

Quest for Self Identity in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the nameless narrator's interaction with nature. She returns to Quebec in search of her missing father. The emotional trauma she undergoes during and after her forced abortion leads to annihilation of her artistic leanings. She is anonymous because she is synonymous with the fragile and powerless women at large who are subjected to male exploitation and commodification. After living at the heart of nature for a while, she realizes that nature is not biased, and as she has discovered the roots of her identity in the wilderness, she reintegrates with the society and even she prepares herself to bear a child. In her quest for identity, she comes to terms with the dualities and incongruities in the patriarchal society she lives in through the struggle to reclaim her identity and roots, Thus the protagonist's psychological journey to discover her roots and identity enables her to gain access into the world of pristine nature.

Keywords: Dehumanized, Disillusionment, Fragmentation, Metamorphosis, Modernization, Transgression

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a prolific and honoured Canadian writer who is widely recognized as a feminist and as an advocate of developing writers. In her novels, Atwood creates women as characters who are forced to reconstruct themselves as self-reliant and courageous personality when they try to establish a relationship with the world around them. The novel *Surfacing* revolves around the nameless narrator who tries to comprehend the complexities of human relationships. Attracted by the glitters of city life, she leaves Northern Quebec, an island where her parents live. The city exposure reveals the evils embedded in the life style of city people and also the fake relationship and artificiality that predominates their life.

Long since women have been trying to gain an appropriate place in society. In *Surfacing*, a reputed Canadian classic of Atwood, the nameless protagonist searches for her identity. During her journey to her ancestral village along with her three friends David, Joe and Anna, she feels disappointed seeing the changed environment. She returns to her ancestral village to find out her missing father. She gains a new identity amidst nature and its beauty. Her deep

concern for nature and freedom enables her to take directions that give a new shape to her life.

2. Male Dominance

Men take pleasure in dominating women. They exercise control over women thinking them to be a means to satiate their needs. Marriage increases the misery of women. Men after marriage expect more from women. He views wife as his property. He behaves like a master dominating and controlling her. David's open insults on Anna as uncultured and vulgar reveals his dominance. He thinks that she deserves no respect. Anna having the only identity as David's wife accepts all his abuses. David's and Anna's relationship symbolizes the degradation of marriage. It turns out to be a show off business. They are married for nine years but it is artificiality that prevails in their life. Artificiality is seen in Anna's makeup which she applies early in the morning as she cannot stand before him in natural face. She plays the tricks to meet the hypocrisy in marriage.

In *Surfacing*, the narrator points out that marriage inculcates oppression and victimization against women.

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The narrator is betrayed by her lover who is a 'second-hand'. She feels shattered when he shows the photographs of his wife and children. The narrator mourns, "...for him I could have been anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that's where I learned. I worshipped him"¹ (142). Her lover not only betrays her but also his own wife: another woman. This illustrates the extent to which society or man exploits woman.

Surfacing brings out the inferiority complex in women. The narrator is brought up in a masculine world where girls are not allowed to ask questions like boys. If a girl dares to raise a question, other girls suddenly comment, "Think you're so great"¹ (53). Thus brought up in a male-dominant culture, women remain silent and suppress their frustration. Margaret Atwood draws attention to the fact that "The world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it ruled it, and still dominate it today are men"² (557).

3. Exploitation by Men

The narrator's thoughts run through the past and she thinks of the trauma she has undergone in the dehumanized city culture. It makes her to lead a life of hallucinations. She feels the dominance of her husband in the technologically advanced city. She thinks her womb to be an incubator. Living in the patriarchal society she thinks her as a child bearing machine. Her hallucinations reveal the emotions of a victimized woman. She feels that men make use of women to bear children and they deny them due respect and identity as a mother. In short men dominate all the natural cycles and manipulate women for their own selfish needs.

While travelling into the forest the narrator realises the adverse effects of felling trees in forest. Both women and nature have become the victims of man. She notices that a new instrument has been used to cut down the stumps of huge trees. The narrator associates her own exploitation by her husband with deforestation. Her child is aborted with the latest instruments. It is not permitted to take birth and continue its journey on earth.

4. Modernization and Destruction

The narrator begins to feel that she belongs to the wild forest rather than to the city. She chooses the profession as a commercial artist to earn more money but she resents it later. She designs pictures for posters, covers, books. She designs more flashy and stylish picture to suit the interest of English and American publishers compromising with her natural talent. She realizes that commercial trade forces her to involve in artificial jobs staking her natural talent.

Lack of sense of satisfaction is contrasted in the life of the mother on the island and the daughter in the city. She thinks about her mother who develops a special love for nature. Her mother follows old traditions and values, has connection with nature and becomes a confident and self-reliant protective woman. On the other hand the daughter migrating to the city compromises her interest, gets pregnant by her lover, aborts the baby being persuaded by her lover. She hates people working like a machine in the city. A breathing baby is removed from the womb as if a lifeless object. Modernization pulls people away from nature.

5. Marriage Enslaves Women

The tussle in narrator's mind makes her suspect marriage. She thinks it as a contract that binds a woman to be a slave. Felling trees and killing other creatures give pleasure to man because it shows his power over nature. David's "Random Samples" showing the photograph of the interior parts of a fish and a chopped log of tree reveal his proud achievements. The narrator feels that man doesn't have the right to execute other beings as it is viewed as inhuman act.

A research states that men are violent against women and he is non-tolerant in his relationship with other living beings on earth. The reason is they have few outlets for their anger, they don't share their mind, they don't cry and it is burst out in the form of anger or violence. The narrator feels that Hitler is alive in the behaviour of men. The senseless killing of heron disturbs her mind. She feels that heron is killed only for pleasure.

6. Narrator as a Spokeswoman

The art teacher uses his skills to exploit and seduce the protagonist and finally crushes her artistic sensibility. He poses himself as her husband by presenting wedding ring and she yields to his desires and becomes pregnant. To relieve her husband and to free herself from all future implications she undergoes abortion which she feels as planned death in her.

Her disillusionment with the concept and institution of marriage induces her to reject Joe's marriage proposal. Abortion dries the human urge for creativity in her. During times of difficulty she ends her ties with her dear ones and made things more complicated for her and loses emotional balance.

Men and women have to work hand in hand to free the world from exploitation and oppression. The narrator becomes the spokeswoman of all exploited beings. She speaks not only about two sexes but also about the strong

and weak. She struggles not only to face reality and survive with dignity but also wishes to organize all the weak victims to voice against the oppression of the strong victimizers.

The title *Surfacing* indicates the progress of the narrator. She comes up at the end of the novel after having dived into a lake surfacing literally and symbolically. This pattern suggests a rebirth or even baptism from which she emerges as a new woman. She goes in search of her missing father and ends up in a kind of visionary trance like state and communicates with the spirits of nature. She decides to return to the city to face challenges in life. She will not withdraw from the battlefield. She realizes her identity in rebellion. She will not be a victim and assumes a new role for herself. She will create her own reality. She develops a productive harmony with the world. Towards the end of the journey in Northern Quebec, she realizes the victimization of women and gets ready to revolt against exploitation and oppression of all beings.

7. Women Treated not on Par with Men

It is woman who maintains peace and happiness at home. If every home is happy, it signifies that all the women in the household are happy and their happiness assures other's happiness. Such happiness arises out of peaceful, harmonious and prosperous life at home, and mainly depends on women who rule it for its betterment and economical advancement. A house that lacks such a woman is a house devoid of prosperity. Men take them for granted instead of realizing them as their equals. "Even as the fingers of the two hands are equal, so are human beings equal to one another irrespective of their sex. No one has any right, or any preference to claim over another³ (105).

Atwood depicts lack of respect for women in Canadian society in *Surfacing*. Anna is often dominated by David denying her due respect which she deserves. He abuses her verbally and physically in one way or the other treating her as a slave to him. The eroticism in every man for women is reflected in *Surfacing*. He is fascinated by Anna's body and constantly demands Anna to wear make-up to see her to be young and fresh always. Anna is terrified that her body might lose its hold over him. Hence, she keeps herself charming and beautiful for David's needs. She trusts that a woman can never be alone in a society which expects women to depend on men for everything. The couple leads a life of deprecation.

David forgets the fact that Anna is not just a piece of flesh but an owner of soul deep inside. Anna's control over

her body is very limited and becomes an addict to cigarettes to relieve herself from mental anguish. David even insists Anna to sleep with Joe so that the narrator would be jealous of her. David does all brutal acts which should never be done by an ethical husband. The narrator wants to help Anna out of this tyranny. But she knows that would make matters even worse since the "balance of power"¹ (164) that holds Anna and David together is too high.

8. Identity Crisis

The narrator's madness seems to arise from her anger at all of the standard roles forced upon women. Her response to this alienation is to coexist with nature. The result of the narrator's transformation is a greater understanding of her place in the society. She is determined to protect her second fetes, which is a fulfilment of her quest. Therefore, she realizes the need to eat to live and to bear her child. She says: "if I starve, it starves with me. It might be the first one, the first true human: It must be born, allowed"¹ (222).

As she realizes later that she cannot rely upon human beings to discover her roots and identity, she turns to nature. Though strange, she reinvents her roots only after she identifies herself with the wilderness which is wild and unconstructed. She perceives that her name and her wedding ring do not provide her real identity and by rejecting them she becomes one with the landscape the feeling of which is therapeutic and rejuvenating. As a part of this self-driven healing therapy, the narrator-protagonist identifies herself with the dead heron. The ruthless and pitiless killing of the heron is symptomatic of the endangered ecology which parallels the violated womb of the narrator. She conceives the killing of the bird as a heinous inhuman act and compares it with patriarchal oppression and harassment of women. The creative and fecund potential of women is not only underrated by men but also stifled and muted through which they derive sadistic pleasure.

9. Nature the Healer

The trauma of abortion leads the narrator-protagonist to empathize and sympathize with the plants, animals and everything associated with nature. She owes her regeneration from her fragmentation and disillusionment to her unification with nature as she asserts "that the fulfilment of our humanity is profoundly linked with learning to appreciate the nature within us and without ... the power for destruction mainly connected with the power for creation"¹ (43). She realizes that the power of destruction and that of creation cannot be separated as they are innately

complementary. Then it dawns upon her that she herself had been antagonistic to nature since she had been anti-nature by her involvement in her abortion. Hence in order to amend her transgression, she resolves to conceive again and let her child to grow as a natural human being in the most natural way.

When she links her own life with those of the other beings of nature, she is able to perceive the rhythm of nature, its cycle of life and death. She perceives that in order to be one with nature she has to shed off the artificialities of the modern world. She strips herself off her clothes, feeds upon edible products of the wilderness. The narrator's act of going around naked in the bush reinforces her rebellion against anti-female attitudes. The camera used by David and Joe to make a film about Canada symbolizes a hostile detachment. The symbolic act of narrator throwing it into the lake indicates her rejection of men's attitude. The narrator "destroys the camera that recorded Anna's humiliation"¹ (178). Thus identifying herself with nature, the narrator-protagonist undergoes a complete metamorphosis by being one with nature - a plant, animal, earth and woman at the same moment; she becomes a natural woman. She feels powerful, for she is natural, human and saintly at the same time. She is no more the same person the reader sees at the beginning of the novel. She understands the essential pain in the life of her parents and realizes that this is the only truth in her own life.

10. Conclusion

The narrator's background gradually brings out some of the reasons for her alienation and her inability to feel. Her relationship with her parents has never been close. Although her father talks with her when she is young, his conversation is usually about concept of reason and it fails to draw the two together. On the other hand, her mother doesn't seem to speak much at all. Though the narrator and her brother play together, his attraction to violence begins to separate them.

As she is forced to divide her time between the anonymity of large cities and the isolation of the island, the narrator's alienation increases as she grows older. She is awkward and shy with other children. They tease and torment her. As she grows older, she begins to imitate the behaviour of others and does not do or say what she really feels. She abandons her dream of becoming an artist because her teacher tells her that there have never been any

famous woman artists. As a commercial artist, she draws whatever will please her publisher. In addition, her relationship with Joe reveals that she is not simply aloof but is empty of emotions. She recalls that Joe is impressed by her coolness when they make love for the first time .

When the truth of the narrator's early love affair and abortion are revealed, the reader learns a great deal more about her personality. The pain and guilt she experiences, forces her to construct elaborate false stories to lessen it. To escape from various traumatic experiences which she has undergone she creates imaginary fables in her mind to get rid of certain incidents recorded in her conscience. Once she comes face to face with truth, she allows herself to experience with truth; she allows herself to experience that pain and begins to unlock her feelings. By accepting her past she accepts her guilt and responsibility that goes with it. At the end of the novel she becomes more emotional and less alienated person. She is less suspicious of others and begins to see Joe's wish to marry her as an expression of love and not as an attempt to overcome and conquer her.

Women who constitute half of the world's population are paradoxically not treated on par with men in all spheres of human activity. They are oppressed, suppressed and marginalized in matters of sharing the available opportunities for fulfilment of their lives, despite the fact that every woman works for the development of her family, her husband and children. Women during times of stress, tension, disappointments and failures have to muster strength and courage and must realize the fact that they have the inner strength and peace to meet challenges in life.

11. References

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