
**Creating Her Own World: The Rise from Submission to
Independence in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*:
A Feminist Study**

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Abstract

Margaret Eleanor Atwood (1939-) is regarded the greatest woman and feminist writer in Canadian Literature. The themes of her poems and novels shift the focus of the reader to issues which are directly related to women. In the 1960s, women were not allowed to think about their own requirements, be that monetary, social or bodily needs. Any woman who challenged the social codes was looked down upon. It was in this period that Margaret Atwood used fiction as an instrument to voice against the traditional practice of male hegemony which always undervalued women and suppressed their identity.

Therefore, the aim of the paper is to shed light on how, in her paramount novel, *Surfacing* (1972), Atwood portrays the total alienation of women in Canadian society and how she uses the isolation of the narrator to relate with all Canadian women which will finally result in their rise to an independent mode of living. Atwood finds men imposing laws of patriarchy on women through religion, marriage, language etc. She also says that men only consider women as “war-spoils” (23). Her alienation is very systematic and manifests that children know their gender role at an early age. The effect of the narrator’s alienation is the complete withdrawal from vibrant life and landscape.

Margaret Atwood is born on November, 18th, 1939 in the city of Ottawa, the capital of Canada. She grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec, and in Toronto. She is the author of more than forty volumes of poetry, children literature, nonfiction, criticism and short stories. She wrote many novels like: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin* (1998).

Atwood is a cultural critic, social historian, environmentalist, human rights spokeswoman, political satirist, and cartoonist. She is one of the world's leading women novelists besides being one of Canada's most successful and popular writers. She campaigns for human rights and for environmental issues. Her work was viewed through the second wave of the feminist movement throughout the 1970s, which offered a new critical paradigm. She began writing at a time of raised feminist consciousness. She is concerned with the female position and she believes that women deserve equality. Women's concerns were seen as central issues in Atwood's fiction (Macpherson, 111-112).

Atwood's notion of feminism is a significant one, simply because it leads to the discussion of women only because they are females. Women fought and continue to fight for equality throughout place and time. They aim to change their living circumstances, and to challenge the masculine, hegemonic order of society. Atwood is "concerned about the image she presents concerning her stance on feminism" (Moss, 21). She moves towards a feminine mode of expression. Her central focus is the description of feminine subjectivity and the position of feminine subjects (ibid, 21-22).

Through *Surfacing*, she clearly features her interest in womanly issues and female experiences. She is concerned with women perspectives regarding feminine experience and female self-expression. She traces femininity in its more tangible forms, tackling the role of being a woman, the way women are socially defined according to their physical appearance, their beauty standard, besides their interest of becoming mothers and how the lack of it can affect woman's life. She also tackles the severe crisis women undergo during childbirth. Above all, she clearly shows the evil conventions of masculine dominated societies which penetrate women's actions,

beliefs, feelings, intentions, and even their personal decisions (Gogoglou, 1).

Through *Surfacing*, Atwood mirrors how women see themselves as innocent and inviolate according to stereotypical terms. She shows "the pressures facing feminine characters in a patriarchal Canadian society contaminated by neo-colonialism" (Trapani, 28). Atwood reflects the oppression of women by men and the entrapment of women within social, cultural and even linguistic constructions. Martha Sharp states that:

Women become subject to what they symbolize to men as woman, the projection of a fear of what is unknown, hence mysterious and unnamable. Thus, women's specific experiences as individuals remain unexpressed; they are reduced, defined, and explained under the male constructed symbol, woman (60).

Surfacing is a fine example of feminist novel in which Atwood shows an optimistic view of the narrator. The novel revolves around a female narrator who is at odds with feminine gender roles. When the narrator returns to Quebec where she has spent her childhood with her family, she is shocked to find what the Americans have done to this town after the second world war. The novel explores the relationship between nature and culture that centers around a woman's return to her childhood home in the northern wilderness of Quebec. Due to her father's disappearance, the narrator drives to Quebec with her boyfriend Joe and a married couple, David and Anna (Roy, 68).

The female characters in *Surfacing* oscillate between power and powerlessness. The narrator associates power with being evil and that's why she does not want to possess the trait connected to power. She remembers the beans in her parents' garden and how she used to believe that picking those beans would endow her with power; "just as well, I think, as I had no idea what I would do with the power once I got it; if I'd turned out like the others with power I would have been evil" (*Surfacing*, 22). Atwood examines the role of power in suppressing women in society. The weak are exploited by powerful ones. Thus, Americans are seen in the novel as exploiting the Canadian wilderness and nature in much the same way as men are exploiting women in that society; "the invasion of nature by the Americans symbolizes the destruction of women's identity in patriarchal society" (Bakay, 1). In *Surfacing*, Americans are portrayed

by Atwood as symbol of the masculine and exploitative culture. The narrator claims that "anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: we practiced on them first" (Surfacing, 86). She believes animals share the same innocence of females, the heron and all other animals which were killed for food become defied.

By relating the narrator to the hanged heron, Atwood connects in crystal clear approach the way Americans destroy nature with the way men control women. The narrator shows her disgust towards the killing of a bird for she "sees the heron as symbolic of her psychological death" (Surfacing, 58). Moreover, this is compared to the unfair treatment of nature in relation to the oppression of women by men. It has long been a natural trend, women are likened to fertility and men cause environmental abuse. This connotes the harsh nature of some men towards nature:

Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like trash? To improve they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise; it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained or talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it (Surfacing, 83).

The narrator regrets her first marriage and believes that it is only a matter of official document, a mere writing on paper. She exemplifies this notion stating that:

I married him, he married me, and we committed that paper act. I still don't see why signing a name should make any difference but he began to expect things, he wanted to be pleased. We should have kept sleeping together and left it at that (Surfacing, 25).

Love turns to be meaningless for the narrator since she has been betrayed by her lover. She considers that for some men "love is taking precautions" (Surfacing, 55). She felt uncomfortable and shattered when her lover showed her photographs of his wife and children, "they had names, he said I should be mature" (Surfacing, 107). She even fails to tell the truth about her unhappy relationship with a married man and her abortion. Because of this experience, she comes to conclude that "I'll never trust that word [love] again" (Surfacing, 30). Her husband treats her "like an invalid rather than a bride" (Surfacing, 107). He doesn't treat her like a bride because to his ideals she isn't one. The principal issue to him is that he forced her to have

abortion because he is a married man who doesn't want to ruin his marriage and family life (Macpherson, 33).

Throughout her entire life, the narrator faces painful experiences such as abortion, her mother saving her son from drowning, confrontation with her father's death which culminates in her drowning and her surfacing again. She, similar to many women, lives a double life in order to repress her memories of abortion, broken marriage and the child (Bakay, 4). One of the most significant feminine concerns is the experience of giving birth to a child. The experience of labor is a painful one. The suffering that woman faces during labor makes her believe in the idea that she is treated inhumanely as some kind of material from which a living thing is extracted. The narrator reflects her view on the whole procedure of giving birth to her child and the painful experience she went through the first time "after the first I didn't ever want to have another child, it was too much to go through for nothing" (Surfacing, 55). The violence of this procedure highlights the way in which the models of motherhood are shaped by the force of social expectations. According to motherhood, giving birth to a child and having an abortion remain the two most vital feminine concerns (Gogoglou, 3).

At first she blames everyone including herself regarding her pregnancy and abortion. She describes her mating with her lover "like the buffalo on the US nickel" (Surfacing, 2). Later, she started transforming her psychological experience to an animal-like birth, and she finally accepts to do it with Joe.

This time I will do it by myself, squatting on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning 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, I will never teach it any words (Surfacing, 117).

She compares the process of abortion to a removal of the potentially fertile parts in order to suit the evils of civilization through the case of a sexist and anti-animal joke (Goldie in Atwood & Lawrence, 102).

Abortion is a severe decision women are often forced to commit for different reasons by men. Women are victims of social circumstances, for they have to sacrifice their personal wish and

intention of motherhood because, as for the narrator's case, she is not supported by the father of her expected child. The narrator feels she was forced to have an abortion by her lover. She feels that the unborn child was imposed on her; "I never identified it as mine... It was my husband's, he imposed it on me" (*Surfacing*, 20). Barbara Hill Rigney in an essay entitled "Alias Atwood: Narrative Games and Gender Politics" affirms that:

The nameless protagonist of *Surfacing* ritualistically murders dolls in childhood, just as she later, as an adult, considers herself guilty of childhood murder by abortion, real or imagined or simply a lie (Rigney, in Bloom, 63).

The narrator finally accepts that the child needed protection just like an animal. She insists that she is innocent and a 'nice' victim of male aggression "the immorality of her abortion, which is the essential reason for her status as an American killer, is expiated by her conception of a god-child" (Power, 109).

Surfacing is, thus, a study of female victimization. Through her novel, Atwood protests against being a victim. The narrator senses her victimization in her relationship with her former lover. She sustains that:

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that, I can do nothing. 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 more disastrous than the truth would have been (*Surfacing*, 138).

Atwood's views of feminism are further exemplified by the character of Anna. Anna represents the system of oppression. She is the narrator's "best woman friend" (*Surfacing*, 3). She surrenders to the ideological representation of women within the masculine centered societal frame. She communicates and talks in an artificial way with men due to the fact that she cannot fight them. She is one of those women who measure their own worth in relation to success with men. Her aim is only to attract her husband, David.

Women wear expensive clothes, accessories and cosmetics to gain men's attraction and to create an impact of desirability. Anna is compared to a doll when she puts on makeup. She wears makeup to raise sexual interest in her husband. She carries her makeup kit everywhere she goes because she has to wear it all the time besides

that her husband is not used to see her without it. She assumes that; "he doesn't like to see me without it" (Surfacing, 27). Later on, she contradicts herself when stating that "he doesn't know I wear it" (Surfacing, 27), therefore, in concordance with her speech, he does not even notice when she is without it. Anna aims at being appreciated and wanted by her husband. She wishes to please and satisfy him as much as she can afford. She puts on makeup to emulate a corrupt womanly ideal (Gogoglou, 2).

David is a calculating man. He always hides or ignores feelings of love as he considers them a sign of feminine weakness. He reflects constant reference to the female anatomy. It is through David and Anna's relation that Atwood shows sexual power politics in Canadian society. Via language, David teases, disrespects and drains Anna. He fully controls her and uses her femininity against her to uphold his sense of masculine superiority. She is faithful to her husband in spite of all his abuses. He treats her like a doll or robot "she is locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth" (Surfacing, 119-120). She tries her best to collaborate with him despite his changing moods. She claims that:

He's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them, so I'm never sure. He's crazy, there's something missing in him, you know what I mean? He likes to make me cry because he can't do it himself (Surfacing, 88).

The narrator, then, is curious about Anna and David's marriage believing that it is a strong relationship, may be "they have some special method, formula, some knowledge I missed out on" (Surfacing, 25). She believes that they are happy spouses and that their marriage is perfect. Later on, during an adventure trip in the island, she asks Anna "how do you manage it?", Anna responds "manage what?", she explains that her marriage works because "you just make an emotional commitment, it was like skiing, you couldn't see in advance what would happen but you had let go" (Surfacing, 30). She discovers that their superficial intimacy is only a show of pretention they made up their minds to perform in front of others to give them the false impression of a successful marriage. Nevertheless, it is later revealed that their commitment is one of hatred, not love. David and Anna wage their own private war "they hate each other" (Surfacing, 100). She finds them like "the wooden man and woman in

the barometer house" (*Surfacing*, 25), in which their happiness is not real.

Furthermore, to humiliate and deprive her of womanly rights, and to more expose the dark side of a masculine-dominated society, Anna is forced to take off her clothes and to be photographed naked for a film. David and Joe want her to do as they want, "you'll go in beside the dead bird, it's your chance for stardom, you've always wanted fame. You'll get to be on educational T.V." (*Surfacing*, 97). In fact, both women and nature become objects for leisure 'education'. David, thus, punishes her for refusing to pose naked in front of the camera. At first he claims that "she likes her lush bod...even if she is getting too fat" (*Surfacing*, 97). Despite her refusal, he keeps on ordering her by saying "come on, we need a naked lady with big tits and a big ass" (*Surfacing*, 97). On the other side, Joe tries to stop him, but he responds "shut up, she's my wife" (*Surfacing*, 97), as if she is his commodity to destroy, and is always there for him to order anything "that's what I like, service" (*Surfacing*, 21). He commands her to "look sexy now, move it; give us a little dance" (*Surfacing*, 98). When she resists, he uses sheer force to make her comply.

In such social ideals, a woman is considered a deficient male, a second class citizen, emotionally unstable and devoid of creative potentialities. That is why David likes house-wives to learn just "how to switch on the T.V. and switch off their heads" (*Surfacing*, 80), because he is fully convinced that "that is all they need to know" (*Surfacing*, 80). Even Paul is surprised to see the narrator without her husband when she returns to the island to look for her missing father. He considers that "a man should be handling this" (*Surfacing*, 12).

Atwood draws special attention to women's feelings of shame and degradation because of men's fantasies in reaction to a fear of the body. At the novel's end, Anna is trapped by her husband's insistence to videotape her naked body for a film he is making just for his own pleasure. She is bullied harshly because she refuses and is left with no option but to submit to his sensual, bohemian instincts. This mirrors that she has become an instrument for her husband's sexual entertainment. In turn, this signifies that women in general do not act in full control of themselves. They set their own trap by letting their lives be controlled by men instead of defining themselves (Gogoglou, 2-3).

Because of the narrator's physical appearance, she claims that she has often had the feeling of being manipulated or treated in a particular way. She traces the familiar sense of vulnerability which she has experienced when some men kept staring at her buttocks while trying to come out from a shop. She is dissatisfied with their looks and considers that part of her body is scrutinized by strangers claiming that "I would like to back out the door, I don't want them staring at me from behind; but I force myself to walk slowly, frontward" (Surfacing, 15).

Such incident is a common thing occurring to any woman who is having her body considered as an object by male strangers and the insecurity women feel due to such perverted looks. Maria Gogoglou pin points this fact upon mentioning that:

The sexual appeal that a woman may have on strangers plays a significant part in her everyday interactions; the fact that the image of her body may create conflicting reactions creates a sense of frustration and prompts any woman to view her own body as a consumable object(2).

More to the point of female physical and psychological pains, Atwood refers to sexual intercourse as a painful experience. When the narrator hears David and Anna making love, she thinks of "an animal at the moment the trap closes", claiming that sex is "like death" (Surfacing, 57).

In general, the island influences both Anna and the narrator in the way they interpret men, especially during sex. Men's notion of love is one that is based on "love without fear, sex without risk" (Surfacing, 54) which is later coined by the female characters as "love with precautions" (Surfacing, 55). The narrator denies Joe and David who both had the opportunity of having sex with her, because she is frightened of getting pregnant (Endurance, Babee&Majeed, 34).

In the course of the novel, water is seen as symbol of life and redemption, a process of cleansing, in addition to the fact that it constitutes a solution to death "and for the narrator it is a memory of two significant deaths in her life: her father's and that of her fetus" (Dudova, 20). The narrator feels her lost child when she attempts to bath in the deep water of the lake at the moment of her impregnation. Therefore, she narrates:

He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds (Surfacing, 117).

It is through this impregnation that she not only heels herself and the memories of her aborted child, but she also heels her divided self. Her two halves, her old self and her new one. There is an attempt to recuperate that 'other half', to set the lights and replicate the shards of the self in other bodies. Atwood writes in Surfacing:

Women sawn apart in a wooden crate...a trick done with mirrors...only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal (Surfacing, 77).

She later says "it might be the first one, the first true human, it must be born, allowed" (Surfacing, 138). The only one she can heel and forgive herself is by becoming a mother. She considers it safe in the watery world "being in the air is more painful than being in the water" (Surfacing, 51). It is only through water she is able to gain purification and cleanse her soul. She goes to water one last time at the end of the novel claiming that:

When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock. They offered clothing as a token, formerly; that was partial but the gods are demanding, absolute, they want all (Surfacing, 129).

It is thus crystal clear that the narrator's character undergoes a change by the novel's end. She embraces her life on the island which is now her immediate surrounding. She now interacts with nature and animals which leads to the distortion of her relation with humans "I lean against a tree, I am a tree-leaning" (Surfacing, 131). She is upset with the sight of her friends who come to look for her. She feels they have come to disturb her peace while she is in the final process of absorption with nature, and, thus her final escapement of the domination and humiliation of masculine world.

That is the way they are, they will not let you have peace, they don't want you to have anything they don't have themselves. I stay on the banks, resting, licking the scratches; no fur yet on my skin, it's too early (Surfacing, 134).

She finally decides to remain on the island in order to nurture the baby growing in her womb. Her intention to give birth to the child reflects her revived self because of her closeness to nature and her connection to the place (Endurance, Babee&Majeed, 35-36).

Conclusion

In her novel, *Surfacing*, Atwood exemplifies her perspective of feminism. One which touches on diverse issues as the health risks related to hormonal contraception, the issue of contraception as male invention, the power inherent in pregnancy, the social implications of makeup, the false beliefs in relation to marriage, the notion of a natural woman, and the psychological mechanisms used by men to exert control over women.

Through her portrayal of the female characters of the narrator and Anna, Atwood labors to insist on women to observe the world through their unique individualities and to make their own choices. This is due to the fact that women of today are still challenged to put their dilemmas into perspective, look into different sides of them and lead themselves to a new understanding of their own lives. Women's lives are constricted by social boundaries and restrictions imposed on them by a society which they defy. Their role in society is assigned by their passivity and submission. They fall a prey to male domination without being given the right to defend themselves, besides that they do not have full control of their own lives. Atwood believes that women are victimized by the patriarchal system which drives them into insanity. She advocates resistance for women and pleads them to find solace in a vocation of their own.

Moreover, Atwood affirms throughout her novel that in certain cases women both lead themselves and are led to dead ends as far as their needs of being accepted and becoming desirable as well as becoming mothers are concerned. The dead ends to which women have been pushed to are all through the idea of being appreciated specifically for who she is, but they project an image of themselves aiming only to ensure male physical attraction. Atwood reflects that both women and nature will be protected if they defend themselves against the severity of men. Atwood is much aware that men's domination of women is deep and systematic. The oppression of women is deeply embedded in such societies, and it is considered natural and accepted by the majority.

The narrator depicts the way in which men view relationship as war, with women being the spoils. She finds out that men alienate women by the way they control them through religion, marriage, birth control, sex, language and children. She feels isolated and caught up in miserable atmosphere. Her only quest is to live life in its totality. She remains unnamed, making her a universal figure and suggesting that all women are in some way alienated.

الملخص

صناعة عالمها الخاص: القيام من الاذعان الى الاستقلال في رواية مارغريت اتوود

الصعود: دراسة نسوية

الكلمات المفتاحية: اتوود، الصعود، الحركة النسوية

المدرس: رنا مظهر دخيل

المدرس: أمجد احمد لطيف

جامعة ديالى/ كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

الملخص

تعد مارغريت أتوود اليانور أعظم امرأة وكاتبة نسوية في الأدب الكندي. تحولت موضوعات قصائدها والروايات تركيز القارئ إلى القضايا ذات الارتباط المباشر بالنساء. فيستينات القرن الماضي، لم يكن يسمح للنساء بالتفكير في احتياجاتهن الخاصة، سواء كانت احتياجات مالية، اجتماعية أو جسدية. في ذلك الوقت، كان ينظر بأزدراء إلى المرأة التي تتحدى القواعد الاجتماعية. في هذه الفترة بالذات استخدمت مارغريت أتوود الأدب الروائي كأداة للتعبير ضد هذه الممارسة التقليدية للهيمنة الذكورية التيدائما ما تقلل من قيمة النساء وتقمعهن. لذلك، يحاول هذا البحث جاهداً تسليط الضوء على الكيفية التي تمكنت من خلالها أتوود بتصوير الاعتراض النسوي في المجتمع الكندي، وكيف أنها استخدمت عزلة الراوية لتتصلب جميع النساء الكنديات الأمر الذي سيؤدي في نهاية المطاف إلى الوصولهن المعيشي.

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