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## UNRAVELLING OF THE PSYCHE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*

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### ABSTRACT

Preponderance of fantasy, myth, social realism and parody characterizes the fictional works of Margaret Atwood. Victimization being one of the recurrent themes of her writings, Atwood's endeavour has been to focus on the Canadian identity. What contribute to her uniqueness are her inimitable way of rendering the psyche, the alienation of individuals and scathing criticism of the patriarchal society. In *Surfacing*, the enigmatic novel, the past and present are inextricably interlinked, leading to the self – discovery of the nameless protagonist. The novel is enriched by the writer's profundity of vision, the feminist perspectives and the dexterity with which she exposes the interior vision of the narrator and observation of the real world.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, Feminism, schizophrenia, consciousness, patriarchy, and commercialization

In *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975), Annette Kolodny stresses in male – authored literature, the predominant gendering of the land as female and the accordant tendency to resort to nature for pastoral repose, recuperation and gratification. She also proposes a parallel between the domination and subjugation of women and the exploitation and spoliation of the land (*A Handbook of Literary Terms*, 85).

The female protagonist of *Surfacing* is 'everywoman' who is victimized by gender politics. The quest for her missing father denotes the journey into her interior; a tryst with her own wounded psyche. On reaching her haven, the remote island in Northern Quebec where she spent her childhood days, she remains dumbfounded. The place is deprived of its pristine charm and clad in the garb of civilization.

Northern Quebec is throbbing with life but everywhere, the protagonist encounters morbid images of darkness and devastation. The tall birches that sway in the wind are afflicted with tree cancer and the summer cottages that wear a deserted look appear like measles. The city is in the grip of commercialization and everything, internal as well as external appears a masquerade. The protagonist and her companions symbolize the degeneration that has crept into relationships. Anna's relation with her husband is a distorted one, devoid of loyalty and understanding. The protagonist who refuses to be harnessed by the patriarchal society regains tranquillity and serenity only when she reconciles to her lot. The painstaking task of self-realization which begins with the journey, in search of the roots is consummated only when she merges with the flora and fauna of the island.

The protagonist realises with a shudder that the breathtaking beauty of Northern Quebec is a thing of the past and the locals are wreaking havoc, sowing the seeds of death and destruction everywhere. She, who from her childhood has been a staunch advocate of non-violence, vehemently protests against enslavement. The callousness and atrocity of man embarrass her and she feels that she has subverted nature by aborting her foetus. The very idea of 'captivity' is suicidal and detrimental to growth. She finds herself mighty and complete as she stands a solitary figure; the silence of the wilderness, engulfing her.

The lake is calm and the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing (191). The image of her lover who jilted and the absence of love and trust in the married life of Anna and David make the protagonist reach the conclusion that conjugal bliss is an impossibility. Love, she feels, is an illusion.

Loving has brought such pain. She would not love again. Trusting a man has brought about mutilation, the violation of motherhood and nature. She compares divorce to an amputation, when in fact, the amputation, her abortion caused the divorce, not only from her lover, but from all love, all feeling (83).

In love with solitude, the protagonist withdraws into a life of seclusion. She experiences an emotional numbness and is on the verge of derangement. Empathizing with the passive creatures of the island, she bewails that the landscape has been victimised and raped. In the final section of *Surfacing*, the protagonist initiates lovemaking with Joe just to get impregnated.

This time I will do it myself.... The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood, retiring to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it; it will be covered with shining fur, a god (156).

The protagonist tries to prove that childbirth is the monopoly of woman and man is an alien to it. She becomes aware of her existence in a state of primitive consciousness and believes that every trivial object of nature is endowed with a

sacred mission. Civilization is loathsome. She develops an aversion to man-made food and relishes only the edible roots.

In perfect harmony with nature, the protagonist rises above the banal and mundane and attains a kind of animal existence. She communes with the spirits of her parents. As the images of her father and mother dwindle into the air, she gains a clear vision of life and returns to the bizarre world of normality. The protagonist undergoes catharsis by the 'ceremonial' diving into water wherein she eliminates the harrowing experiences that left indelible impressions on her mind. She notices herons, flying overhead before her dive into the lake. The mutilated body of the heron reminds her of the epitome of sacrifice, Christ on the Cross.

The protagonist inadvertently plunges into her traumatic past where she encounters the corpse of her father and that of the aborted foetus. The dichotomy between the mind and body which constitutes her self is typical of the female protagonists of Margaret Atwood.

Though rooted in reality, the nameless protagonist of *surfacing* exists on a spiritual plane of abstraction. She plunges into the placid lake which is indeed a dive into her turbulent psyche, torn asunder by the past, and surfaces, having triumphed over the memories which always kept her in thrall. She thus annihilates the bygone and is at peace with herself. As the novel ends, the protagonist is no longer servile to the dead past but lets herself go with the vibrancy and swiftness of the present.

Margaret Atwood's novels unravel the intricate and inexplicable relations between man and woman, man and nature and the concrete and abstract. The novelist transcends the ideological definitions and deviates from the trodden path. Her works have an undercurrent of the excruciating reality. Her forte remains the vivid and authentic portrayal of characters and incidents, embellished with a tinge of sarcasm and irony. The female protagonists of Atwood are at strife with themselves and the identities that society thrusts on them. The protagonist of *Surfacing*, a victim of paranoid schizophrenia has a dual personality. The schism is between the body and mind and the past and

present. As reminiscences are exorcized, it dawns upon her that she is no longer an animal and comes to terms with the 'grotesque' world of reality.

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