Chapter Three

Quest for Identity

Over the last few decades, the concept of ‘gender’ and ‘identity’ has received growing attention in nearly every field of academic study. Gender has become an important analytical tool in many disciplines because of the insight it gives into the cultural orders underlying representations. Theories of subjectivity have illustrated that identity is not something achieved and possessed but something individuals must consistently re-establish in various social contexts. This chapter attempts to trace the growth of the self in the female protagonists. In all of the stories discussed in this chapter, the protagonist is in an eternal search for her identity (self).

Audrey Thomas’ stories record the saga of self-discovery of her female characters and track the heroine’s journey towards female selfhood through her consciousness. Her stories deal with women’s experiences in a male dominated culture. Her women are caught in oppressive stereotypes from which they struggle to create a female space for themselves. This may be done through autonomy of thought, through self-definition and through a refusal to take up the victim position or the role of subjugation. In this chapter Audrey Thomas’ heroines embark in the process of their quest and aspire towards a progressive future by establishing their self and identity.

“Out in the Midday Sun” is the story of a Canadian woman and her husband Frank, who are on a holiday. The woman protagonist is a budding writer, who has once been his brilliant student. This woman, who is a successful scholar and has married her own professor, has to break off her marriage to establish her identity as a writer. Frank is a sort of person who seduces and runs off with his brilliant female students as a way of suppressing them.
She says, “He is the kind of man who will love you only so long as you walk a few steps behind. Only so long as you arrange the dinners and airline tickets . . .” (RM 96). Frank has already had two wives, and between him and his third wife (the protagonist) is “the tacit understanding that the line did not necessarily stop there” (96).

The woman is about to make a revelation to her husband which would result in the dissolution of her marriage. Although she loves him, she has lived in his house under false pretences. She feels as if she has co-opted into a script written by her husband. His script for her is that of the traditional helpmate. Not content with just being there whenever he wants her (she wonders whether he married her to shut her up), she has been writing a book in secret and the book is about to be published. Now, she contemplates her decision to show him the letter from the publisher. She is very sure that her husband will leave her once he comes to know of her success, for her success will unwrite the script he has mentally composed for her. She feels hostile towards her husband for keeping her under his spell for five years like a magician and using her as a raw material for his fiction. Having decided to show the letter, and knowing that the result would be her husband leaving her, she is not very much perturbed. Rather she feels very much liberated as she will be able to have girlfriends again. The life that she has been living so far was completely under the control of Frank. Frank was designing her every move. Now that she could be free of him, she decides to have some friends of her own, thereby having her life back. She feels like a ‘new woman’.

As the story unfolds in Audrey Thomas’ hands from the female perspective, the woman is not a destructive force, rather the problem lies within the male who cannot bear to have his dominancy challenged by “the black pen . . . of the apprentice sorcerer” (89). He will only be jealous of her as he is afraid of his creative impotency. She thinks that her self-
fulfillment will be looked upon by him as a betrayal and an infidelity and therefore, it would terminate their relationship. The professor would be exposed and undone.

At the end of the story she has not yet shown him the letter from the publisher but she intends to show it the next day and the story ends with her imagining how he will react and how she will respond. Writing is presented as one of the most effective ways of woman’s resistance and self-definition. It is used to demonstrate its liberatory potential. When a leper touches her in the square of an African town, she realizes that her older husband has stepped up to help too late on purpose, so he can record the details of her suffering for novelistic purposes. The woman who has hated her writer-husband’s tendency to use her in his fiction, wonders, whether she too, will take in all the details of the breakup “and then, when she got free of him, write about that too?” (RM 100) For Audrey Thomas, this is one of the most powerful means women have of “leaving” the power relationships between men and women: “to take in all the details . . . [and] write about that too.” The tables are turned – it is after all the husband who is written down here, the wife who is the story’s centre of consciousness, and who turns out to be the story’s real writer.

For the protagonist, the feminine quest includes the search for freedom of imagination and expression through the medium of art. But she has to break off her marriage to establish herself as a writer. She undergoes conflicts between her role as a wife and as an artist, negotiating between marriage and a career; she is split between domesticity and independence. She realizes that the price she has to pay for wanting more will ultimately be the destruction of her marriage. As women seize power or come to assume it subtly from vain and weak men, relationships dissolve or last only as long as the woman maintains the charade of male dominance.
The story thus depicts the struggle of a woman, edging her way out of a failing marriage, for whom walking a few steps behind attractive and intelligent husband is no longer a satisfying mode of existence. This protagonist attempts to dislodge male defined female identity and engages in a continuing process of defining her own identity. She is often caught up in a net of complex and conflicting emotions. However, she struggles to break free and stop being a victim. With the help of her published book, she is able to prove her liberatory potential, thus emerging courageous and strong. In trying to establish herself as a writer, she not only frees herself but also finds a new identity.

“Out in the Midday Sun” is thus a story of resistance and rebellion offered by a female against sexual power politics. She gropes for her identity as an intelligent and potential writer. She attains emotional balance, endurance and maturity. She realizes that her own voice was drowned under the imposition of Frank’s speech. But the revelation that writing is the best revenge, registers a growth in the changing perception of her “confirmed in her female-defined identity, in love with herself” (Godard, Review 111).

Thomas’ women characters claim that to keep their identity intact they must be independent, since if they relate closely to others, they become nothing more than their reflection. They assert that marriage does not allow them to be independent: as they understand it when they marry, they assume the identity of their spouse. This is Rona’s experience in “Timbuktu.” The story presents the realities in the life of a woman named Rona -- an old Norse name meaning ‘very powerful’. Rona struggles for a sense of selfhood. She has her own narrative of uneasy role-playing in her husband’s story. She decides to leave Philip after five years of their marital life. She leaves her marriage, which poses to be a great hindrance, in search of her identity.
Rona understands that to keep her identity intact she must be independent. Relating herself to her husband, she has become nothing more than his reflection. She understands that marriage does not allow her to be independent as she has to assume the identity of her husband. Hence, she complains that she feels herself ceasing to exist because she has no independence in her role as wife. She feels as though “some limb or set of muscles that she has not been using has shriveled up.” She says, “I don’t feel real anymore. I don’t feel as though I am a separate person” (RM 111). It seemed to her that marriage has marred her freedom and has deprived her of her identity, leaving her unfulfilled. Rona has married Philip out of fascination for his “stories about Gibraltar, Malta, Morocco, the Ivory Coast and Senegal. . . . She had married Africa, not Philip” (107). Rona wants a life without ties: a life without love that chained her and made her a slave to her emotions. She wants to write her own script than just fit in into somebody else’s story.

Women had been following men around for centuries, may be since the beginning of time. But Rona tries to rewrite the story of her own life in order to live differently. Not wishing to be a mere housewife any longer, she broadens her search for identity into the wider world. She re-establishes her identity as a woman beyond being the wife of Philip. She opts out of the male-defined ideal wife and leaves her husband who charts and draws, thus enabling her to repossess this power for herself. She makes choices, transgresses conventional limits of womanliness and faces the consequences of such disruptions of order in her own life.

She should be wandering around the streets by herself, finding some little place that caught her fancy, not going to a meal that has been ordered in advance by somebody else. (RM 125)
Her love for self and loneliness is more than the love that she has for Philip. She feels that being in relationship mars her freedom. She did not want to mother a child because that will be a hindrance to her freedom. Although she misses Philip on her way to Timbuktu she does not want to return to him. So she writes a letter to Philip admitting that it was boredom that made her leave him. She also acknowledges that it was not so much Timbuktu that she was after, but herself. She was in search of her own reality – her “separate reality” (127).

Women who serve the purposes of men, who support them like pedestals, do so by sacrificing their own identity, becoming like puppets in their hands. But Rona doesn’t want to become a puppet. In her, there is a constant struggle for a sense of selfhood. All that she needs is to be herself. She does not want to be taken care of by anybody. She hates when it comes to that a man has to protect her (being asked by her husband to take her steward, Hyacinth, if she has to go out). She wants to take care of herself.

Rona wishes to be something more than just a wife. She is frightened that she might end up like those women who are afraid of going anywhere alone. So, she decides to go to Timbuktu, alone, rejecting the offer of Philip who is only too ready to do anything to keep her happy. Though she loves her husband, his love and care appears to be a hindrance for her freedom and therefore, she finally decides never to return to him. She overtly breaks her maternal links in her quest for autonomy and travels to the legendary “Timbuktu/Ou-ou-ou. Erotic and beckoning” (116). To her, Timbuktu is a symbolic expression of creativity and flowing energy, a broad highway of adventure and self-discovery.

Rona undergoes a marginal change in perspective at the end of the story. She gets a better insight to understand her past and a new self emerges. Perhaps, she will not stop at Timbuktu; she will continue, as she hints in the story, to the mouth of the Niger, and sail into
her ‘other self.’ “Timbuktu” thus throws light on Rona’s conscious search for self and her struggle to destroy marital links for the purpose of creation in future. She searches for authentic self and identity and undergoes a journey of self discovery.

The woman protagonists in “Out in the Midday Sun” and “Timbuktu” record the discovery of the woman’s voice when they are forced to play the roles that the husbands imposed on them. In these stories, Audrey Thomas effectively shows how women who are so often silenced, learn to speak and make themselves heard. Their diverse experiences in their families and their quest for creativity give them the confidence to come out of their closet and explore a new world of adventure.

This quest is slightly modified and it takes the form of a quest for personal space – a room of her own in the story “Trash.” The protagonist wants to be left alone and “to stop for a while,” (WBY 113) as she is exhausted of playing several roles – a graduate student, a teacher assistant and a mother of two children. She earnestly longs for a separate and quiet space of her own, a “room – rooms – to work in, study in, be alone in” (113). But even this simple quest of her is not achieved as her husband is not financially sound and they have to rent out their upstairs suite in want of money. She prefers to spend a summer camping, or sprawling in her own backyard rather than visiting her parents-in-law in England, as the money, that her husband is about to spend on the trip, would pay for the suite to be empty and ‘be hers’ for atleast six months.

When her husband decides to rent the suite (her personal space), she gets into a terrible row with him. Later, she lies and manoeuvers to keep out several prospective tenants. In her attempts to keep the suite for herself, she even goes to the extent of being shameless and tells the tenants that they are vegetarians and that she couldn’t possibly rent it to anyone
who cooked meat. Regardless of her seething resentment deep down, as her husband does not pay attention to her requirements, she is forced to withhold and compromise with her quest. Unlike Rona who audaciously walks out on her husband, in her quest for autonomy, the protagonist of “Trash” is impelled to suppress her desires.

In this male dominated world women are oppressed and have no scope for self-realization and fulfillment. Miraculous changes happen once she understands the need for her identity. Audrey Thomas deals with the theme of oppression of women and their deprivation of the scope for self-realization and fulfillment. Her protagonists often break the cocoons of subordination and liberate themselves with the knowledge of female power. The feminist consciousness prompts them to reflect on their ‘self’ and assert their individuality.

“Crossing the Rubicon” is a woman’s version of a love story where again a woman walks out on the man in search for her identity. It centres on a woman’s struggle to break away from a lingering but obviously disintegrating love affair and to stop being the victim. The whole thrust of the story is towards imagining a future in which the woman-protagonist will behave differently. But before she can act differently, she realizes she must first imagine herself acting differently. Hence, the narrator is writing a story within the story in a self-reflexive narrative where she pictures herself transformed.

In the story being composed by the narrator, a woman is on her way to meet her ex-lover. This woman does not want to discuss her life with anybody, even to her very close friend with whom she stays. So she dresses up carefully and leaves early to avoid her friend. But a part of her mind wants to avoid seeing him. She feels like a fish caught in a hook. “All he will have to do, then, is reel her in” (RM 161). The narrator wants to alert the woman. She wants her to walk away, or better still run as she will be trammeled once he looks up. As she
stands there, hesitating, it was too late; he sees her and waves at her. They walk around for a while and discuss their individual lives having a drink at a nearby hotel.

Unable to forget her past love, she demands him to admit that he has missed her. “Tell me that you miss me or I’ll walk away forever!” (168). But the man refuses to admit. So she turns her back on him and begins walking in the opposite direction. From the other side the man finally calls out, “I miss you, you bitch!” (168). The woman stops and remembers the end of the film *Cabaret*, where Liza Minelli waved goodbye to Michael York. Wishing that she too had Minelli’s green fingernails, she reaches her right hand over her left shoulder and wishes goodbye to the man, who has after all chosen to live with his wife. The narrator makes the character end her encounter in style: “And she doesn’t look back. In my story, that is. She doesn’t look back in my story” (168). Thus the narrator imagines herself having the courage and strength to walk away, not to cling to past dreams or a dying relationship, but to walk alone into an unknown future. It is writing that the protagonist uses as the ultimate weapon on her male counterpart. She makes use of autobiography to create identity.

Thomas’ married women protagonists assess the cost of closure in marriage to their sense of self, fairly frequently. They pursue this assessment through analysis, analyzing their husbands, their roles as wives, and the circumstances of marriage itself. The narrator and protagonist, Francine, in “Goodbye Harold, Good Luck” is a woman seeking to break out of a bad marriage and facing up to the options available to her if she does so. The story is about a mother and a daughter travelling, a situation common in several stories. In this one, the protagonist is trying to decide whether to leave her husband who is a demanding perfectionist.
Contemplating her future she sits alone in the bar of a motel where her daughter and she have lately arrived. She keeps smoothing back her hair so that the waitress can see that she wears a ring. She currently sees her ring “as a small gold tourniquet tied too tight, cutting off her circulation, not just to that finger but all over” (GHGL 205, 206). She imagines the ring, the symbol of her marriage, as a poisonous snake, as Sherlock Holmes’ speckled band. She finds it difficult to breathe in this marriage, and this physical symptom leads her initially to her family doctor. She tells her doctor that her husband hates her. “There it was out in the open. He hated her and was trying to kill her or trying to kill her spirit. He was the deadly snake” (207). While the young doctor thinks she should see a psychiatrist, Francine persists in trying to explain the nature of her marriage which stifles and undermines her sense of self-worth. Her husband, a perfectionist, insists quietly, and sometimes almost humorously, that his version of appropriate behaviour be accepted in the household. While her husband appears to be open and inviting, she tells the doctor, she can’t get through to him at all. Her husband questions everything she does, even the simple act of cutting carrots, and this questioning both infuriates and undermines her. He tries to sabotage her messiness humorously by writing her name with left-over noodles kept too long in the fridge, but she perceives his message accurately: she is a mess. His tendency to globalize problems leaves her and her daughter feeling helpless, in need of a safe and secure home.

However, she grows to perceive that her home is safe neither for her nor her daughter, because the cost of safety and closure is self-esteem. While her husband forgives himself his penchant for perfectionism, seeing this as an admirable quality, he fails to forgive his wife and daughter for their faults, and constantly picks away at their sense of self-worth. The marital crisis comes to a head for Francine for two reasons: she cannot breathe and her
daughter is beginning to feel angry, defensive and helpless as well. She tells the doctor, “He makes me feel such a failure and it isn’t just me, it’s our daughter as well. . . . he says in his soft voice, ‘My beautiful clumsy daughter, my beautiful clumsy daughter’” (208, 209). Francine who is unable to bear this treatment of her daughter, concludes “There’s a fine line between a perfectionist and a bully” (209).

She and her daughter have taken to breaking things, not consciously but accidentally on purpose, and this breaking can be seen as an act of sabotage of their own, a mother-daughter accomplice act to deconstruct his perfect world. It is at the point when her husband puts down his paper, smiles and asks, “What are we going to do about all this breaking of things?” (210) that Francine realizes she must act. Francine feels that her wedding has reduced herself to a state of choking despair. It is not physical abuse or infidelity but a constant sense of being made to feel wrong when she knows it is her husband who is wrong that is driving Francine, she fears, to a break-down. She is untidy and clumsy but he is obsessively orderly. Lately, he has taken to getting at the daughter and this for Francine makes it imperative that she breaks out of marriage.

Her train trip to Prince George with Emily during spring break releases her briefly from the state of subjection her marriage has become. This break gives Francine the opportunity to reflect on her marriage, and such reflection gives her at least brief mental freedom. Francine knows that Emily believes the trip is an adventure, almost a quest, full of new discoveries. Francine also sees other potentials for this journey: it could be an escape, a fresh start, a break for it. She interprets the signals of the experience as hints at new beginnings: spring evokes rebirth, break suggests release; fresh eggs equals fresh start; visiting Mile 0 equals the possibility of beginning again. She enjoys this intellectual play, the
possibilities of new beginnings, and even the element of secrecy which gives her renewed power. She feels that her life is now under her control and gains the confidence that she can herself live her life meaningfully and independently. Yet, even as she toys with this fantasy of her own freedom, external social circumstances and her own fear of independence enclose her. Francine herself seems somewhat unaware of the irony and ambivalence of this situation. As she sits alone at the bar, she contemplates the personal ad she might place in a paper. She desires “someone gentle and sometimes wrong . . . a friendly surveyor to lay out her life for her” (211). She still wishes the benefits of safety and closure, a brand new marriage with a new role determined by another. The idea of being single, alone, frightens her; she feels “exposed for what she really [is,] a woman alone in a bar” (205). Her daughter’s safety concerns her equally. She has left her daughter behind a safely bolted door, watching Elvis Presley in Jailhouse Rock. The idea of both closure (Jailhouse) and safety (bolted door) coexist here.

Perhaps consciously, Francine chooses an environment which undercut her quest for freedom, since the bar reinforces her need for safety and her knowledge that women are vulnerable when alone in a male world. She and her husband had shared a joke about personal ads in the past, defining DWF (divorced white females) as Dwarfs, lonely dwarfs. The bar confirms how single women become dwarfed in male environment. In the bar world, men are steers and women are heifers; sexual definition is clear and closed. Women exist in the bar only to entertain men, and they must meet male expectations or suffer scorn. Francine unconsciously confirms her husband’s ideology in the bar scene.

Francine feels shocked by the first entertainer, “a small woman, in her sixties maybe, with curly white permed hair. She had a sharp little face and a high quick voice and reminded
Francine of a toy poodle. She would play a few bars on the piano, take a good swig of her drink, and then tell a joke, a really filthy joke” (210). This woman, entering her grandmotherly years, seems inappropriate and confusing to Francine, but to the drunken men, she’s simply “a stupid cunt” (214). The comedian grotesquely caricatures men’s disgust for women; she internalizes this disgust. The second entertainer, a young female exotic dancer, exists strictly for male pleasure. “Wait till she gets to the oil,” one tells the others. “That’s the best part. We’re not going to get stiff watching this” (217). She dances about, plays with her nipples, and lies down and touches herself. Throughout this performance, she appears tired and distanced to Francine, who sees her as a young girl smelling of baby oil. Both of these performers confirm the cost of living in a sexually defined world; both confirm the need for protection and safety for Francine. By choosing the bar as an environment for self-reflection, Francine encloses herself in a world of subjection.

Watching the expressionless stripper tolerating ridicule and lewd remarks from the table of drunks, she thinks of the degradation she tolerates in her marriage. Her husband sometimes turns down the gas burner when she is cooking, making her feel stupid. She recalls a button she once read in a bookstore: “They sent one man to the moon, why can’t they send them all” (218).

Francine faces her dilemma with her daughter’s question, “Mum, were you ever in love with Elvis Presley when you were a girl” (222). She wants to be ‘in love,’ to be loved, protected, and secure, and she wants this same safety for her daughter. She perceives that if she separates she will lose safety along with closure. She does not wish to remain within the state of closure which undermines her self worth, but neither does she wish to become a lonely dwarf. Francine sees no other possibilities for herself and her daughter.
In the hotel, where Emily, the daughter, has been taking a bath, the words “Written by somebody’s finger or with a piece of soap” appear (221). The story’s title, “Goodbye Harold, Good Luck” comes from this message written on their room’s bathroom mirror. Perhaps, it is the message of a woman who had stayed there before Francine came to that room, and left for her lover to find in the morning. This message appears only when the steam from her daughter’s shower brings it out; it’s a secret message. Initially they laugh and laugh, perhaps because on the surface, they delight in the message’s assertion of a women’s independence, perhaps simply because the message comes as a surprise. Francine perceives the duality of the message. In themselves, the words speak of freedom, independence and pleasant parting but to understand the message fully she needs to know the situation, context, and speaker. Perhaps this is the message of the exotic dancer wishing good will to a man who had just bought a one night stand. She fantasizes leaving her husband the same message some day. “Could she do it? The idea was certainly attractive?” (222). It suggests a way out. Finally, she decides to pack their bags and leave for good, with a message scrawled on a mirror.

Thomas’ characters find it impossible to commit themselves to marriage without leaving their sense of identity. Her characters see themselves as ‘vegetables’ during their married life, and believe that they cannot come into being, until they escape from their ties. With their urge towards independence on one hand and the desire for attachment on the other, women are self-divided, always in dialogue with themselves and with others.

Thus in her narratives, Audrey Thomas shatters female stereotypes and emphasizes women’s competence and independence. Her protagonists, single or separated, posit themselves in a world of independence, which provides alternative definition of what it means to be a female. The emancipated women face crisis with confidence and courage. She
faces the dilemma and struggle through adversity, self-knowledge and authenticity. Her heroines free themselves from the desire of what women must become and achieve the desirable feminist synthesis, exploring and exposing the heroic possibilities in them. They cease to swing in the ancient orbits and embrace new orbits of definition and define themselves in relation to artistic values other than those of male superiority stressed by patriarchy.

The structure of the story “The Slow of Despond” is explicitly female defined. The protagonist Sarah MacLeod is introduced as a single woman. She completely alters her life so that she will be noticed and accepted by the man she wants to marry. She marries only to find that her life is no longer her own. Her missionary husband Gordon plots and defines her life, her role in society; she becomes completely passive. She returns home with Gordon, suffering depression after each of her two miscarriages. Later, her third foetus comes to term and she gives birth to a frail boy. Sarah disappears with the three month old baby on the verge of sailing back to Africa. She leaves Gordon at the customs, with an explanatory letter and mistrusting the powers of an alien doll which was presented to her by her friend to increase her fertility, she drops the child in the waters of the quay, telling it: “Look at you – pale and freckled – out there you’d last about five minutes” (WBY 30).

She murders the baby and leaves her husband, thus effecting a traditionally tragic disjuncture. She wants something else, something more; she wants a destiny. So she never returns to him and makes sure that she never responded to any of his letters or calls. At the end of the story she is described contently playing the piano, in a room of her own, her own self-defined space.
Murdering the baby and leaving her husband are disruptive elements that in traditional male definitions of literary genres would end in tragedy. In Audrey Thomas’ female definition of literary form, Sarah’s life becomes distorted by the various changes she undergoes to fit Gordon’s definition, culminating in the child they beget. In traditional male definition, marriage and a baby would indicate the final higher unity of the romance form. Here (ironically combining male and female definitions of love and romance with definitions of form) they indicate dissolution of self and barriers to happiness. The murder and separation are the heroine’s acts of intervention that facilitate her integration with herself, and she becomes the hero of her own story. When Audrey Thomas writes that Sarah tells Gordon she is going to the “ladies” (so she can get away to commit her crime), perhaps it is a pun on the formal transfer from male-defined to female-defined literary forms.

While exploring the male-female struggle and the ways in which men have usurped the role of defining women, the protagonist reaches a formal romantic unity – in her movement from unity, through dissolution, to a higher unity that is traditionally tied to social identity and marriage – in that she becomes able to define herself, but, paradoxically, only with the traditionally tragic means of disjuncture and separation.

 Literary tradition has portrayed woman as weak, passive, gentle and modest, “the proper woman in male texts has been the selfless, self-effacing, docile, acquiescent, mute and submissive one, an angel in the house who accepts without demur the gender defined role assigned to her by the patriarchal society” (Asnani 84). But Audrey Thomas’ women have turned away from the catchword consolations of patriarchy, security, marriage, property etc., and have arrived at self-articulation, gender based vision of an alternative organizing of life through self-assertiveness.
In “The Happy Farmer,” the protagonist, an older woman, establishes her identity by asserting her right not to be pursued. Her rejection of Peter’s overtures, however, causes the script to turn sinister. Peter insists on enacting this script and asserts his right to be the protagonist of her story. Because she refuses to recognize him as the protagonist and, in fact, refuses to recognize his right to be in her story at all, he makes her into an antagonist. The fact that she asserts herself and her right to make her own choices pushes her into this role. Thomas pushes the courtship script to its sinister conclusion in a symbolic rape scene, but in this story she tackles the script itself, suggesting an alternate ending which empowers her female protagonist.

Peter does not know Janet initially, enters her house uninvited and begins immediately to investigate her possessions, demanding a tack hammer, and assuming his right to be present. When Janet, with a bad case of flu and some anxiety over the stranger’s intrusion, asserts her right to be alone, he offers to take the role of solicitous friend, bringing her ginger tea, but again Janet asserts herself and asks him to leave. He leaves bowing backwards “in a parody of an oriental servant” (WBY 129). Over the next few weeks, he assumes that she will welcome, desire, and want his presence. He sends her a number of gifts to court her favour: a heal-yourself book, “a drawing of a man and woman falling through space, reaching out their arms to one another, a bottle of Blue Nun” (131). All these gifts insist on his presence (presents) in her life, and all imply that perhaps there is something wrong with her; she should stop being blue and chaste like the nun on the wine bottle and should heal herself by falling into space with him. She tells her friend, “there’s something creepy about him, something menacing” (130). He always leaves these gifts for her on her porch, never giving them to her directly: “She never heard him come up on the porch and
wondered if he waited until all her lights were off and she was safely asleep” (131). In true suitor-like fashion, he plays the violin to her and her hens. He insists that since they are two lonely adults, they should be friends; she rejects friendship and the assumption of her loneliness. As she continues to reject him, Peter’s role as courtly lover changes, he grows to perceive Janet as an antagonist and re-defines the adventure as slaying her, the dragon lady, rather than meeting a princess’s good favour. He continues to insist that she must have some relationship with him, antagonistic or otherwise.

The chivalric quest, suggests Annis Pratt, can become a frightening and macabre pursuit by male villains (43). In this story Peter perceives himself as a nice guy. He is good-looking as Janet acknowledges, and the girls on the island are crazy about him. He is, therefore, in his own terms an appropriate suitor, and his quest is to conquer Janet.

The plot turns sinister when Peter perceives Janet’s vulnerability in her apparent affection for her hens and in her desire to be respected in the small island community. While sitting on the porch of the local store with some other men, he jokes as she passes, and they all laugh. “Most of these guys had worked for her at one time or another and she’d thought they all liked and respected her. Their laughter hurt” (WBY 133). He uses the store as a public forum to embarrass her whenever he can and in front of the store keeper, he suggests the connection between her and her hens:

“Hey Janet,” he called one day, “have you ever been to Greece?” she shook her head and he got up and followed her into the store. “Well I was in Crete in the seventies, in Matala, and you know what they call hens in Greece? Do you?” He was dancing around her as she picked out milk from the cooler, a couple of tomatoes. “They call a hen ‘Kotopoulo’ stupid bird. Isn’t that cute??
Some of the Greek men say that about women too, especially North American woman.” (135)

Soon after making this connection between Janet and her hens, Peter turns his unwanted attentions to the hen-house. He purchases a dog, Fang, who salivates around her chickens, and he writes Janet a condescending and belittling letter which undermines her self-confidence about her nurturing ability: “He then proceeded to tell her all the things she was doing wrong. The birds were grossly underweight, the nesting boxes should be cleaned twice, not once a week, “at least” (underlined), the rooster could get fungus under his feet” (138). Janet becomes increasingly angry and fearful, and the introduction of fear gives Peter the upper hand. The story climaxes with the symbolic rape, the apparent destruction of all Janet’s hens which Peter has released to freedom. Peter wishes to see Janet vulnerable and afraid, in need of male protection; he wishes her to see what the consequences of her actions will be if she continues to be free and alone.

However, at this point Thomas moves from the rape script to conclude the story with Janet’s empowerment. Rather than succumbing to the role of victim, Janet uses her wits and her guile – the froda of romance – to manipulate Peter. Realizing that he has tried to fool her into fear and has not killed her chickens, she destroys her hen-house, forcing his honesty. His bad joke turns against him and he is forced to make amends by rebuilding the hen-house he has caused her to destroy. This particular short story reflects Audrey Thomas’ real concern in both the increasing trend of misogynist violence toward women and the anger and grief of women who are pushed into Gothic scripts of fear. In “The Happy Farmer,” a form of transcendence occurs when the characters themselves reject the script and take personal responsibility for creating their own stories.
Audrey Thomas’ women try to rewrite their stories in order to live differently. As has been discussed earlier in the stories of “Out in the Midday Sun” and “Crossing the Rubicon” some of the women protagonists make use of writing as a means to overcome the vacuum in their life and to bring an order in their otherwise meaningless life. For Audrey Thomas, it was not so much the essential self, but the action involved in searching, that was important. The self for Thomas is neither constant nor stable; it is a shifting identity, and writing is one way to try to understand and clarify the position(s) occupied by that identity.

In “Initram”, two boisterously confessional women writers meet at the exit point of their marriages, as they have decided to leave their husbands. The narrator is a writer who wants her friend, Lydia, a fellow writer, to write the story of the dissolution of her marriage. Instead, the narrator is ironically drawn into a situation where she is forced to witness the dissolution of Lydia’s marriage, and consequently, in writing about that break-up, writes her own story in relative terms. Lydia’s husband has an affair with one of his students and when Lydia is out on a reading tour, he brings the other woman “right to the house… and the children were here too” (L&E 97). This infidelity on the part of the husband is too much for Lydia to bear that she finally decides to leave her husband. The narrator too has left her husband for the very same reason. But in her case the other woman was her best friend making the betrayal still more painful. By recording the story of their life through the medium of art they try to bring order to their life, thereby establishing their identity as independent woman without their man’s support.

It is not just writing, but even art as a medium is used by Thomas’ women to establish their identities. Thomas’ central character in the short story “Galatea” sees herself as a set designer, since she often provides details of setting for her husband’s novels. She sets the
scene, but she does not wish to be a key actor herself. Reading this story is like entering a ‘set’ design, a landscape she codes in mute watercolours in order to be pleasant and peaceful. Her role is to maintain this design, to ensure its continuity so that her husband can act. He acts the role of the difficult demanding writer; she acts the role of the bondservant, tied to the maintenance of his official story. She exists nameless; she is the Dame in the expression M’sieu-Dame used to greet the couple as they take their walks in the French countryside. “‘Bonsoir, M’sieu-Dame,’ others would say, as though it were all one word – but always the man first and the woman slightly behind, as was only proper” (RM 39).

Thomas writes the story from the point of view of this nameless ‘she,’ a married woman fused to her husband (thus M’sieu-Dame) and determined to ensure his story and her anonymity. The sketches and watercolour paints define the way in which she frames their personal drama. She sketches out a pleasant set, two weeks together hidden away in an inn in a “perfect village” where her husband, Peter, can work on finishing his novel. Afternoons provide a break together: “Afternoons were supposed to be uneventful: a stroll along the canal, lunch and a chat by the pond; a walk across the bridge and up to one of the marked footpaths, which took them through oak forests and fields” (36). In the evenings, they enjoy a shared meal with wine. Peter concentrates on his novel, sometimes late into the night, since in this scene he has his own private room, while she concentrates on ensuring that he is not disturbed in any way: “She didn’t knock, however, she didn’t want to disturb him” (36).

She occupies herself with walks about the countryside, and on her return she pleases him with details and anecdotes from these walks. He approves of her ability to create pleasant scenes, and he takes advantage of her accurate sense of detail to fill in his own novels. Sometimes she pretends to loiter and sketch, but really she jots down interesting
conversations: “Peter sometimes used her that way, when he wanted to overhear conversation” (39). She often fills in the details of setting for his novels: “He was no good at settings. In fact she often ‘did’ them for him. He would tell her what a character was like and she would create the setting. She enjoyed it. It was like being a set designer” (42).

As she paints this pleasant scene, she does fill in the space of their own marital background which had involved a year of separation, but even here, she tries to transform this background into watercolour pastels. He returns to her after a year, confesses that he cannot live without her, and she accepts him: “She saw her forgiveness as almost saint-like” (45). On his return, he requests one of her paintings, and she gives him a decorative painting of Chinese women bent in the fields working. “For the first time, she felt she had been able to get out of ‘content’, to simply see the women as part of the landscape” (40). She, too, wishes strongly to be only part of his landscape, a necessary decorative detail within his pleasant watercolour world. Peter’s desire to transform her into his own decorative artwork is appropriate to the story’s title which refers to the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea where a similar attempt to transform another into one’s own desired image takes place.

Thomas questions and undermines the authenticity of this scene both directly and indirectly. Almost all the women, the protagonist knows, question her decisions. The “militant females” from Peter’s department who came to dinner admire her sketches and insist that she takes her art more seriously. She turns cold and rejects their views. “[H]er sister, her mother and her friend [are] horrified” when she takes Peter back after their separation: “How can you be so accommodating, they cried?” (45). The female patronne at the inn where they are staying looks questioningly at them when her husband insists on two bedrooms.
The décor of this pleasant landscape indicates marital discord and male tyranny. The wife remains unable to free herself to enjoy her day; her husband insists that her routine be determined by his and that the details of her day be handed over as potential artistic material. She takes careful note when she transgresses his schedule: “He accepted the bouquet (of wildflowers) rather ungraciously, for he had knocked off early and had been waiting for her” (39). They drink extensively, starting on their own terrace before dinner, and “[ordering] an extra bottle of wine three nights running” (44). Consumed with a desire for greatness, he seems irritable and dissatisfied, needing constantly to be flattered. He seems somewhat similar to the patronne’s boy of the same name, who the guests flatter daily.

However, the awareness of this character’s fear of separation determines the dishonesty of her watercolour scene the most. One knows, as does she, that she is capable of a much more powerful artistic realization than she allows herself. “The paintings she has done during the one terrible year when he left her, had been praised by her teacher, large canvasses full of brutal colours. But they frightened her; it was as though she had hung herself up there on the wall” (40). She does not wish to show herself, to be painfully but vibrantly alive. She prefers to act out Peter’s role for her as the soft muted set designer behind the scene.

She has been a statue all her life, neglecting her career as a painter to give Peter her full attention. She has been happy to bask in the reflected glory as a wife of the rising young novelist. Her continuing inauthenticity is very clearly portrayed here. She has convinced herself that fusing with her husband’s story creates a better design than would the loud and brutal colours of her own emotional canvas. But this opinion of hers gets shattered when he leaves her for another woman.
Galatea is a name popularly applied to a maiden who is originally a statue carved of ivory by Pygmalion of Cyprus in Greek mythology. She is brought to life by Aphrodite in answer to the sculptor’s pleas. An allusion to Galatea in modern English has become a metaphor for a statue that has come to life. The nameless protagonist of “Galatea” also comes to life after living a life of statue for several years. She establishes her identity in a slightly different way from her other protagonists. While others have to break their family, and leave the man who designed their life, Galatea’s protagonist takes up a different stand. Over the years she has “crippled him in some essential way, as surely as if she had cut off his toes with one of those wicked-looking knives that she saw here on market day” (45). She comes to understand that she is not the same woman that she has been when he left. It dawns on her that she is the one who can survive independently and not him.

Even when she accepts him after his initial betrayal, she sees her forgiveness as almost saint-like, as he weeps in her arms for the first few nights. But she knows that she is no saint as she reckons herself to be. She establishes her identity through a visceral image. She ideates an image of herself behind him, pushing his chair around forever with his legs covered in a soft plaid robe. She no longer needs to worry when he flirts with his students or young girls in ticket booths, or with the beautiful young patronne of the inn. Because he will never leave her again, or even if he does leave, he will soon return. On the other hand, it is up to her to stay or to leave. She has proved to him that she is the stronger of the two, thereby making him weak.

My God, she was strong! That’s what he had seen (but he had not seen that she had made him weak). (RM 45)
This image of the strong woman is extended in “The Princess and the Zucchini,” where the protagonist establishes her identity by not succumbing to the requests of the male lot.

“The Princess and the Zucchini” is a slyly wicked modern day fairy tale about the encounter between a young princess, Zona and a prince who has been turned into a zucchini. Like all princess in traditional fairy tales, Zona is also very beautiful. There has been no rain in the kingdom lately and everything looks parched and brown except for the royal garden which is carefully watered twice everyday. The hot summer and the dry atmosphere make everybody in the kingdom grumpy, especially princess Zona. She is unable to sleep because of the heat and wishes with all her heart for a thunderstorm and a downpour to break the pressure of the night.

One night she finds the heat so unbearable that she gets out of her bed and goes on a walk in the royal garden. The garden in all its gloriousness is so inviting that Zona feels like walking barefoot in it. So she opens the door quietly and tiptoes past the bedroom of her sleeping parents, gets down the royal staircase softly and passes along corridors and passages where the moonlight streams in through the leaded windows. She reaches the kitchen, then the pantry, and finally the back door. Although the door creaks a little, she manages to get away without waking up anybody. Regardless of the dry lawn that tickles her feet she passes through the white gate and finally into the garden. Enjoying the beauty of the garden and its coolness she wishes with all her heart to sleep out there in the garden. She feels bad for not having brought something to sit (or a hammock) for she could have stayed there in the garden for the night.

Walking through the garden she trips and stubs her toe on a large zucchini and suddenly she hears a deep voice. The voice makes Zona tremble in fear for there is nobody in
sight. Being a princess, she tries to muster up her courage and questions as to who it is and what it wants. Although a voice answers from below her, she is unable to sight any person. All the stories of dwarfs, elves and gnomes come to her mind and make her think that there is one hiding in the vines. Her curiosity gets the better of her fear. She demands it to come out where she can see it as it is really overgrown in that place of the garden. She even wonders whether it is something invisible that she is talking to.

The voice answers with a deep groan and sighs that it is the zucchini that she earlier stubbed her toe against. Zona who is no mood for jokes finds this ridiculous and hard to accept. Summoning up her dignity, once again she orders it to come out, to which the voice answers that it can come back to its original form only if the princess kisses it. Still Zona finds it unconvincing to accept and even wonders whether it is some ventriloquist or a shape-shifter that she is talking to.

The voice alleges that it is truly a handsome young prince who has been cast under a wicked spell. But this, Zona is not ready to believe. Rather, she laughs merrily clapping her hands thinking that it is just one of those crazy dreams that she sometimes has, like having a conversation with her horse or like being a mermaid living underneath the sea. However, after sometime, she brushes aside this thought as she is unable to wake herself up as she usually does when she realizes that she is dreaming. Bewildered, she wonders:

whoever heard of a prince being turned into a zucchini! A bear, yes; a swan, certainly; even a frog, although personally I find that one a little hard to swallow. But a vegetable! That’s utterly ridiculous. Somebody’s pulling my leg.  (GHGL 166)
The ‘so-called’ prince explicates his part of the story. He says that he comes from a very far away land across the sea and that he fell in love with her name even before seeing her portrait. He has travelled a year and a half to get there, and all through the way he has been muttering her name “Zona, Zona, Zona” to keep up his courage (166). Standing in that garden, and gazing up at the light in her little window, he has tried to sing a song that he has composed about her beauty, when all of a sudden he has felt strange and the next thing he knew he has been turned into a tiny zucchini. He has been growing bigger everyday and now he is afraid that he might burst anytime because of his rapid growth.

In a usual fairy tale, all that the princess has to do is to kiss the zucchini to turn it back into a prince and the story will end with them getting married and living happily ever after. But Thomas offers a feminist twist to the theme of the captive prince. Zona does not want to kiss him. Instead she oppugns the credibility of his story. She questions him as to how he is so sure that only her kiss would turn him back into a prince and not anybody else’s. When he replies that it is her name ‘Zona’, starting with the letter ‘z’ and he, being turned into a ‘zucchini’ also starting with ‘z’, she does not give in to his whims.

Unconvinced of his answers she says that it is not a name that she chose for her. Just like all the women in her family, she too has been named ‘Zona’. Although she doesn’t like it, she has been forced to keep it. So to establish her identity, she decides to change her name to ‘Suzanne’, once she reaches a particular age. She does not believe in the ‘happily ever after’ concept of the prince. Contradicting him, she states: “Love doesn’t really conquer all and, even if it did, I’m not in love with you, it’s the other way around” (167). To her, even the very idea of kissing a zucchini sounds bizarre and repulsive. Not giving in to the postulations of the zucchini, she discards his pleas on the pretext of feeling sleepy and retires.
to her room leaving him imploring, “Oh please Zona . . . Just one little kiss . . . I may have burst by then” (167). She wards of his accusation of being cruel, by explicating that she is being practical.

Every evening she meets the zucchini and listens to his stories about the distant land he comes from. She even starts enjoying his deep, thrilling voice and looks forward eagerly to hear his stories of adventures. But she will not kiss him. In that she is inexorable. She finds it ignoble to kiss a zucchini. When he cites the story of the Frog Prince being kissed by a princess, she disregards it saying that it is “another story and another princess; it’s nothing to do with me.” (168), thereby reinforcing her identity once again.

One night sitting at her dressing table and brushing her long golden hair, Zona tries to imagine the young prince before he had been changed into a zucchini. She tries to imagine “happily ever after” (169). She stares at herself in the mirror and ascertains her beauty as has been told by her father, her mother and the zucchini. Looking at herself in the mirror she understands who the real ‘she’ is.

But who is the ‘I’ who is so beautiful . . . Who is she? I will be fifteen next month. That’s a lot of Ever After. (169)

Now that she is fifteen and all matured, she realizes that it is time to change her name to ‘Suzanne’. She also realizes that she no longer should allow others to design her life. She manifests women’s liberty to choose the man of her choice. So she decides to dismiss the idea of turning the zucchini into a prince and ultimately swallows the zucchini (quite literally), instead of ‘swallowing’ his story of “happily ever after.”

The feminist implications are very much complex and the interpretation of this story subverts old themes and constructs new meanings. Patriarchal solemnity is disrupted in the
story where all the traditional fairy tale expectations are set up and then subverted. Zona ascertains her feminist freedom and maintains her individuality by choosing not to kiss the zucchini, even if that would end up in the dangerous bursting of it. In the story’s final paragraph, the princess cooks dinner for her parents, and tells them its ratatouille – “I found the recipe in *The Joy of Cooking*” (170). The story ends with Zona serving her parents the food that she has prepared. While this ending is equally as final and conclusive as the traditional one – perhaps even more final – Thomas still voices her distrust of the fairy tale tradition. Or, more accurately, she articulates Zona’s misgivings about the fairy-tale ending, thereby establishing an identity for herself.

Audrey Thomas’ women are thus seen finding ways to be self-creators and self-promoters distinguishing between themselves as objects of others’ perceptions and as perceiving, imagining individuals capable of making their own worlds. Her heroines move further ahead in the process of their quest and aspire towards a progressive future by realising their selves and identity.