

## The framework of male dominance and women as the victim of societal norms in *Surfacing*

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### Abstract

In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood attacks the framework of male dominance by implicitly criticising it and the novel revolves round a protagonist who is at odds with feminine gender roles. Atwood's *Surfacing* demonstrates the complex question of identity for Canadian women. Concern about women has been a thematic reason of Atwood regarding Canadian culture. At the very outset of the novel, the unnamed protagonist reveals the fact that she has already lost her identity. This paper throws light on the framework of male dominance and women as the victim of societal norms. Identity for the protagonist in Canadian society has become problematic because of her being a victim of colonial forces: she has been colonized by men in the patriarchal society and by cultural colonization.

**Keywords:** Male dominance, societal norms, identity, alienation, and colonization.

### 1. Introduction

*Surfacing* is one of the best novels of Margaret Atwood which portrays the framework of male dominance and women as the victim of societal norms. *Surfacing* reveals emotional, intellectual and social needs of women who are battling with a series of issues about women's role in society without identity. It has been argued that the primary means by which we derive the largest part of our understanding is languages. So the protagonist exhibits her attitude to language. In the words of Margaret Atwood:

"...if you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, you speak their language, a language is everything you do."<sup>1</sup>

The protagonist embarks on a journey to her homeland, Canada, in search for her missing father accompanied by her lover Joe and the couple friend Anna and David. She was in complete isolation, away from the busy city, after a while, having succeeded in leaving her friends behind, surrounded only by nature and wilderness. In due course of time, she manages to recover her balance and to discover the truth about the death of her father.

#### 1.1 The Framework of Male Dominance

In *Surfacing*, David is the model of the framework of male dominance. David initially appears to be an ideal husband, as he jokes and flirts with Anna. However, Atwood twists her portrayal of David by revealing the cruelty that underscores his jokes and the emptiness of his flirtation. Under the guise of joking, David constantly tries to control Anna's behavior. As the week progresses, he becomes overtly antagonistic towards her, calling her fat and snubbing her ideas, and eventually uses psychological cruelty to dominate her. He also objectifies Anna by referring to her body in front of Joe. Anna's primary role in *Surfacing* is to crystallize the narrator's opinions about love, sex, and marriage. The narrator also observes the psychological cruelty that men inflict on women through the way that Anna crumbles in the face of David's cruel jokes. The degradation of Anna's marriage confirms the narrator's suspicions about marriage in general. At first, the narrator

seems to envy Anna's love for her husband, and she marvels at the way Anna keeps her marriage together. However, the narrator eventually comes to understand Anna's marriage as one balanced by hate rather than love, and David's cynicism allows her to reject marriage altogether. Anna's life as a whole becomes a cautionary tale for the narrator. The narrator learns through Anna the pitfalls of unhappy marriage, empty sex, and fractured love.

#### 1.2 Women as the Victim of Societal Norms

The novel *Surfacing* has portrayed women as the victim of societal norms that makes them vulnerable to the dominance of their male counterpart. Women in different contexts in the novel have gone through a long journey to find their identity and invigorate themselves as individuals with right to live without being governed by men and societal norms. Atwood has presented a feminist approach in her novels to depict the rise of female rebellion against gender chauvinism. J. Brooks Bouson a feminist critic remarks that: "*Surfacing* rejects the masculinist culture- which is depicted as both rationalistic and dangerously aggressive- and idealizes a nature- identified femininity."<sup>2</sup>

Through *Surfacing*, Atwood questions a woman's conventional social and sexual role. *Surfacing* touches on the health risks associated with hormonal contraception, the idea of contraception as a male invention, the power inherent in pregnancy, the social implications of make-up, the potentially false ideal of marriage, the notion of a natural woman, and the psychological mechanisms that men use to exert control over women.

Atwood uses the narrator's near-constant feeling of alienation to comment on the alienation of all women. The narrator feels abandoned by her parents because of the disappearance of her father and the detachment of her mother. She finds men especially alienating because of the way they control women through religion, marriage, birth control, sex, language, and birth. The narrator also describes her alienation as systematic, highlighting the way that children learn gender roles early in life. The result of the narrator's alienation is madness and complete withdrawal.

The narrator remains unnamed, making her a universal figure and suggesting that all women are in some way alienated.

Despite her fear of the consequences, her search for her missing father and her search for self increasingly offers her the power to resist the oppression inherent in their relationship and to reassess her own need. The protagonist moves from struggling with the oppression and domination of the male world to associating with various feminine principles and motifs to eventually embracing and returning to the natural world as an equal, unassuming member. Margaret Atwood shows men's misuse and women's use of nature in *Surfacing*. Women's association with fertility and men's with environment abuse specifically as a metaphor of the violation of women by men. The male dominance shattered her self-image and integrity as an autonomous individual. She voices this idea in an interview with Graeme Gibson:

'If you are defining yourself as innocent, you refuse to accept power you refuse to admit that you have it, then you refuse to exercise it, because the exercise of power is defined as evil, and that's like people who refuse to get involved in politics because it's dirty.'<sup>3</sup>

The development of understanding among women, related to the rise of consciousness, has resulted in rise against oppression and male domination. Consequently, women have emerged as individuals with greater strength in the context of sexual exploitation, to resist abuse by male prejudiced society. Oppression and suppression of women in the patriarchy has resulted in an awakening that may cause the emergence of consciousness among women, with regards to expression of their feelings. As a consequence, women have become able to identify themselves and hold a place in the society, breaking themselves from the manacles of dreadful male domination.

Being in search of her identity, the protagonist detects first with colonizers as she is under the modern Darwinian influence of 'the survival of the fittest' applied to the social jungle- which means that she has to adapt to her new circle of friends in order to ensure that she will have a group of people to talk to. But she wakes up from her dazed state to realize that she was wrong to act this way and starts the process of identity transformation by isolating herself. The cultural battle envisaged by the protagonist is contemplated by the cultural identity mystery that she tries to solve. She has enjoyed the company of French people during her childhood, but at present she can no longer do that, as her British accent makes her speak English. Thus the protagonist has been squeezed by the many unfortunate situations with which she had to cope- a broken marriage, an abortion, difficult relationship, unfit friends, she suffers all the more for not really knowing who she really is and what she wishes to do.

Atwood avoids naming the narrator of *Surfacing* in order to emphasize the universality of the narrator's feeling of alienation from society. The causes and effects of the narrator's psychological transformation remain somewhat mysterious. The narrator feels emotionally numb, isolated by the numerous roles she is supposed to play in her life. Part of the cause is grief, and part of it is due to spending too much time in the wilderness. But the narrator's madness also stems in large part from systematic social alienation. Atwood explores a woman's place in all of its facets: as a human, a wife, a religious person, a mother, and a sexual

being, because the narrator realizes that complete withdrawal from society will result in her death.

## 2. Conclusion

*Surfacing* reveals the existing power of politics, the traditional notions of male superiority, and the mutilation of women by men. Margaret Atwood observes that women can refuse victimization and can gain transcendence from the male defined world and can hope to breathe freely in a world defined by them.

## 3. References

1. Atwood Margaret. *Surfacing*. Mc Clelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1972, 123.
2. Bouson J. Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Designs in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. University of Massachusetts Press, Massachusetts, 1993, 39.
3. Gibson Graeme. *Eleven Canadian Novelists*. Anansi, Toronto, 1973, 24.