



Knowing Yourself in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Ms. R. Yoga

Researcher, Post Graduate and Research Department of English,
Alagappa Govt. Arts College, Karaikudi, Sivaganga District, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

This study presents a systematic analysis of the fictional world of Margaret Atwood with a focus on the identity of human being, in which they face the struggle against violence, frustration, despair, and quest for survival and identity. Atwood's self-reflexivity makes her different from other novelists. Atwood brings the condition of the Canadian society to the light along with the problem of the multicultural society like Canada.

The prolific writer Margaret Atwood is one of the most famous and talented feminist writers of Post Modern Canadian Fiction. She is not only a novelist, but a critic, a story teller and a poet also. Through her writings has set a new trend in Canadian literature. As a Feminist writer Margaret Atwood's aims to explore woman's inner psyche, their conflict, search for identity, identity of selfhood, identity of womanhood, national identity, cultural identity and religious identity. Almost all her protagonists are victimized - either by man or by authority or by a particular social environment Atwood examines the place of women in modern society.

In Surfacing unnamed narrator becomes an unsuccessful artist in the city of Toronto, due to her art teacher, who is a married man. In this novel the



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narrator wants to find out her real identity. The whole novel is based on the narrator's attempt to search her missing father, which becomes a symbolic representation of search for the self and country cultural identity. Margaret Atwood brings the condition of the Canadian society to the light along with the problem of multicultural society like Canada.

Key words: *Identity; Feminism; Society; Self-condemnation; and Victimization.*

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Knowing yourself is the Beginning of all Wisdom

-Aristotle

The term 'Identity' is defined in *Introducing Identity* is something we uniquely possess; it is what distinguishes us from other people. Identities are our traits, characteristics, social relations, roles that define identity who is one. According to Fromm, there is only one possible productive solution for the relationship of an individualized man with the world: his active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual.

A sociological approach to identity begins with assumption that there is a reciprocal relationship between 'self' and 'society'. There has long been a school of thought that our environment is a major factor in establishing who we are and how we act. The self influences society through the actions of individuals thereby creating groups, organizations, network and institutions, and, reciprocally, society influences the self through its shared language and meaning that enable a person to take the role of the other, engage in social interaction, and reflect upon oneself as an object.



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Margaret Atwood is a scintillating Canadian writer. She is internationally well known for her writing in poem, novel, criticism and short story. With such a multidisciplinary writing skill, it is difficult to judge the way of presentation in her future publications. Even though her writing is diversified in many ways, all of her writings are consistent in success and reader friendly. In general she gives importance to write about her own experience as well as in and around social activities of her current place. She lived in places like Canada and United states. She also roamed in England, France, Italy and Germany. Her travelling experience reflects in her writings also. However, most of her publications are based on Canadian way of writing skill.

Most of the Atwood's novels have focused on the theme of search for identity. The search for identity is not a common problem in Canada but it remains as a fate that it shares with all those who ruled it before i.e. the post-colonial and with the new nations. It is more than a century since Canada attained its supreme power as a treaty country by the British North America Act 1867. But the search for nation's identity is still out of reach or yet to be reached.

Canadians, who faced many problems, are reflected in their literature. Over the past century, Canadian literature by an immigrant literature shared their movements of British and American Literary History. So the Canadian writers always had to grapple with the problem of creating and sustaining for individuality of Canadian identity.

Atwood's novels speak soundly about her fantasy, literary sophistication and mystery over the devices of novel writing. The questions of identity have always emphasized in Canadian tradition. The discard of human as an animal has already been established in Darwinians, which is uniquely equipped.



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Atwood describes the contemporary battle of sexes, survival and struggle for identity. Many writers like Susan Sivan, Robert Kroetsch, Jack Hodgins emerged in Atwood's generation. Atwood believes that literature performs the function of a Mirror - a Mirror which enables to see 'himself and his world'. According to Atwood in *Canadian Literature: An Overview*, "Literature is not only a Mirror; it is also a map, geography of the mind"(69).

One of the major novels of Atwood is *Surfacing* in which it is seriously concerned with the country's predicament as a political victim. She is trying to show what being a victim in the colonial culture feels like. She puts her anguish into words by saying that the United States as an imperial master is the cause of Canada's victimization. The novel voices Atwood's border relationship with the United States of Canadian. She he exposés the threat of Americanism to Canada's national identity. Of course, the novel presents a slice of Canadian reality.

Atwood commonly focuses on autobiographical structure and elements in her writing. Her first trial of marriage with Jim Polk was a in failure, just like narrator's marriage with her art teacher also proved to be a failure. Like her, Marian blew off her first engagement with Peter in *Surfacing*. The protagonist's story is very much similar to Atwood's personal experiences. So this uses autobiographical elements. In most of her novels, Atwood shows modern women as longing eagerly to accomplish their goals. Her character does not put the blame on others but block out all human society and turn to a primitive world.

The novel *Surfacing* was written during the time of cultural variation between the Quebec and the remaining of Canada. They were expressing themselves in the view of raising Quebec nationalism. We could find a great



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deal of differences of opinion between an individual in realizing themselves and the national consciousness. It is not only the novel of self-realization but also has an element of self-identity. The very complicated query of identity for an English speaking Canadian female was clearly explained in the novel *Surfacing*. Even the identity of the protagonist has become problematic as she was the victim of colonial forces. The protagonist has been imprisoned by the people in the patriarchal society in which she was brought up, American and their cultural imperialism, Neo-colonialism as it has become Euro-centric legacy that prevail in her country, even after the English and French ruler's physical presence have been taken away.

Atwood focuses on a young nameless woman and her inner-search for who she is and how she relates to the world around her. The search assumes greater significance when the narrator begins to search for the essential links in her life. Critics have termed the quest psychological, religious and social; as the superficial search is a cover for the search of the inner self. The novel also explores the search for the past, the complexity of the female self, and the creation of a female identity.

In the novel, the character endures a kind of transformation in which she gives up her identity as a human and assumes to be an animal. Suddenly she stops speaking and started her action with spiritual quest. The forces of the Canadian society which brings her dead father and her lost 'self' become unfriendly.

The protagonist recalls her childhood memories which emphasizes that all women's role are decided and assigned by the society: their patience and their humbleness is the only thing that is expected. She remembers that when she was young she was not shown any guidance or given any help from her



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mother and unlike other mother's who had shown their daughters how to dress, please men, and survive as a mature women in public. She has habituated to compare her drawings with her brother's because through this activity she remembers her childhood life. When she saw her brother's drawings, the visions display bravery, power etc, "explosions in red and orange, soldiers dismembering in the air, planes and tanks... could be seen" (67) But when she search her's, "I searched through it carefully, looking for something I could recognize as myself, where I had come from or gone wrong but there were no drawings at all, just illustrations cut from magazines and pasted in" (68). Her inner self thought to herself that she needs courage and strong mind to face the panic situation but she remains innocent because of her paranoid.

Atwood explores the ways of how an individual get involved in the society. Their relationship can be created either as domination or victimization and cannot be more superior than this when the protagonist recollects in surfacing her long ago lost innocent days, she realizes that she was not a mere victim but instead an actual competitor in the game of cruelty. After all of these childhood joys which were shared with her brother, she feels as if her life was all just a persistent struggle of dependency on the world.

The nameless protagonist senses victimization in her relationship with her former lover, the art teacher who hides his reality that of his marriage and she feels she has been controlled by her acceptance of his control. She was forced abortion by her lover which haunted her throughout the novel. Here, the loss of the child is the loss her identity. The narrator does not dare to tell even her parents about her divorce and abortion, and consequently remains suspended between the 'real' and 'imaginative' identities throughout the novel.



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In the beginning, without any questions, she simply accepts the role and position of her as a victim. She accepts the functions and the role of women. In order to fulfill the duty of her, she accepts the role of women which was given by the Canadian society. Once she identifies herself with the Heron: “if they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me or bludgeon in my skull and hang me up by the feet from a tree”.(143)

Then she determines herself to oppose the ways and the habits of society in which she struggles herself. The Protagonist hate the ‘American way of life’ because the shape of the society which restricts her and she feels that her identity is spoiled by this pattern. At one stage, she becomes conscious of herself that she is not a victim and an American too. she hopes that, in the name of deification animals are killed and becomes prey for the hungry peoples and those animals are regarded as females.

The most firmful guilt complex from which she wants to get released is the sin of her abortion. “... and can look out through the walls of the mother’s stomach” (20). She frequently liar her mind by her guilt and doesnot consider herself totally innocent or helpless. She locks herself into a circle of guilt, which is a kind of death.

While reading the novel, the reader can often infer that the protagonist has no education of society in her former length of life, because the protagonist of *Surfacing* is prisoned between the two cultures of the French Canadians and the English Americans. Even George Woodcock in *Introducing Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing* believes that protagonist’s parents had fear of the world:

In fact it seems to have been largely because of fear of a world about which they knew a great deal in one way or another that the parents erred in bringing up narrator to be so ignorant of life



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beyond the home and the island that she must learn about it in shameful indirection from her most knowing and by implication, her more corrupt brother. (13)

She dislikes the first group because they turned themselves into a cliché and disowns the second for causing and spreading evil in multiple ways. She does not speak in the same fashion or dress the same as them. She knows from the start that she speaks a different language than other people for instance, as the two men speak or as Anna speaks. She is, what Rigney calls in *Women Writers: Margaret Atwood*: “an incarnation of the evil queen in snow white who sits before her mirror but never asks fatal questions.”(30)

The protagonist spends her life mostly in metaphorical country in which she lives between truth and lies. The novel shows that her inner self is completely different from her social life as she is living between reality and fantasy. “I have to behave as though it doesn’t exist, because for me it can’t..... lapse, relapse. I have to forget” (33). In order to forget, she holds her mind emotionally in which she borrows the hurting more. The novel shows that her inner-self is totally different from her social one as she is living the dual life between reality and fantasy. As she is not willing to live, she does not care about what happens around her. She locks herself because of her inner crime.

In the tale the camera acts as one of the important characters which records the unfortunate incident such as how the man act against the women’s feelings, freedom and self respect. Also it results to victimize the women again and again. The author conveys the power of camera in this tale. The main character in this tale thing that the camera will whip out her inner spirit and results to fear that the next victim “will be me” (103). Hence, she decides to destroy the film which is used to capture her in picture. Hence, she will get a



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chance to refuse to be their victim. After destroying the film she thought that she also saves Anna from the panic situation. Also she felt that she gets some kind of psychological spiritual re-birth, which allows her to live in the patriotic society. In the view of searches in this tale, the narrator seeks to find her lost father and lost self which is separated between the social 'self' and her inner 'self'.

The narrator is troubled by certain public forces and society. Due to this, she is caused to have a new dramatically, converse self, who can get by the society's flaw or draw away from the face of society altogether. She wants to escape her prison in the jail of civilization. She does not want to be confined by the lines of demarcation of society and she wants to break away by taking shelter in nature. She presumes that she must find a fresh residence in order to release her true qualities and self and only in that place she must permit her true past to come to light. The images of drowning and struggling are significant because they show the narrator's lost 'self' and her reappearance to the status where there is no deceit but 'wholeness'.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist chooses to remain nameless and the reason is more convincing that names are meaningless for women, since they are all derived from male, whether from husband or father. This is one of the reasons why Atwood's protagonist says: "I no longer have a name, I tried for all those years to be civilized, but I am not and I am through pretending" (131). Finally the story narrated by the nameless protagonist could be the story of the millions of unnamed women all over the world, who may identify themselves with her.

When protagonist looks at herself in the mirror, she does not give any importance to her physical changes and this includes the distortion of her



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identity. But she feels that she has new identity and she is regenerated to become a natural woman. The mirror symbolizes her past. Also it denotes the picture of the body in front of the mirror. But there is also another body which indicates her new identity. In the main character point of view, this new identity in mirror is an alteration of her past identity. Because the mirror acts like human beings who try to project them as wise persons by means of changing their way of approach. The only option left to her is to change her mind to build bridges between her identity and society.

Not only the narrator but another woman, a primary character in this novel named Anna, wife of David, who is talkative and social but doesn't give importance to her identity as she has lost herself. David who puts the canon for the play has to win the game always. Anna has to act as a doll according to her husband's key. Throughout the novel, David shows his masculine strength by putting down Anna's femininity.

Anna completely surrendered to the ideological representations to the male-centered society. She mingles with the men because she cannot fight against the system of David and society too. David forced his wife to pose naked for his film 'Random Samples'. If she refuses to pose naked, she will be punished by teasing her physical appearance. She thinks to herself that her marriage is a war in which she uses her body as a weapon to fight. she leads a life of unhappy married life, empty sex and wounded love with David.

She is vulnerable but crafty too. She applies makeup and decorates her in order to attract and please her husband, David. Though David abuses her many times in many ways, she still remains patient and has faith that she will be a good companion to him. The narrator learns through Anna's life, as a



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whole becomes a prudent story for her. Thus Atwood maintained a balance system of human and non-human in which unity is maintained in diversity.

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