. They contain many intricate stories within
stories, reflecting self-referentiality in her writing, which is a trait of postmodernism. Her
first short story “If One Green Bottle . . .” serves as the embryonic source for much fiction
that has followed. The experiment in this story continues to find its way into her subsequent
stories and novels like Mrs. Blood, Latakia, Two in the Bush, Intertidal Life, Graven Images
and Coming Down From Wa. All these novels focus on either a lost child, a lost lover or
occasionally on both.

Although Thomas has written both short and long fictional forms with equal ease, she
characterizes the shorter form as extremely demanding because the slightest error is
magnified in them. Working so accurately has clearly been an important apprenticeship in
her craft of writing. Continued practice has honed her use of highly allusive word and
telegraphic detail that even in her longer fiction traits of density and compression are to be
found.

Thomas’ works provide more scope for unearthing new dimensions of feminine
imagination. Significantly, Audrey Thomas does not give up the conventional role of the
responsibilities of a daughter and mother. Her life has been that of shifting from disturbed
home life through education to marriage, to motherhood, divorce, economic crisis and then to
stability as a writer. Her fiction has been and continues to be the evolution of feminism
moving beyond conventions. For Thomas, personal experience and maternal experience are
quite clearly connected and important to her art.
Thomas focuses on the complex experiences of modern women negotiating their way through the world of family, maternity, and personal relationships. Like Atwood, she sees the power politics of sexual relationships as focused in language, remarking that “language is where men and women get into trouble . . . they think they mean the same things by the same words when they really don’t” (Lacey 25). The recurrent motif of Thomas is the portrayal of female protagonist who needs warmth, company and human attachment despite having an established sensibility and a feeling of self-assuredness. She has been articulating her experience as a woman in a decade when women writers have been receiving much attention as a group. This places her works in not only Canadian context but also in an international context.

For Audrey Thomas, interest in language, change in meaning is related to personal association and experience. Her stress is always on the spontaneous, the unconscious, in sensing connections and not in any political motivation. She expresses the view that in order to confront patriarchy, one must “talk about forbidden subjects. That’s the way in the end to defeat particular use of language” (Wachtel, Fences 67). Her fiction is a manifestation of feminist consciousness. Her interest in etymological roots of words, experiment and innovations with form, and narrative voice are found in her works. Her inventiveness in using varieties of narrative technique and intertextual references has set a model for experimentation among younger writers.

Audrey Thomas’ feminist fiction is allusive, sophisticated, and experimental in narrative form and use of language. She is particularly interested in women being pushed to the edge, either due to personal or domestic circumstances, or because of social pressures. She portrays women’s challenge to the patriarchal society. Her women aspire to rise above
day to day business. They feel the painful dilemma of regarding themselves as the essential and the social pressure to accept them as a passive object. The apparent though masochistic willingness to belong, to conform, as well as the equally compelling urge for freedom and creativity felt by women is Thomas’ major concern. Thomas, like Margaret Laurence, makes ample use of biblical allusions and plots in her fiction; and like Margaret Atwood, she writes from knowledge of female rituals and rites. Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* and Audrey Thomas’ *Mrs. Blood* invite comparisons. Both these novels present explorations of the irrational, nightmare side breaking out of the order of male civilization.

Critics interpret changes in Thomas’ writing as signs of increasing maturity and improvement. In “Thomas and her Rag-Bag,” Butling places *Real Mothers* within the movement by women writers to redefine “the images of women” in fiction (195). Thomas successfully deconstructs old images to make way for new images. Idealistic images are replaced by more realistic ones, where “Confusion, embarrassment, and mixed feelings” become identified with mother love and with the construction of new ideals (198).

The growth of women’s self-awareness has considerably advanced in Canada during the 1970s. Thomas’ works, too, fit into the milieu of feminist writing. In her home on Galiano Island, Thomas is part of an artistic community, which has been said to “rival that of ancient Lesbos” (De Santana 15). She acknowledges her writing has been

shaped by some of the great women of the past: Harriet Beecher Stowe, whom I read in an illustrated edition when I was very very very young (and who had an enormous influence on the women of her own and the succeeding
generation), Louisa May Alcott, Willa Cather, Sigrid, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing and so on.

(Thomas, My Craft 152)

Audrey Thomas, in her obsession with death, invites comparison with Sylvia Plath who was at Smith College with her and whose obsession with death is expressed in poetic form. She writes from a woman’s point of view. Her books focus on female characters and the stories are told from their individual point of view. Each of her protagonists is in search of her own voice/identity, troubled by the ambiguous relations between language and silence, speech and thought, words and power. Thomas’ stories explore the constricting definitions of women and dramatize the ways a woman’s voice becomes the means to her self-realization.

Audrey Thomas advances women’s knowledge of themselves “to demonstrate the terrible gap between men and women” and to “give women a sense of their bodies” (Coupey 98, 107). Her position is like that of Munro, Laurence, Atwood, Marian Engel, Constance Beresford-Howe, and Carol Shields. She documents the strictures on women’s lives and attempts to articulate this experience in women’s own words without positing alternate worlds. Thomas is different from the other writers of the period with regard to her experimentation and her interest in sexuality. Thomas finds sexuality in Munro’s work mostly adolescent: “She’s never really written an adult story,” whereas Doris Lessing has written frankly about sexual relations “the sexual stuff between men and women” (Bowering, Songs 31, 14).

Thomas with her first short story “If One Green Bottle . . .” has inaugurated “gynecological” fiction (Bowering, Songs 20). Her concern for the body has drawn Thomas into the orbit of women’s writing in French, especially the works of Helen Cixous, who
advocates the translation of the body to create a new women’s discourse. Her concern also with the language and the acts of writing and reading finds a correspondence in the works of Nicole Brossard.

Thomas has great admiration for the works of Quebec women writers, especially Marie-Claire Blais’s *Mad Shadows*. She admits: “I feel a kinship with Marie Claire Blais . . . A book like *Mad Shadows* – I wish I’d written that” (Bowering, Songs 30, 31).

“Mademoiselle Blood,” the title of Audrey Thomas’ review of Anne Herbert’s *Heloise*, underlines her affinities with “the theme of mastery” and with the dark world where sex and death intertwine (11). These writers share a fascination with *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

Femininity is of major interest to Audrey Thomas who questions and revolts against the acquired mode of behaviour of perceiving, thinking and acting in a manner the larger society demands of women to realize the roles assigned to them. Audrey Thomas explores the female quest for independence, identity and ultimate authority and fulfillment. Her keen sense of observation effaces her from the position of an ordinary didactic critic and puts her in the position of literary artist, who writes about woman’s silence, madness, marginality, negativity and difference; and woman’s body, woman’s feelings and woman’s desires.

Thomas’s heroines do not always want to disentangle themselves of their femininity. It is their psychological requirement to love and be loved. Just as Susan Brownmiller says:

> The territory of the heart is admittedly a province that is open to all but women alone are expected to make an obsessional career of its exploration, to find whatever adventure, power, fulfillment or tragedy that life has to offer within its bounds. (215)
Susan Rudy Dorscht is of the view that Thomas’ fiction insists that language is all: “Everything is word, everything is only word . . .” (68). Is life, like Africa, “something which you ‘do’ and then write up for the folks back home?” (TGB 56). Are the connections between being and nothingness, between life and death, just “a question of semantics?” (22). Is it easier to conjure up a fairy tale . . . than to put one’s finger on the pulse of truth?” (142)

The relationship between the word as sign and what it signifies is always an arbitrary one, but in the extreme situations in which Thomas’ characters find themselves, that is, in foreign countries, in insane asylums, in sexual ghettos, the gap between their experience and the language used around them is a vast one. The problem in communication is simultaneously cause and consequences of their alienation. Thomas explores and explodes limits and boundaries in a perpetual search for meaning.

Her style is characterized by word play; she emphasizes puns, etymologies, euphemisms, words within words, and pointing to the inherent possibilities, ironies and ambiguities of language. This close attention to language highlights the act of writing itself, and the possibilities and impossibilities of communication in human relationships. Her writing is also rich with literary allusion, from Shakespeare to Conrad, and from the Bible to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

Regarding Thomas’s characterization, she “is skillful at peeling off the emotions” (Moir 5). Laurence Lafore says that Thomas’s “speciality is not a region but a gender” and she is brilliant at portraying “neurotic women” (55). Frank Davey sees her style as fundamental to write: “an extreme kind of psychological realism” (From There 254). The action involved in searching the essential self is an important component in the fiction of Audrey Thomas. Her female narrators attempt to dislodge the male defined female identity
and engage in a re-search of the self. This search is a continuing process, as her fiction remains open-ended and accessible to further exploration.

The paradox of being a major writer whose reputation has been “a seesaw one” (Godard, Audrey 10), is perhaps a result of the contradictions, inherent in the author, which have made it difficult for critics to place her. While calling herself a feminist writer, she does not want to be part of any institutionalized movement. She tells Robyn Gillam, “You can’t add feminism to your work . . . it’s not like vanilla; you don’t go, tsk, tsk, needs a bit more feminism, and you put some more feminism in” (5).

Some important feminist readings of her novels appeared in the 1980s with critics like Joan Coldwell, Lorna Irvine, Wendy Keitner, Pauline Butling, Coral Ann Howells and Susan Rudy Dorscht making significant contributions to new readings of Thomas’ works. Most of them dwelt on the connections between her fiction and western classics whose plots they sought to deconstruct. However, Lorna Irvine, who assigned allegorical meaning and took an archetypal approach to her works, persisted in looking for an essential truth. Butling’s reading, while emphasizing Thomas’ self-reflexive writing and foregrounding of language, saw the real meaning of form and method as the paradox of a Cretan proclaiming “All Cretans are liars” (Latakia 29). This confusion of truth/lies ensured that all meaning is plural.

Thomas criticizes the writings of the Modernists like Wolfe, Hemingway, Fitzgerald etc., as it glorifies impersonality and indifference as male qualities and rejects emotion and feeling as womanly qualities. In more than one interview, she has stated, ‘I don’t identify with men” (Wachtel, Room 26). Out of Eleanor Wachtel’s interview comes the impression of Audrey Thomas as a woman with a passion for words and for strange facts, a natural scholar
too original in mind for the academies to capture her. Perhaps the most striking feature of her fiction is that, while she is a natural experimenter, her work is deeply rooted in tradition. She really sees herself carrying on the work of predecessors like Virginia Woolf and Henry James and Patrick white, while remaining free to grow in her own way like errant clematis vine. She has earned a distinguished reputation among feminist writers for her exploration of women’s issues.

A new and positive feature identified by critics in her writing is humour. Reviewers appreciate the combination of “humour with heart-breaking pathos and realism with the odd dose of whimsy” (Gunn E15). Thomas considers herself a funny person, but admits: “humour has not frequently appeared” in her writing (Wachtel, Guts 28). However, her humour is most evident in “The Princess and the Zucchini” a witty fairy tale for adults about a princess who encounters a talking zucchini, with “a feminist twist to the theme of the captive prince” (Hatch 34).

A shift in critical paradigms in the field of Canadian literature towards deconstructionist, feminist perspectives, and theoretical approaches, begins with the premise that language mediates our encounter with reality. These tendencies converge in Thomas’ works with its subversions of the paradigms of dominant discourses. The British critic Coral Ann Howells highlights Thomas’ “treatment of narrative as a feminist issue” (No Sense 111). In her essays, Howells is concerned with Thomas’ women’s need to tell stories, which are closer to their social realities and, consequently, with the need to revise or unwrite existing “old romantic fantasy narratives” based on woman’s adoration of the powerful male and on an exaggerated evaluation of him (111).
Audrey Thomas offers play on the duplicity, the multiplicity of language and its paradoxes, thus opening up the space of the books for an active reader to work at its meaning. The stories are not in its words, but in the spaces between and around them, in the play between text and context. Thomas’ stories evolve through “rhythm, calculation and selection” (RM 35), “plane grafted onto plane, perspective piled onto perspective” (Godard, Audrey 66).

The stories of Audrey Thomas thus also signal very clearly the remarkable emphasis in recent Canadian fiction on the active participation and involvement of the reader. This concern with reader response is in itself a matter of historical importance since it involves the placing of the reader as a participant in history, in the struggle for meaning. In acting as the producers of meaning, and not just its passive recipients, the readers of the text become “the actual and actualizing links between history and fiction, as well as between the past and the present” (Hutcheon 65).

The central concept of Thomas’ fiction is that personal memory allows one to become one’s own saviour. She understands that the artistic validity of psychological drama depends on the influences of the past that the tension proceeds from “within the person who is drawn back to the past in order to orient himself to future” (Miller 56). In tracing Audrey Thomas’ development, it is important to attend to the order in which the stories were written. Audrey Thomas says, “All my novels are one novel, in a sense . . . each one extends, in a different style, offering more information, from a different perspective, what is basically the same story” (Hofsess 17).

A vigorous experimenter with narrative method and language, Thomas shows keen interest in the derivation of words, their ambiguities and multiple connotations. She attempts
“to locate a real language, a means of communicating . . . women’s experiences and feelings” (Bennett 235). She plays with literary allusions and puns, stretches language to catch the experience of people, mostly women, hovering on the verge of disintegration. Thomas is a demanding writer: “in her scrupulous avoidance of easy answers” (Hofsess 17).

Another important feature in Audrey Thomas’ fiction is the reality, which proceeds from the female body. Susan Gubar comments on the relation between body and creativity:

. . . many women experience their own bodies as the only available medium for their art with the result that the distance between the woman artist and her art is radically diminished. (296)

Thomas does write the body to a certain extent such that her own physical ageing parallels the growth of her protagonists.

Thomas’ feminist consciousness, apparent in her choice of subject matter, as well as her innovative use of form, language and narrative voice, has established her as a front ranking Canadian writer. The distinguishing themes and invasive motifs in Thomas’ fiction are quest, artistic creation, sexual identity, male/female relationships and mother-daughter relationships. There is a proliferation of biblical and literary allusions, references to rituals and rites of post-ages, female chaos and irrationality in her fiction. She is a serious writer who “has been discovered repeatedly” (Wachtel, Guts 3). Her works map the evolution of her feminist thought.

In her feminist perspective, Audrey Thomas is not limited by the regional or geographical boundaries. In the present time, difficult situations, conflicting emotional demands, or role expectations are slipping women apart. Audrey Thomas in her stories has taken up the area where the struggle of contemporary women to redefine conventions is at its
sharpest because convention here coincides with our deepest emotional bonds. It is in the intersecting paradoxes of Thomas’ narratives that these conflicting demands are reconciled. Her stories reinforce wholeness and integration in a world that threatens to come apart and her stories appeal to the heart, just as their self-reflexive nature offers consolation of form to the mind.

The main objective of the thesis is to analyse and interpret the short stories of Audrey Thomas and to probe into the predicament of women as depicted in the changing cultural scenario of Canada. The various causes for the disintegration of family and marriage, the problems and challenges faced by woman and the resultant quest forms the main focus of the research work. The scope of the thesis includes all the seven collections of her short stories. This thesis would become a debut study as no Ph.D level research work has so far been undertaken on the short stories of Audrey Thomas.

Her short stories are as significant as her novels. The vitality with which the themes are treated in her novels is also found in her short stories. While many book reviews, journal articles and a number of M.A. and Ph.D thesis on her novels have appeared over the years, no extensive work exclusively on her short stories has been taken up for research. This study hopes to fill this lack, and thereby making it the first full length study of Audrey Thomas’ short stories.

The stories of Audrey Thomas have been investigated using the physiological approach; the creative process as well as the creations have been examined thoroughly. The link between the attitudes and states of mind and also the special qualities have been analysed. The repressed impulses which are the contents of the “Id” in many of the female protagonists have been brought out clearly in the main chapters. Though the libido or sexual
energy, to use Freudian terminology, disturbs the women, they ultimately compromise with their love and care for their daughters; ironically here the daughters become the ‘husband-substitutes’ in many cases as illustrated in the discussion of the stories. Post-Freudian analysis of the individual and social psyche, especially in terms of ‘desire’ and its impact on ‘self’ and ‘power’ has been used for interpretation in relevant contexts. Though set in a predominantly feminist matrix, the traditional definitions of selfhood and gender-identity are radically and transformatively shaken up through a new approach to the use of language and the art of story telling as established in chapter seven. This analysis of the postmodern tendency is based on some principles of Julia Kristeva’s *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. In postmodern literature, the narrator’s voice does not dominate over the speech of characters.

The postmodern thought formulated by Michael Foucault about ‘self’ and ‘identity’ has been used in the interpretation of the stories in the third chapter. Jacques Lacan’s concept of the mind involving a structure that is characterised by inner fracture and internal conflict is used in the attempt to understand the psyche of the women in trouble.

Radical feminists like Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics*, saw sex as a form of oppression independent of social class and emphasised sexual rather than economic exploitation of women. Audrey Thomas presents men as an exploiting class as illustrated in the chapters. Simone de Beauvoir’s postulation in *The Second Sex* that woman is trapped in the bad faith of men has reference here. Audrey Thomas’ male characters want women to be ‘an inferior object – a will-less being’ acting according to their wishes. Radical feminism also showed a deep concern for female sexuality and male violence towards women. Feminism wanted to give every woman “the opportunity of becoming the best that her natural faculties make her
capable of” (Fawcett 357). In Audrey Thomas’ short stories many women struggle in their attempt to even exhibit their natural desire to establish an identity like a writer.

This thesis being the first full length study of Thomas’ short stories offers rich critical insights. It analyses Thomas’ stories from a feminist literary perspective, examining Thomas’s concern with women’s experiences and perception of the world, female identity and the social constraints on its development, female subjectivity and self, the mother daughter relationship, and forces opposing women’s artistic self expression.

Chapter Two introduces the reasons for the failure of the traditional relations between men and women leading to the breakup of family. The most important reason is the misplaced and incapable men as men do not fare very well in Audrey Thomas’ feminist scrutiny. This incompatibility and disintegration in familial relationship turns the women rebellious and hungry for fulfillment and recognition thereby leading the women to pursue their quest.

Chapter Three is devoted to the study of Thomas’ women protagonists’ search for their authentic self and identity. It concentrates on those women who try to forge new lives by breaking away from the men who design and control their lives. It further records the saga of self-discovery of her female characters and tracks the heroine’s journey towards female selfhood as they embark in the process of their quest and aspire towards a progressive future.

Despite having an established sensibility and feeling of self-assuredness, Thomas’ women also need human attachment. Chapter Four deals with the various facets of loss and loneliness and how her women overcome them and organize their lives. The focus point of Chapter Five is the quest of these women for familial relationships. It centers on those stories which have quest for love and connectedness as their central themes. It further examines the
subtle nuances of contemporary familial relationships and the strong link between mothers and daughters.

Chapter Six concentrates on Thomas’ consistent theme of private fear. Her protagonists find themselves ineffective and terrified of their old age, coupled with their inability to cope with life. The difficulties faced by the women protagonists in encountering their fear is the focal point in this chapter. It analyses how Thomas’ women slough off their fear syndrome and make advancement in their process of quest.

The seventh chapter shifts the focus of the study to Thomas’ art of storytelling. It concentrates on how Thomas appropriates autobiography, repetition, parody, fairy tales, alternate stories, and other experimental forms to thematize the quest. Chapter Eight in the form of conclusion seeks to recapitulate the observations and arguments made in the preceding chapters. It summarizes the analyses within the six chapters and establishes whether Thomas and her women protagonists have succeeded in their Quest for fulfillment.