

Extricating the Psyche in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

S. Abirami, Ph.D. Research Scholar

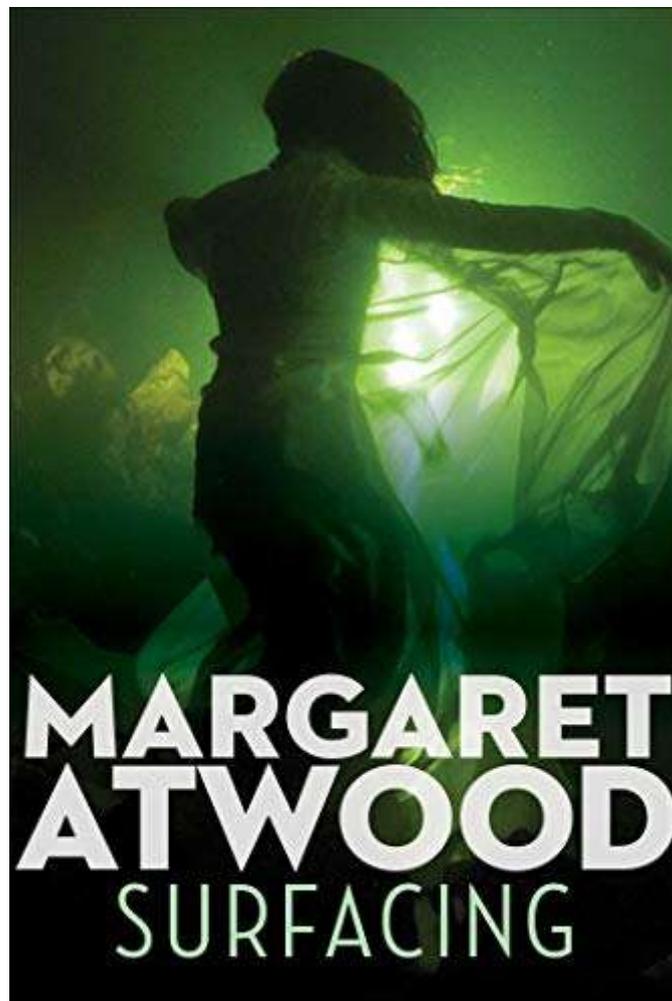
Department of English, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai - 625001

abiramiee2015@gmail.com

Dr. J. Sobhana Devi

Assistant Professor

Department of English, SFR College for Women, Sivakasi - 626123



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Abstract

The prolific writer Margaret Atwood is one of the most famous and talented feminist writers of postmodern Canadian Fiction. *Surfacing* (1972) is a complex work – a

psychological novel as well as a detective novel. This complex novel is better understood if we read it several times to get the real meaning of what Atwood intends to communicate. As a feminist writer, Margaret always explores women's distinctive awareness of the role of gender in shaping their mind, psyche, feminism, etc. There is a gap between men and women and through her novels Atwood demonstrates and highlights such gap between them. The protagonist in the novel *Surfacing* becomes assertive because of the circumstance of victimization. The paper attempts to show that extricating the Psyche is at the heart of Atwood's novel under consideration.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, Impuissant, Victim, Subdued, Schizophrenia, Feminism, Self-discovery, Isolation.

The novels of Canadian literature have their own focus and they deal with the geographical sizes and cultural breadth of Canadian Life. The most common way followed is to distinguish them by region (or) province. In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, the narrator is searching herself-identity in Northern Quebec. There is a portrayal of women/females as victims of victimization, but, over the course of time, they find themselves more powerful than men. Margaret Atwood frames this novel as a first person narrative.

Northern Quebec is rugged in nature and life. The narrator encounters a bleak image of darkness and devastation of landscapes. The tall birches that sway in the wind are afflicted with tree cancer and the summer cottages wear a deserted look which appear like measles. The city is in the grip of commercialization and everything. The nature around symbolizes the deterioration that has crept into the relationships of theirs.

The narrator has to deal with her past as she begins the narration, saying "I can't believe I'm on this road again ..." (Chapter 1, First sentence). She is searching for her father on a remote lake in northern Quebec. This brings out episodes of her life, suffering, happiness, solitude, painful thoughts and so on. All these are beautifully narrated in this novel in three parts with a total of 27 chapters.

The Narrator regains tranquility and serenity when she attunes herself a lot. She thinks about her experience even from her childhood:

"In one of those restaurants before I was born my brother got under the table and slid his hands up and down the waitress's legs while she was bringing the food; it was during the war and she had on shiny orange rayon stockings, he'd never seen them before, my mother didn't wear them." (Chapter 1)

There is wreaking havoc, sowing the seeds of death and destruction everywhere. She is surprised by changes around, although such changes do not really make any change in the lifestyle of the people in the land: "We slur down the last hill, gravel pinging off the

underside of the car, and suddenly there's a thing that isn't supposed to be here, MOTEL, ..." (Chapter 2, first paragraph).

The narrator feels alienated to her own land. In her childhood days, she felt like "I was the one who didn't know the local custom, like a person from another culture" (88). She goes to the town where her father was living to find out how his father disappeared. Her father's neighbor Paul "shrugs. 'He is just gone,' he says ..." He also asks, "... Your husband here too? ..." The narrator says, "Yes, he's here ..." But she actually hides the truth. She reports in her narration, "What he means is that a man should be handling this; Joe will do as a stand-in. My status is a problem, they obviously think I'm married. But I'm safe, I'm wearing my ring, I never threw it out, it's useful for landladies. I sent my parents a postcard after the wedding, they must have mentioned it to Paul; that, but not the divorce. It isn't part of the vocabulary here, there's no reason to upset them." (Chapter 2).

Words are used to transform our thoughts for others to recognize what one is going through in one's own life. But the protagonist faces a dialect problem of languages and she tries to use her own. "I was seeing poorly, translating badly, a dialect problem, I should have used my own" (96).

Due to the past experience in life the image of her lover who jilted and the absence of love and trust in the life of David and Anna make the narrator reach the conclusion that conjugal bliss is an impossibility of love. She also feels it as an illusion. She fears about her life in the present scenario as she states "Fear has a smell, as love does" (97). She connects herself with the past and present and yet she could not conclude that it was really she who was part of her recollection of her past. She sometimes assumes it was just her own imagination. She feels that the rough landscape is victimized as rape. In the final part of *Surfacing*, the narrator initiates lovemaking with Joe just to get impregnated.

The narrator did not talk much but has a distinctive inner thought about humans. She thinks that man was furious about the animals, and woman also faces an end to conform to male expectation. As Gloria Onley notes, the narrator "fills her with unconscious self-loathing."

The Narrator canoes to a site in her father's map. The past comes to her mind when she sees the images of the corpse of her father and that of the aborted fetus in the lake. She screams and swims over the surface. The paradox of mind and the body is typical of the female protagonists of Margaret Atwood.

In perfect harmony of the nature around her, the narrator abandons everyone, which simply shows she attains a kind of animal existence. She communes with the spirit of her parents as the images of her father and mother dwindle into the air. She gains a real life and returns to the bizarre natural world of reality.

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 able to see it; it will be covered with shinning fur, a god (156).

The protagonist tries to prove that giving birth to a child is a monopoly of women and men are alien to it. She thinks being aware of her existence in a primitive consciousness leads to belief that every 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.

Through her narration the author brings out the extreme dilemma of man-woman relationship, and this is the basic issue underlying all feminist literature. Margaret Atwood describes the tortured sensibility of a woman who is not prepared to compromise with the male dominated society and who is looking for routes of escape.

The narrator recognizes that she is no longer an animal and she comes to terms with the world of reality. Joe unwillingly helps her in conceiving another child, with the sole aim of bringing the child up on birth in the lap of nature, away from the taint of human civilization.

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