



## QUEST FOR FEMALE IDENTITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING: A BRIEF NOTE

Dr. C. Ramya

Assistant Professor in English, Yadava College, Madurai.

### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the questions of female identity and to what extent the novelists Margaret Atwood has discussed the levels of marginality in her novel **Surfacing**. It is one of her best novels for the novel successfully transcends all the 'isms'. This paper projects this novel as a unique work both in style and contents in portraying the deeply felt and artistically analysed truths of the female psyche that inherently longs for the constant quest amidst the interrelated multiple identities being faced by the protagonist portrayed in the novel **surfacing**.

Margaret Atwood is a multifaceted genius in Canadian Literature. Being a distinguished contemporary novelist taking pride in her Canadian heritage, she is said to have written in every conceivable genre-novel poetry, children's literature and non-fiction. A prolific poet, novelist, literary critic, feminist and activist, Atwood is a notable one among the most-honoured authors of fiction in recent history. Born on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario as the second child to the couple, Carl Edmund Atwood, an entomologist and Margaret Dorothy Killian, a dietitian, Atwood became a voracious reader of literature, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Canadian animal' stories and comic books and attended Leaside High School in Leaside, Toronto and graduated in 1957, from Victoria University Award and Prince of Asturias Award for literature. She obtained a Master's degree from Radcliffe in 1962.

Atwood enjoyed being a teaching faculty at the University of British Columbia in 1965, Sir George Williams University in Montreal during 1967-68, the University of Alberta during 1969-1979, York University in Toronto during 1971-72 and New York University where she was Berg Professor of English. In interviews, Atwood generally commented that when she started writing in the late 1950's and early 1960's, "Canadian Literature" was considered a contradiction in terms. Arguably, as a distinguished novelist and critic, Atwood has done more to put Canada on the literary map than any other author. She has to her credit publication of such novels as: 1. **The Edible Women** (1969) 2. **Surfacing** (1972), 3. **Lady Oracle** (1976) 4. **Life Before Man** (1979) 5. **Bodily Harm** (1981), 6. **The Handmaid's Tale** (1985), 7. **Cat's Eye** (1988), 8. **The Robber Bride** (1993), 9. **Alias Grace** (1996), 10. **The Blind Assassin** (2000), 11. **Oryx and Crake** (2003), 12. **The Penelopiad** (2005) and 13. **The Year of the Flood** (2009) and a few short fictional, works like **Dancing Girls** (1977), **Murder in the Dark**, (1983), **Bluebird's Egg** (1983), **Good Bones** (1992), **Moral Disorder** (2006) and non-fiction like **Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature** (1972), **Days of the Rebels** (1977), **Second Words** (1982), **Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing** (2002), and a few poetry collections like **Double Persephone** (1961), **The Circle Game** (1964), **The Journals of Susanna Moodie**, **Power Politics** (1971), **Selected Poems** (1976), and **Love Songs of a Terminator** (1983).

Atwood's fiction is found to be always symbolic and she has easily moved between satire and fantasy and suffering as is amply brought out in **Surfacing**. It is one of her best novels for the novel successfully transcends all the 'isms'. It is multi-textured in the sense that what appears as a search of missing father at the surface level turns into search of self thereby touching the boundaries of nationalism and gender politics as well. This novel is nothing but a representative of the rediscovery of the past, including the primitive. In that sense, the journey of the unnamed narrator in search of her father is symbolic of a quest for a Canadian identity in the past.

The novel **Surfacing** begins like a detective story, where the unnamed protagonist goes back to the place of her childhood in the Quebec country side to search for her lost father who has already drowned in the lake while looking for Indian rock paintings. The stay on the island away from the mechanical life in the city provides her with an appropriate opportunity to introspect her own self. Gradually she discovers that it is less for her father and more for herself that she has undertaken this journey. All through the novel, she presents carefully wrapped his to suppose her hidden self buried deep within her. She misguides herself as well as her readers into believing her fake story which is only a cover-up for the painful past memories. It is only in the 'Canadian Wilderness' (p.45) that she finds a way to heal the split within her own psyche, thereby restoring her emotional and spiritual health. In the process of discovering the circumstances surrounding her father's death, she regains touch with her past and her hidden emotional life. The young unnamed narrator of the novel experiences the archetypal figures from her collective unconsciousness in a very intense way and moves within a span of about twelve days from a state of fragmentation to that of 'psychic wholeness' (P.261). In a way, she surfaces and her story traces the multi-layered process of rehabilitation by which a dislocated and damaged women manages to come to terms with her past, while recognizing that the past cannot ever be retrieved through it may be partially reconstructed through memory and fantasy being, a wiser person



who instead of escaping from the city, is now ready to face the menace, the metal culture and the disease of Americanism. **Surfacing** constitute a rite de passage from which the nameless narrator emerges a newly integrated and realized self. This is the more popular reading. Important statements of come from Josie P. Campbell, Sherrill Grace, William Grace, William C. James, Catherine McLay, John Moss, Annis Pratt and Jerome H. Rosenberg. Though each one examines **Surfacing** from a different angle, all are united in the belief that by the end of the novel, the narrator attains the ideal that Atwood called “Some kind of Harmony with the world”, a statement to which many of these critics draw attention. Catherine McLay, for instance, sees the novel as an exploration “of a contemporary problem, the search for unity in a self which has become divided”, claiming that the conclusion is “ultimately... an affirmation of the self in its two faces of mind and body”. Similarly, Sherrill Grace maintains that the narrator achieves, “a new and more hopeful wholeness in the final section of the book”, specifying that “by that end of **Surfacing**, the narrator has succeeded in her quest; she has found what she needs to begin a new, complete and free life”. (P.146)

No doubt, Margaret Atwood’s **Surfacing** describes the journey into the wilderness as a voyage of evolutionary regression during which the very idea of the human must be reinvented. An unnamed heroine searches the wilderness of Northern Quebec for her father, a botanist who has been reported missing. In the process, she comes to terms with a failed love affair and an abortion; she must reevaluate all her cultural assumption” (P.45) She works in a city, Toronto and for several years she has not visited the island. She is accompanied by her friends – Anna her best friend and David - Anna’s husband and her lover Joe. The heroine herself is a commercial artist who works for Mr. Percival. She feels that her job involves much compromise of her artistic talents. The reason why she has come to the island is that her father who has been living alone here as a recluse after the death of his wife, has been reported missing and feared dead. The protagonist’s elder brother is already away to some distant place and cannot be contacted at all. For many years, the protagonist did not contact her father and it appears that she purposefully evaded her parents.

In effect, the abortion caused a deep trauma to the heroine who came to see herself as a killer of the child. She returns to the Island in search of her father, but all along she is seen struggling to evade her lost child, the child who was denied its rightful chance to be born and grow up. The pain of the abortion was so unbearable for her that she lost the ability to feel altogether. Then the search for missing father becomes a search of her own lost self, her inner real self-her identity. In the process of discovering the circumstances surrounding her father’s death, she “regains touch with her past and her hidden emotional life she surfaces” (Jaidev, 278). The quest in the novel is patterned after the ancient heroic quest, described as a ‘separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life enhancing return” (Jaidev, 55). It is akin to an ancient hero undertaking an arduous journey into some dark, unknown and unexplored region where he goes through self-introspection accompanied with several pagan rituals and tests of his strength and will power. In the process, he gains some power of self-revelation. He then turns to the world of reality, retaining some of the insights he has acquired. This is like the quest of the ‘Holy Grail’. The protagonist of **Surfacing** embarks on such a quest and soon it is realized that she is a divided person. Her division is two fold between her mind and her body, between the past and the present. In her quest, she concentrates on both these problems seeking wholeness of reason and emotion. The narrator is fragmented and this is conveyed quite clearly through the elaborate imagery. She feels that she does not feel anything and she has to ‘rehearse emotion’. Further she says that she has to pick herself in the back of her arms constantly to really feel something. “The insides of my arms were stippled with tiny wounds like an addicted” (P.120). As she seeks a resolution to her problem, she observes:

“The trouble is all in the knob of the top of our bodies. I’m not against the body or the head either; only the neck which creates the illusion that they are separate .... If the head extended directly onto the shoulders like a worm’s or a frog’s without that constriction, that lie, they wouldn’t be able to look down at their bodies and more them around as if they were robots or puppets.....” (P.81)

The protagonist later goes through her mother’s photo album to try and discover when the separation took place but it offers no clues. She says:

“I watched myself grow larger. Mother and father in alternate shots, building the house walls and then roof, planting the garden... I was in most of the pictures, shut in behind the paper; or not me but the missing part of me” (P.116)

The missing other half is her natural self, her childhood and uncorrupted self which she comes to re-see and recognize in her late mother’s album. The pictures revive the past in the protagonist and even though she does not directly figure in these pictures, she can atleast recollect that she was there. This ‘she’ is not her for it is the missing twin, the suppressed self. “.... The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, dethatched, terminal” (P.117) her rational-minded fake husband destroyed her faith in spirituality which is inherent in the experience of true love;



thereby forcing her to shy away from giving and receiving love. She is made to realize that child conceived is nothing but ‘an animal’s abortion too is equally simple. The psychological trauma dawns on her mind when she passes through actual experience which leaves an indelible psychological scar as it was totally against her innocent desires” (P.282). She had trusted him completely. In the meantime, she got pregnant but instead of supporting her, her fake-husband conveniently asked her to get rid of her child. He commenced her into getting her child aborted by telling her that it was very simple thing –like getting a wart removed” (p.155). The abortion left a permanent scar on her psyche, so much so that her mind and body have split leaving her numb-emotionless. Such is her disillusionment with love that she forgets to give and take. Bonnie Lyons rightly comments:  
“Her lover treated her merely as a utility item, her utility being that by loving him, she sustained his ego and narcissism”. (P.183)

It may be concluded that though her journey does not end with the novel, the protagonist is able to find her identity in terms of religious, professional and personal terms. She is able to demystify her parents and accept them as normal people who grow old and die. She still might not follow Christianity but her following the shamanistic rituals have made her nourish faith in the supreme power, Divinity. On the professional front, one thing is for sure that she would not compromise her artistic anymore. She might become a writer or still a painter that is for one to speculate; but which ever field she chooses, she would be a ‘real artist’ now. In terms of personal relationship, her friendship with David and Anna might have broken but it has left her a wiser and matured person. She is ready to live with Joe without marrying, even bear his child but sans the clichéd wed lock. She is ready for motherhood leaving behind her scarred memories. Now instead of escaping to the past, she has come to terms with the present and its grave realities. Thus at the end, she is committed to life and life enhancing values because she has relearned her old escapist idiom and mastered the new language which the ritual of self-encounter and identification with nature has taught her. She returns to discover her father, she discovers him but she also discovers herself and her saviours. She evades her father in the beginning, later on, the saviours representing the father of her soul, evade her until she is fit to communicate with them. She faintly expects a will left by her father, she becomes a heiress to the most precious gifts. What initially appears to be a living person’s search for the dead proves to be a dead person’s search for someone who is only technically, physically dead. It is in the nature of the narrative that the dead one discovers her deadness and becomes alive once more.

Thus, the novel, **Surfacing** retains its uniqueness both in style and contents in portraying the deeply felt and artistically analysed truths of the female psyche that inherently longs for the constant quest amidst the interrelated multiple identities being faced by the protagonist.

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