



Deconstructing the Quest for Identity and Meaning in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract— Margaret Atwood's novel, *Surfacing* (1972) addresses the Woman's Question through the point of view of young woman who travels with her boyfriend and two married friends and sets on a journey into her troubled past. The paper analyzes the different ways in which the novel portrays the growing distance of the protagonist's self-identity from her sense of language, history, and culture. It delves into the role of language, reason, and logic in imbuing as well as taking away the protagonist's self-belief. It also probes Atwood's portrayal of nature, especially wilderness, as an essential aspect of one's psychological development and realization of desires. The paper argues that the novel is a quest for female identity and meaning in which language and nature play extremely significant roles.



Keywords— quest, identity, language, nature, civilize, society,

Rosemary Sullivan famously remarked that Margaret Atwood's writings are marked by a "cultural or civic consciousness", the fact that her work embodies both a strong public and private consciousness (qtd. in Mandel 53). This is true for much of Atwood's poetry and her novels which are known for their exploration of a range of pressing contemporary issues and subjects in a distinct manner making her large body of work at once unique and radical. Linda Hutcheon rightly suggests –“ In all her writing, Atwood shows herself to be the tireless explorer and exposé of cultural clichés and stereotypes, in particular of those that affect women” (313). Atwood attempts to address the Woman Question in her novel *Surfacing* (1972), a story structured around the point of view of a young woman who travels with her boyfriend, Joe, and two married friends David and Anna, to a remote island on a lake in Northern Quebec, where she spent much of her childhood in search of her missing father. Accompanied by her lover and another young couple, she becomes caught up in her past and in questioning her future. First published in 1972, the novel has been called a companion novel to Atwood's collection of poems *Power Politics* which was written the previous year. It was adapted into a movie in 1981.

What is presented in Atwood's *Surfacing* is the analogous nature of patriarchy and geographical colonization and how this combined colonial experience has left the victim with the feeling of displacement and disconnectedness from her language, history, and culture. This has, in turn, led to a fractured sense of self and a desperate need to regain and reclaim identity. The story is that of the literal journey to the site of her past that initiates the metaphorical one into her subconscious, which in turn forces her to confront certain ghosts and to re-examine what she has become convinced of believing as the truth, the lies that she herself and society have impressed upon her, including notions such as there never having been any important women artists. Slowly, she becomes awakened to the fictionality of history and memory and thus begins her re-examination of her past, “ I must be more careful of my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said”. She travels to a place beyond, or before, that is reminiscent of a pre-colonial Canada – a place of wilderness, a place of nature, a literal place her father chose so that – “ ... he could recreate, not the settled farm life of his own father but that of the earliest ones who arrived when there was

nothing but forest and no ideologies but the ones they brought with them". On the other hand, it is a metaphorical place from where she can retrace her history's steps and this time from a renewed and cleansed perspective. She surfaces from her past and her acceptance and acknowledgement of it is presented as vital in her process of regeneration.

Surfacing is divided into three parts – the present, the past, and again the present. The journey to Quebec brings back to her the horrifying memories of her abortion—an experience which sublimates within itself the disturbing memories of her marriage as well. Atwood radically brings to the surface the dark side of childbirth where the female subject does not experience the conventional maternal bonds with her unborn baby but rather goes through a phase of disgust and burden of guilt. The societal expectations from a mother are subverted when the protagonist categorically states that it was no use trying to justify to the world the “unpardonable sin” that she had committed in aborting the child. She feels that she is like – “ ... incubator... after it was born I was no more use (34)”

The narrator's friend Anna, too, is plagued by her moody husband David who orders her to strip off her clothes for his movie ‘Random Samples’, a compilation of shots “of things they come across”. Anna, humiliated by the request, however complies. Even though she confesses to the narrator about being subject to nightly rapes by David, she remains passive. In a similar fashion, Joe, the narrator's boyfriend is infuriated when the latter rejects his proposal. Anna's confession prompts the narrator to question her own relationship with Joe. She acknowledges – “ I'm trying to decide whether or not I love him ... I sum him up, dividing him into categories ... I'm fond of him, I'd rather have him around than not; though it would be nice if he meant something more to me. The fact that he doesn't makes me sad; no one has since my husband. A divorce is like an amputation, you survive but there's less of you”. In the earlier part of the novel, therefore, it seems as if women are mere conformists to men's patriarchal attitudes who consider women as beings desiring only – “babies and sewing”. Women, such as the narrator experience a life of lack, a condition which she describes as – “emptied, amputated”. She states, “ A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled.”

Women's subjugation to the ruthless power of the male authority is similar to the domination exercised by man over nature. The narrator constantly identifies herself with the damaged landscape of Quebec. The narrator establishes an emphatic relationship between the fragmented self of the protagonist and the damaged landscape of the island. The narrator states that the – “ ...

death of the heron was causeless, undiluted.” Beavers are killed for reasons not very different from those which propel men to abuse women, which is “ To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill...”; “ The innocents get slaughtered because they exist, I thought, there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience or piety”. Jaidev sums up the argument – “*Surfacing* addresses itself to such fundamental human issues as cruelty and violence, both of which are associated with power... [the heroine's] tragedy and that of the landscape mirror each other, reflect each other” (113). For the heroine, the term ‘Americans’ has become a metaphor for the power-hungry people who – “... spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference”.

The quest for self-identity takes shape in the second section of the novel with the narrator descending into water and discovering her father's dead body. The narrator encounters the ghost of her aborted child and starts to lose her sanity. The theme of inversion that is characteristic of Atwood's works such as “This is a Photograph of Me” is central to *Surfacing* as well. According to Eli Mandel, facing up ghosts is a requirement of the reconstruction of a devastated world. It represents sexual fears, repressed contexts of imagination and social rigidity. In her quest to find her own identity, Atwood's heroine before realizing a fully liberated state even contemplates death as an escape.

The narrator submits to paranoia – “ Everything I can't break... I throw on the floor... I take off my clothes... I dip my head beneath the water... I leave my dung, dropping on the ground... I scramble on hands and knees... I could be anything, a tree, a deer, a skeleton, a rock”. In her submission to paranoia and madness, the narrator abandons all the external trappings of a civilized world which constricts and oppresses her. Malashri Lal while arguing for the novel as an ecofeminist one makes a valid observation – “ With...the connotations of wilderness, non-civilised state, primitivism, unformed condition, woman in man-made society was seen to require the mediation of men to “civilise” her away from nature and take her closer to the realm of God or morality and social ethics as designed by patriarchy” (309-10). It is precisely this attempt of the patriarchal order to “civilize” the untamed, female subject that Atwood's unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* subverts in her quest for identity and meaning. Where the order of man and woman in the novel hardly comes across as complementary but rather as the victimizer and the victimized respectively, the narrator decides to renounce her passive role as the one who is

brutalized and traumatized. She refuses to play second fiddle to men. She states that “I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always disastrous than the truth would have been. The word games, the winning and losing games are finished : at the moment these are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the other is death.” She decides to stay on the island alone and this, according to Bijay Kumar Das – “...helps her to overcome passivity and casts her in a new role of self-assertion with individual identity” (68).

The narrator begins to destroy language – one of the primary structures of society that oppresses the marginalized. Elaine Showalter in her remarkable essay “Feminist Criticism in Wilderness” comments– “The problem is not that language is insufficient to express women’s consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence... Women’s literature is still haunted by the ghosts of repressed language, and until we have exorcised these ghosts, it ought not to be in language that we base our theory of difference” (193). Atwood too has been addressing this concern in her various works such as her poem “Spelling” from *True Stories* (1981). The speaker in “Spelling” states as if an incantation – “A word after a word/ after a word is power./ At the point where language falls away.../ the word/ splits & doubles & speaks/ the truth & the body/ itself becomes a mouth.” “The prison-house of language” which embeds women in a patriarchal structure, however is radically used by Atwood and her protagonists as a potent force to subvert its potential to create hierarchies and oppress. According to Meera T. Clark – “... while Atwood stresses the importance of visionary language in *Surfacing*, she is primarily concerned with the notion that language possesses an autonomy which far from reflecting an objective, external reality, actually creates a reality which is far more powerful, and which is inextricably linked to our destruction and creative survival” (3).

The narrator has been split in the novel by forces of rationalism and logic represented by her father as well as the lover’s forceful insistence on her abortion. She had been denying her responsibility for the abortion by justifying it – “The bottle had been logical, pure logic, remnant of the trapped and decaying animals, secreted by my head, enclosure, something to keep the death away from me.” However, the narrator accepts her responsibility for the power to kill – “Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn’t a child, but it could have been one, I didn’t allow it.”

The structure of language and logic seem to be fabrications that maintain the facade of life and sanity under which crouch the facts of mortality, death and madness. The narrator divests herself of all these artificialities and burns her artwork – “The pages burn in my hands; I add them one by one so that the fire will not be smothered, then the paint tubes and brushes, this is no longer my future. There must be some way of cancelling the Samsonite case, it can’t be burned. I draw the big knife across it, X-ing it out.” She further states – “I know I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face... Not to see myself, but to see. I reverse the mirror so it’s toward the wall, it no longer traps me.” She tears apart the cabin and burns the symbol of her fake wifehood – her wedding ring and thus divests herself of all doubles. Elizabeth K. Baer remarks – “She attempts to get to the source – the source of her feelings, her instincts, her humanity” (30). The irrationality extends to her language – “The forest leaps upward, enormous, the way it was before they cut it...”. In one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs held for a moment. She warns – “I am absurd... there are no longer any rational points of view”. She therefore breaks the rules of grammar. To get in touch with her body again, she virtually becomes like an animal. She becomes not a living thing but “it” and her language accordingly breaks down man-made limitations – “I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place.”

One of the most important and haunting images of the novel is that of the narrator’s mother standing in front of the cabin with her hand stretched out wearing gray leather jacket. Her mother is feeding the jays, one perched on her wrist and another on her shoulder. This image is repeatedly used in the novel and represents to the narrator a healthy communion of her mother with nature. Ellen Moers, has commented upon the role of bird imagery in women’s literature and argues that the “central sense” of such imagery in women’s literature “is not flying as a way for a woman to become a man, but as a way for the imprisoned girl-child to become a free adult” (qtd. in Baer 32). After having railed against language and after having destroyed its logic and rules, she arrives at the possibility of a new language. The female quest involves a search for the mother – the embodiment of “irrationalism” as opposed to her father’s rationalism, the universal mother, the creative principle. The reunion of mother and child immortalized in the Demeter and Persephone myth is the ultimate goal.

Speaking about her vision of her parents, she says – “They were here though, I trust that. I saw them and they spoke to me, in the other language”. It is remarkable that

this new language is not bound by reason and is no longer enervated by logic. As she sees her mother, she also sees her father who now represents not a terrifying figure but a “protecting spirit” from whom she gets a map to a place where every person confronts his truth. From her mother, she receives knowledge of the heart. Instead of seeing herself as a “pastiche” of words used and misused by others, ‘she’ now assumes power and responsibility for evil as well as good, and above all, for words. She must now acknowledge her capacity for creation, for the fertility of her womb, as well as for the fertility of her imagination. She now affirms life- her life as well as of that inside her. According to Elizabeth K. Baer, “... she has seen the ghosts of her parents and has accepted a gift, a heritage from each one of them” (33).

In resembling more and more with an animals, she attempts to free herself as well as her child from the restricting structures of the society that impinge on her creativity and natural aspects of her being. Her abortion had divided her self. She therefore makes love to Joe so that she can give birth to the “goldfish” nurturing in her womb. She does not know whether the child in her womb is a male or a female but has made up her mind to assert herself by allowing the fetus to grow. She says – “I cannot know yet; it’s too early. But I assume it: if I die it dies; I starve it starves with me. It might be the first true human, it must be born, allowed.” According to Bijay Kumar Das, “...with the protagonist’s determination to give birth to the child, the novelist has hinted that germination will take place and the implication is that the women will be protected provided they defend themselves against the onslaught of men over them” (71).

Her growing awareness of the connection between herself and animals (the fish, the heron) throughout the novel signifies her ability to get in touch with that side of herself and become whole again. Her submerged, true, natural self emerges in full capacity once she gets rid of all the external fabrications of language, the troubles of traumatic wifhood and abortion and the expectations of society to be “civilized”, tame and “proper”. Atwood radically emphasizes that how significant it is for human beings to stay in contact with the animal side of their nature. This is what the narrator had lost; the split between nature and culture, the irrational and rational, intuition and logic, women and men, emotion and intellect. The feminist inversion, as Baers expresses is to claim the value of what has previously been seen as the negative side of all those dichotomies just listed, and further, to assert that full humanity must be both (33). Atwood’s protagonist refuses to be pinned down as the perfect woman, actively reconstructing her life. One can sum up the political feminist agenda of Margaret Atwood’s

reconstruction of the fragmented, divided, downcast, broken and victimised female subject lies in what Goldblatt suggests – “... proving to her and to us that we all possess the talent and the strength to revitalise our lives and reject’s society’s well-trodden paths that suppress the human spirit. She has shown us that we can be vicariously empowered by our surrogate, who not only smiles but winks back at us, daring us to reclaim our own female identities”.

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