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Reclaiming the Self: The Journey of Feminist Identity in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939), a prolific and celebrated figure in postmodern Canadian fiction, is recognized as one of the most famous and talented feminist writers of her era. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), which indeed is a richly layered work that touches on themes of feminism, self-discovery, and identity. As a feminist writer, Margaret Atwood aims to explore the inner psyche of women, delving into their conflicts and their search for identity. Through her works, she seeks to highlight the significant and often terrible gap that exists between men and women in society. In her novel *Surfacing*, the protagonist embarks on a journey of self-discovery and assertion, which forms the central theme of the narrative. This process of self-realization is at the very heart of the novel under consideration. Atwood explores the tensions between societal expectations and personal growth, as well as the intersection of individual awareness and national identity. The protagonist's journey into the wilderness becomes symbolic of both inner exploration and the reclaiming of agency, often framed by feminist concerns.

The manuscript examines the interactions of the unnamed narrator with the natural environment. She embarks on a return to Quebec in pursuit of her absent father. The emotional distress she experiences during and subsequent to her involuntary abortion culminates in the obliteration of her artistic inclinations. Her anonymity is indicative of the broader plight of fragile and powerless women who are frequently subjected to male exploitation and commodification. Following a period of immersion in the natural world, she attains an understanding that nature exhibits no bias; having unearthed the foundations of her identity within the wilderness, she reestablishes her connection with society and prepares herself for the prospect of motherhood. In her pursuit of self-identity, she reconciles the dualities and contradictions

inherent in the patriarchal society in which she exists, engaging in a struggle to reclaim her identity and origins. Consequently, the protagonist's psychological odyssey towards the discovery of her roots and identity facilitates her access to the realm of unblemished nature.

Key words: Feminism, Self-Identity, Personal Growth, Inner Exploration, Commodification, Psychology.

Margaret Atwood: Themes and Literary Significance

Margaret Atwood is one of Canada's most celebrated and versatile writers, known for her vast literary contributions spanning novels, poetry, short stories, and essays. Her work often explores themes such as gender dynamics, power structures, environmental issues, Canadian identity, and the complexities of human relationships. Atwood is renowned for her keen insight into societal issues and her ability to weave myth, history, and cultural commentary into her narratives. Atwood's writing often balances sharp critique with a deep understanding of human resilience, making her works both profound and accessible. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* offers a poignant critique of environmental degradation and the intrusion of modernization into the natural world. Through the eyes of the sensitive and reflective narrator, the novel examines the toll of economic development and materialism on Canada's wilderness, often implicating American influence as a key force behind this transformation. Northrop Frye calls it an "Extraordinary novel, which perfectly represents her own critical review of Canadian themes" (Frye 321).

Characterization of the Narrator and Themes of Identity.

The unnamed heroine in *Surfacing* represents a complex and multifaceted character whose journey is one of both personal and symbolic significance. Her lack of a name is significant in itself, emphasizing her feeling of detachment and lack of identity at the beginning of the novel. Her return to her hometown marks not only a physical return but also an emotional and psychological one – a return to confront the past, her repressed memories, and her fractured sense of self.

The narrator's return to her hometown becomes a journey of disillusionment as she confronts the stark changes wrought upon the region. The quote, "the familiar smell of road dust fuming behind and mixes with the gas—and upholstery smell of car" (*Surfacing* 13), serves as a visceral symbol of industrial and environmental harm, suggesting that the tools of so-called progress have tainted the purity of the natural environment. This imagery underscores the broader theme of conflict between humanity and eco, a recurring concern in Atwood's work.

The narrator's life in Toronto is marked by dissatisfaction and disconnection. Her marriage was emotionally empty, her abortion a traumatic event she cannot fully process, and her divorce a consequence of the unravelling of her personal life. The urban life she leads is one that numbs her emotions, distances her from her true self, and reflects her internal alienation. Her move away from her family and the traditional societal expectations of a woman in the city represents a rejection of those roles, though it also underscores her inability to find fulfilment in this lifestyle. Carl Jung's psychological theory of individuation, which is a process of psychological integration where a person becomes more fully themselves by reconciling various aspects of their unconscious and conscious mind. In Jungian psychology, the environment plays a critical role in this process, providing the external space that allows for introspection and self-discovery.

Jung believed that for individuation to occur, an individual must confront their unconscious and integrate the shadow self, the aspects of the psyche that have been repressed or ignored. In this context, the natural world serves as a powerful metaphorical and literal space for this internal journey (Srinivasan 120).

Symbolic Journey and Supporting Characters.

When she returns to her childhood home, accompanied by Anna, David, and Joe, she is forced to confront the layers of her past—both personal and cultural. Anna, David, and Joe serve as catalysts in the narrative, each representing different aspects of the narrator's life and her emotional landscape. Anna, the friend and model, represents a form of femininity and sexuality that the narrator struggles to understand and relate to. David, the filmmaker, and Joe, the cameraman, are both involved in the male gaze and the objectification of women, which also becomes a central theme in the novel. Together, these characters—and their relationships with each other and with nature—create the dynamic forces that propel the protagonist's journey of self-revelation. These supporting characters help establish the thematic tensions in the novel between:

- Nature vs. culture
- Femininity vs. patriarchy
- Canadian identity vs. American imperialism
- Authenticity vs. performance

The conflict between the natural and constructed worlds, embodied by the different characters, shapes the overall themes of identity, memory, feminism, and personal healing in *Surfacing*.

Transformation and Reconnection with Nature.

This return to nature—symbolic of a return to the self and a confrontation with buried memories—marks the beginning of her transformative journey. The wilderness itself becomes a space of confrontation, not only with the past but with the complex intersection of gender, identity, and self-empowerment. The natural setting becomes a symbolic space where she can engage in self-reflection and confront her shadow—the parts of herself that have been hidden or repressed due to trauma and societal pressures.

Throughout the novel, as the narrator navigates her relationships with Anna, David, and Joe, she also grapples with the larger societal and cultural structures that have shaped her understanding of herself as a woman. Her return to her roots and her growing awareness of her autonomy and rights eventually lead her to reject societal constructs and reconnect with the primal, animalistic aspects of existence.

Resilience and Empowerment.

Surfacing offers a powerful narrative of personal rediscovery and resilience, centering on the protagonist's journey to reconnect with her inner self and, ultimately, with society. Despite the weight of her repressed traumas and bitter memories, the protagonist's ability to confront these experiences and emerge stronger underscores the novel's optimistic core.

Through her journey, the protagonist transitions from a state of emotional fragmentation to one of clarity and maturity. Her decision to return to society, bolstered by a renewed self-awareness and sensibility, reflects her determination to embrace life without compromising her dignity or self-esteem. This act of "surfacing" becomes a metaphor for reclaiming her identity and agency, allowing her to move forward with confidence and purpose.

The optimism in *Surfacing* lies in its affirmation that even amidst life's challenges and pains, there is the possibility of healing, growth, and renewal. Atwood's protagonist exemplifies the resilience of the human spirit, illustrating that confronting and processing one's past can lead to a clearer, more empowered sense of self. This message of hope resonates deeply, inspiring readers to believe in the strength to face their own struggles with courage and integrity.

Mind-Body Dichotomy and Patriarchal Constructs.

Atwood's novel thus explores the dangers of dividing the mind from the body, as well as the rational from the irrational. These dichotomies, often perpetuated by patriarchal and hierarchical structures, limit the narrator's ability to fully experience the world, both within the human realm and in nature.

As the narrator embarks on her journey toward self-discovery, she begins to reject the human-made constructs that have defined her identity and her relationships, including her job and her connections with friends. This rejection represents her attempt to dismantle the boundaries that have constrained her, leading to a transformation where she aligns herself with the natural world. "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 another" (*Surfacing* 105).

The narrator's transformation is symbolic rather than literal. She does not physically become an animal, but her mental and emotional state shifts to a more fluid, ambiguous identity, one that is no longer bound by the rigid definitions of humanity or civilization. This shift allows her to perceive the interconnections between humans, animals, and nature – connections that others often fear or overlook due to ignorance or societal conditioning. Emma Parker says,

Her rejection of, and return to (nature) society is reflected by what she eats. When she rejects culture and retreats into the wilderness to become a "natural" woman, she gives up eating processed food. Such food is contaminated in the same way that society is contaminated by patriarchal ideology. Both are unnatural constructed man made and both threaten to poison her. Instead, the narrator eats only the raw food that nature provides (Parker 50).

The dualistic principle you're describing aligns with traditional gender binaries often found in patriarchal societies, where the feminine and masculine are positioned as opposites with opposing qualities. In this framework, the feminine principle is typically associated with nature, emotion, nurturance, and irrationality – qualities that have historically been devalued in patriarchal cultures. The feminine is often tied to the body and maternal roles, reinforcing traditional ideas of motherhood and passivity. This principle is often seen as closer to nature and aligned with a more mystical, emotional understanding of the world.

On the flip side, the masculine principle is linked to rationality, logic, intellectualism, and separation from nature – qualities that have been more highly valued in patriarchal systems. The masculine is connected to authority, objectivity, and the mind, often viewed as the realm of progress and culture. This has historically placed men in positions of power, authority, and control over nature. In the context of Atwood's *Surfacing*, this dualism between masculine and feminine principles is crucial. The protagonist's return to nature and her journey toward self-discovery involve rejecting patriarchal values that associate rationality and intellectualism with masculinity, while intuition, emotion, and connection to nature are aligned with femininity. Her journey is a rejection of the limiting binaries of the feminine and masculine, allowing her to embrace a more integrated sense of self that does not subscribe to these dualities (Srinivasan 124).

Ecofeminism and Art as Control.

In the Words of Ariel Salleh, "The basic premise in ecofeminism is acknowledgement of the parallel in men's thinking between their 'right' to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women on the other." (Pirnajmuddin and Omani 1)

The union of Deep Ecology and Feminism creates a unique intersection of environmental and gender-based concerns, advocating for a rethinking of human relationships with nature and the broader social structures that govern those relationships. Both ideologies challenge traditional hierarchical systems – Deep Ecology focuses on ecological balance and equality among all living beings,

while Feminism seeks to address gender-based inequalities. When combined, these movements critique both the environmental degradation resulting from patriarchal capitalism and the social marginalization of women and other oppressed groups. Deep Ecology, developed by philosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s, critiques anthropocentrism – the idea that humans are the central or most important species on Earth. Feminists within the movement argue that this human-centered view is linked to the domination of both the natural world and women, whose roles have been historically defined by male-dominated systems. By rejecting anthropocentrism, both movements call for an ethics of care and respect for nature and all living beings, advocating for egalitarian relationships (Srinivasan 118).

In this way, *Surfacing* is not only an exploration of personal transformation but also a critique of the destructive forces of societal boundaries and the need to recognize the interconnectedness of all life. *Surfacing* explores the intricate relationship between art, representation, and the cultural frameworks of masculinity and ecofeminism. In the novel, the artistic aspirations of characters such as David, Joe, and even the narrator reflect a broader critique of masculinist art and its role in perpetuating cultural dominance over both nature and women.

A key symbol in this critique is the camera, which embodies the act of representation as a form of control or entrapment. In the hands of David, for example, the camera becomes "man's tool," a mechanism to capture and objectify both the natural world and women. This aligns with the ecofeminist critique of patriarchal systems that exploit and dominate both the environment and female bodies, often under the guise of creativity, progress, or rationality. The act of photographing nature or women reduces them to consumable images, stripping away their autonomy and inherent vitality. Feminist theorists like Val Plumwood have argued that the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women both arise from similar patterns of domination, which perpetuate violence, inequality, and environmental degradation. Val Plumwood: In her work, "Feminism and the Mastery of Nature", Plumwood argues that the ways in which patriarchal cultures have "mastered" both women and nature are deeply intertwined. She advocates for a more egalitarian, interconnected relationship with nature that considers both ecological and gender justice. (Pirnajmuddin and Omani 1-2)

The narrator's discomfort with such representations reflects her resistance to this paradigm. Her journey in the novel involves rejecting these forms of control, reclaiming her identity, and reconnecting with a more intuitive, embodied understanding of nature and self, outside the confines of masculinist culture and its tools of representation.

Colonialism, Myth, and Cultural Reclamation.

In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood juxtaposes the "primitive" art of Indigenous peoples with the so-called "rational" and "enlightened" mindset of European colonizers, using this dynamic to critique colonialist and masculinist approaches to understanding and representing the world. The rock paintings or cave drawings, which the narrator's father "discovers," serve as a symbol of a deeper, intuitive connection to nature and the spiritual world – one that resists the reductive logic of Western rationality.

The narrator's father's fascination with these drawings, and his attempts to interpret them through correspondence with a university professor, underscores a colonial tendency to "own" and intellectualize what is not fully understood. Their puzzlement with the colour red – likely a symbol of vitality, life, or ritual significance – reveals the limitations of this rationalizing approach, as it fails to grasp the cultural and spiritual depth embedded in the artwork.

This inability to connect with the primal, intuitive meanings of the paintings reflects the broader theme of disconnection between Western, patriarchal cultures and the natural world. By highlighting this tension, Atwood critiques the colonizers' treatment of Indigenous culture as an object of fascination rather than a living, dynamic tradition. The rock paintings thus stand in contrast to the masculinist art

practiced by characters like David, whose representations objectify and exploit, rather than honour and integrate, the subjects they depict.

Fairy Tales, Repression, and Inner Revolution.

In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood uses the fairy tale genre to examine the ways in which society sanitizes and suppresses the darker, more unsettling aspects of life, particularly violence and fear. The narrator's role as a fairy tale book illustrator is significant here, as it places her in a position where she must engage with these sanitized versions of stories, censoring the harsher realities for a younger audience.

The fairy tales, which often obscure the original, gruesome nature of the stories, serve as a metaphor for the narrator's own life. Just as fairy tales conceal the horror and violence within them, the narrator represses her traumatic past – such as her abortion – burying it deep in her unconscious. The narrator's trauma over a forced abortion is pivotal. It becomes a metaphor for male control over women's bodies. She views the procedure as a violent intrusion and erasure of her agency, reinforcing her need to reclaim control and redefine her identity outside of male influence.

The irony, however, lies in the narrator's simultaneous use and critique of this censorship. While she engages in the act of sanitizing stories for children, she is also painfully aware of the harm in hiding the darker truths of life.

This reflects a broader societal tendency to censor fear, violence, and the grotesque in order to maintain a sense of order and safety, especially in the context of childhood. The modern tendency to censor violent or frightening imagery, particularly in media like fairy tales and social media, parallels the narrator's own avoidance of confronting her past trauma.

The narrator's reflection on the absence of the body in fairy tales also underscores a larger theme of distance and detachment from the physical and grotesque realities of life. In fairy tales, bodies are often idealized or removed from the narrative to create a more palatable story, one that does not disturb the reader.

Atwood's narrator is suspicious of this approach, recognizing its dangers, but also guilty of engaging in it when she represses her own violent past. The effort to efface or hide violence, both in fairy tales and in her own life, reflects the tension between confronting and avoiding uncomfortable truths.

Critical Feminist Lineages: The Influence of Beauvoir, Grace, Christ, and Warren on *Surfacing*.

The second wave of feminism (roughly from the early 1960s to the 1980s) focused on issues like gender equality, sexual liberation, reproductive rights, and criticism of traditional gender roles.

In the context of *Surfacing*, the novel was published in 1972, right in the midst of second-wave feminism. The protagonist's struggle with her identity, societal expectations of women, and her attempt to reconnect with the more primitive, irrational aspects of herself can be seen as part of this feminist movement. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is a foundational feminist text, and it deeply informs the kind of feminist identity crisis and transformation that Margaret Atwood explores in *Surfacing*. De Beauvoir's ultimate call in *The Second Sex* is for women to become full subjects, to define themselves rather than be defined (Tandon and Chandra 61).

By the end of *Surfacing*, the narrator moves toward that:

"This above all, to refuse to be a victim."

She refuses to remain objectified – by men, by history, by trauma – and begins to write her own identity, albeit ambiguously. She argues that women are constructed as the "Other" in patriarchal society – defined in relation to men and denied full subjectivity.

In *Surfacing*, the nameless narrator embodies this. She begins the novel alienated from herself, performing roles (e.g., girlfriend, daughter, partner) rather than living as an autonomous subject. Her relationships – especially with men – reveal how she has been shaped by what others expect her to be, rather than by her own authentic self. Her journey into the wilderness becomes a rejection of this “Otherness” and an attempt to reclaim subjectivity.

She strongly states that, “the male world is harsh, sharp edged, its voices are too resounding, the lights too crowd, the contracts rough” (Beauvoir 557).

Sherrill Grace In her notable work *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* (1980) focuses on the split between mind and body imposed by Western (and male-dominated) rationalism. She argues that the narrator's descent into madness is not pathological but rather a radical act of feminist resistance. By abandoning language, logic, and social norms, the narrator reclaims a female-centered form of knowledge and identity that challenges patriarchal dualisms like reason/emotion and culture/nature. As she asserts, “Identifies human failure as acquiescence in those western dichotomies which postulate the inescapable, static divisions of the world into hostile opposites: culture/nature, male/female, straight line/curved space, head/body, reason/instinct, victor/victim” (Grace 5)

Carol P. Christ “The Surfacing of Women’s Spiritual Quest and Vision” (1983) frames the novel as a spiritual feminist quest. She argues that the narrator’s journey reflects a search for female spiritual and cultural roots lost to patriarchy. The stripping away of patriarchal influence is likened to a rebirth, allowing the narrator to re-establish her identity based on female values such as intuition, connectedness, and embodied experience. Christ reads the ending not as madness, but as transcendence through feminist consciousness (Tandon and Chandra 72). As she says that, narrator awakens, “from a male-defined world, to the greater terror and risk, and also the great potential healing and joy, of a world defined by the heroine’s own feeling and judgement” (Christ 325).

Warren argues that the same logic that justifies the domination of women also justifies the domination of nature. This perspective is highly relevant to *Surfacing*, where the protagonist’s healing process involves both a feminist and ecological awakening, rejecting patriarchal and exploitative views of both women and the environment (Srinivasan 128). He strongly believes that “ecofeminist perspective about both women and nature (that) involves (a) shift in attitude from arrogant perception’ to ‘living perception’ of the nonhuman world” (Warren 136).

Conclusion

Myth, Feminism, and Anti-Colonial Resistance.

The novel can also be seen as a blueprint for revolution, particularly in the way it critiques societal and patriarchal structures. The protagonist’s rejection of human-made constructs, including the suppression of the darker aspects of reality (as seen in her illustration work), aligns with a broader revolutionary ethos—one that calls for a rethinking of societal values and the embrace of a more connected, holistic understanding of existence. This notion of a “revolution” is not purely political but also internal, as the protagonist must first confront her own internalized repression before she can engage with the external world in a meaningful way. The narrator’s gradual estrangement from modern society and patriarchal values reflects a feminist critique. She distances herself from traditional roles imposed on women—mother, wife, lover—seeing these roles as traps designed by a male-dominated culture. From an anti-colonial perspective, *Surfacing* can be read as a critique of both external and internal forms of colonialism. The novel delves into the conflict between individual awareness and national consciousness, as the narrator’s journey is paralleled with the larger history of colonization in Canada.

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