

***Surfacing*: A Story about the suppressed condition of women and nature**

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Abstract

This is an attempt to analyze the suppression of women as portrayed in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. Atwood analyses the inner conflict of the protagonist and their quest for survival. Remarkably a good writer of Canada, Margaret Atwood is the most prominent figure in Canadian Literature. She not only reflects society but also aims to reform it. The most important problem that man faces today is the degradation of land and environment and its consequences on human existence. This paper attempts to take a study of degradation of land and environment and its consequences on Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972). Within this text, power and domination, directly highly relevant. Eco-feminism is new ways of approaching oppress both the feminine world and the natural world.

Keywords: *Surfacing*, women, nature

Introduction

Surfacing is Margaret Atwood's novel about a young woman who is an artist going in search of her father on a deserted island in northern Quebec. She takes a couple of companions with her – her lover Joe, friend Anna and Anna's partner David. While attempting to find the father, she recalls feelings and events that have to do with her past. The main issue of the novel is that of searching for identity and it explained how women and nature are suppressed. The unnamed protagonist perceives herself as a victim; on the one hand, as a member of patriarchal society, she is a victim of men: not only, in the protagonist's view, do they make use of women's bodies for their own satisfaction, but also they have more rights and are those who have the main voice in creating history and think they are responsible for "saving the world, men think they can do it with guns" (176). On the other hand, as a Canadian she feels oppressed by the cultural imperialism of Americans. The young woman is shifting between her memories of her childhood and experiences she goes through at present. Not only is she willing to understand and find her position in her family, but also in the Canadian society. As a victim she feels disconnected from her language, culture and history, and, not least, from members of her family, especially from her missing father; she perceives herself as a displaced person. These feelings evoke in her an urgent need of recreation: the heroine of *Surfacing* wants to seek for her lost identity, to find and reconstruct it again.

As a novel about human's relation with nature, *surfacing* shows Atwood's unique insight into the suppressed condition of both women and nature. Even though it is published in the early 70's, it demonstrates her particular concern about the crisis of human intrusion in the wilderness and evokes the attention to the disequilibrium in the novel. According to Nathalie Cooke's observation in *Margaret Atwood: A Biography*, Atwood shows her concern of the topic about nature in her early works:

Atwood's earliest works reflects a number of concerns that have remained central to her oeuvre: a profound respect for the natural world, a commitment to Canadian culture, and a

firm belief in the rights of the individual. In her work, such concerns can be traced in the themes of nature's triumph over civilization, Canadian Nationalism, and feminism. (79)

In *Surfacing*, Atwood embraces many of the dichotomies that have long been standards in Western thought. She connects women with nature and men with culture, which each in opposition to the other. Although these binary categories bring the nameless narrator numerous pains, she relieves herself from the burdens of dichotomy and returns to the city with hope at the end of the novel.

The anonymous narrator in *Surfacing* grows up in a remote island in northern Quebec. She goes back to her birthplace in search of her missing father. When she puts herself in the isolated nature, the narrator finds that she is captivated and summoned by the mysterious power of the nature like many of the female characters in the fairy tales. She has special senses as she dwells in the nature environment. She gets the experiences in her lifetime to come into contact with learn about nature. Unlike her unfeeling companions, she believes and senses nature with ease. As she stays in the rural environment, she feels a kind of safety. "How have I been able to live so long in the city, it isn't safe," the narrator says, "I always feel safe here, even at night" (70). In comparison with the stifling city, the narrator lives and breathes at ease on the island.

For the narrator, living in the city is as if bearing numerous kinds of burdens. Everything in the city for her is a difficult task. Getting alone with so many people makes her uneasy. She cannot fit herself into the surrounding at all. Every times she recalls the nights she spent in the city, she suffers the tension of emotion.

"In the night I had wanted rescue, if my body could be made to sense, respond, move strongly enough, some of the light-bulb neurons, incandescent molecules might sleep into my head through the closed throat, neck membrane. Pleasure and pain are side they said but most of the brain in neutral; nerveless, like fat. I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate;

what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it" (112).

She is unaccustomed to the pressure of modern life. She cannot get used to the life in the civilization. Therefore, she confronts so many difficulties during the period she spends in the city; it's such a hard time in her life.

"The inside of my arms were stippled with tiny wounds, like an addicts. They slipped the needle into the vein and I was falling down, it was like diving, sinking from one layer of darkness to a deeper, deepest; when I rose up through the anesthetic, pale green and then daylight, I would remember nothing" (112).

The narrator's unaccommodated situation in civilization is displayed in her narration as well. Shoes for her "are a barrier between touch and the earth" (164). David and Anna's car is nothing but "a lumbering monsters." The "Americans" are intruders. As Hilde Steals notices in "*Surfacing: Retracing the Paths of Self- Mutilation*", the narrator disdains everything symbolizing civilization and never wants to change herself.

These foreign signs signal the deterioration of the "original" landscape, caused by the intervention of the other human beings, an interference that she associates with violation. The environment that underwent a process as a result of changed context "betrays" the narrators expectations.

Therefore, when the narrator comes back to her birthplace, goes fishing with her friends, and eats artificial food on the natural land, she even has a sense of complicity. A sense of crime rises gradually in her mind because she is aware of her takings part in doing something bad to nature.

"We knelt down and began to pull at the weeds; they resisted, holding on or taking clumps of soil out with them or breaking their stems, leaving their roots in the earth to regenerate; I dug for the feet in the warm dirt, my hands green with weed blood. Gradually the vegetables emerged, pallid and stunted most of them, all but strangled. We raked the weeds into piles between the rows, where they wilted, dying slowly; later they would be burned, like witches, to keep them from reappearing. There were a few mosquitoes and the deer files with their iridescent rainbow eyes and stings like heated needles" (77).

After perceiving her own complicity, she then turns to despise what the "Americans" do to the natural island and even compares them with dogs. They should preserve the beauty of the environment rather than destroy it.

"After we landed we found that someone has built a fireplace already, on the shore ledge of bare granite; trash was strewn around it, orange humans. It was like dogs pissing on a fence, as if the endlessness, anonymous water and unclaimed land, compelled them to leave their signature, stake their territory, and garbage was the only thing they had to do it with"(111).

The Americans unscrupulously do things bad to nature in order to demonstrate their power. They repeatedly ravage and rob the landscape with their own will and disregard the reciprocal relationship between humans and the land. Human beings exist in the natural world. They should give thanks and preserve it with all efforts. Without the support of natural system, it is important for humans to sustain themselves well. Similarly, the heroine struggles with the attitude of her friends towards her. They all come from a city and even though she

has also already lived there for a couple of years, she is unsure whether they will ever understand the place she originally comes from. This concern proves to be the case: finding themselves in the middle of the wild nature, David and Joe are occupied by shooting a primitive amateur film instead of paying attention to the natural environment that surrounds them. Similarly, the protagonist is upset by the way Anna looks: Anna is presented as a woman constantly paying attention to her appearance, one conscious of fashion, wearing make-up. These facts make the protagonists disappointed, the values her companions advocate are contrary to what she professes. For the heroine, her friends represent the symbols of a consumer oriented life she denies.

"Whether it died willingly, consented, whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ; if they didn't kill birds and fish they would have killed us. The animals die that way we may live; they are substitute people, hunters in the tall killing the deer that is Christ also. And we eat them out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life. Canned spam canned Jesus, even the plants must be Christ. But we refuse to worship" (141).

Even though the protagonist's attitude towards Christianity has already been shaped during the years she began to reason herself, reaching the place of re-creation of herself intensifies her rejection of the religion. As she and her companion's pass a wooden Jesus nailed to a crucifix near the road, she claims Christ to be puzzling and mysterious. She further states there indeed are gods existing; however, there is nobody who knows about them. Atwood claims that in Canada the authenticity of the religion is destroyed; one has to discover its essence in some other way. That is exactly what the heroine of *Surfacing* does: the natural world she reaches evokes in her a need to worship it. While fishing, she compares her way she believes in the underwater fish to "the way other people believe in God: I can't see them but I know they are there" (68). Other people believe in God, she does not.

More likely, she is thankful to and believes in the natural world she has just reached,

"These gods, here on the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten" and she firmly maintains that those are "the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed" (155). What is more, the heroine gets everything from them for free. She communicates with the gods and believes she feeds them by throwing the remaining food into the fire. The heroine is strongly convinced that the act of feeding them would guarantee that they either come back or stay away.

It is ironic that human beings worship Jesus Christ for his sacrificing life for them but denigrate animals sacrificing their lives to provide them food. Birds and fish in the novel are victims that convey the embarrassing condition. The way of human's exploitation of nature is connected to the oppression of women through the narrator since she is a woman who suffers painfully from the domination of men and civilization and has a special bond to nature. Both nature and women contribution to human society but are repressed under men's commanding power.

In fact men would like women to remain oppressed as well as suppressed. The idea of women as a free and independent existent is intolerable to them. Her having a title a profession

is bound to threaten man because he is very well pleased to remain the sovereign subject, the absolute superior, essential being, he refuses to accept his companion as an equal in any concrete way.

A woman is considered a deficient male and a second class citizen, emotionally unstable and devoid of creative potentialities. No wonder, therefore, that David likes the house-wives to learn just “how to switch on the T. V and switch off their heads” because he is convinced that “that is all they need to know” (129). It is not just David who thinks this way.

The narrator lives happily on the island rather than the city. For her, life in the city is so difficult. She is unaccustomed to the pressure of modern life.

“In the night I had wanted rescue, if my body could be made to sense, respond, and move strongly enough, some of the red light-bulb neurons, incandescent mole-cues might seep into my head through the closed throat, neck membrane. Pleasure and pain are side by side they said but most of the brain is neutral; nerveless, like fat. I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it”. (112).

As days go by the city David begins to like that place very much. Gazing up the sky he says, “We ought to start a colony, I mean a community up there, get it together with some people, break away from the urban nuclear family” (105). Such a sight of heaven on earth is threatened when the American, Bill Malmstrom brings out his proposal of buying the farm from the heroine in order to use it as a kind of “retreat lodge”. She refuses to sell it to him. The narrator goes to fishing with her friends, and eats artificial food on the natural land; she even has a sense of complicity. A sense of crime rises gradually in her mind because she is aware of her taking part in doing something bad to nature. “We knelt down and began to pull at the weeds; they resisted, holding on or taking clumps of soil out with them or breaking their stems, leaving their roots in the earth I dug for the feet in the warm dirt, my hands green with weed blood” (77).

Women have no names in the rural town. Everyone is called “Madame.” They are only objects that belong to men in the male-dominated society. They exist to satisfy the physical, domestic and sexual needs of their spouse or male companion. Names for them are not important at all because individual are not significant. The slaughter of livestock in the novel although the narrator deliberately describes it as if she goes through a delivery:

“After the first I didn’t never want to have another child, it was too much to tie your hands down and they don’t let you see, they don’t want you to understand, they want you to believe it’s their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so won’t hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your leg are up in a mental frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or snickering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with red plastic, i saw it running down through the tube. I won’t let them do that to me again” (79).

The narrator is cut into two after the cruel and forced abortion. “I emptied, amputated;” the narrator says “i of salt and

antiseptic, they planted death in me like a seed” (145). This compelled event hurts her physically and mentally since how she feels is never the concern. David symbolizes the authority of patriarchy that exploits women in all respects. On the sixth day they spend on the island, David asks Anna to take off her clothes for his ‘Random Samples’. He persuades her into doing it.

“What’s humiliating about your body, darling?” David said caressingly. “We all love it, you ashamed of it? That’s pretty stingy of you, you should share the wealth; not that you don’t” (136). By pressing a button, David easily captures Anna’s naked images. It is a torture to Anna but a joy to David. Shooting films is an act of taking possession. David takes Anna as his personal property for consumption that he can film her as long as he can and he wants. For David, Anna becomes nothing but a pornographic object displaying in front of his eyes.

Drawing attention to the power politics of gender relations, it shows how women, in an age of supposed sexual freedom, remain bound in a social formation that assigns man the role of sexual aggressor and women that of passive victim and sexual object.

The marriage between Anna and David is not an admirable relationship; on the contrary, it gives the narrator a lesson to scrutinize her own carefully. Contesting the Myths of romantic love as the attraction of opposites or the balance of complements. Surfacing draws attention to the oppression of women in a male-defined order of hierarchical and oppositional roles that empower men at the expense of women. The narrator gradually realizes the imbalance of Anna’s marriage and she decides to fight back. She wants to do something for Anna, but at this point, she is still afraid and feels that “the only defense was flight, invisibility”:

“I wanted to run down to the dock and stop them, fighting was wrong, we aren’t allow to, if we did both sides for punished as in a real war. So we battled in secret, undeclared, and after a while i no longer fought back because i never won. The only defense was flight, invisibility. I sat down in the top step” (136).

The narrator reels off the film and symbolically rescues Anna from David’s coercion. She unwinds the film and throws it into the lake. These unjust treatments of Anna lead the narrator to re-examine her identity as a women in marriage. As the journey progresses, she rejects the patriarchy- defined gender role for women. She refuses to be a victim like poor Anna. She wants to have her own way as Atwood talks about in *Margaret Atwood Conversation*:

“If the only two kinds of people are killers and victims, then although it may be morally preferable to be a victim, it is obviously preferable from the point of view of survival to be a killer. However, either alternative seems pretty hopeless; you can define yourself as innocent and get killed, or you can define as a killer and kill others. The ideal would be somebody who would neither be a killer nor a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony, rather than a destructive relationship towards the world” (167).

Without doubt, Anna embodies the role of victim, a victim of patriarchy. However, the narrator doesn’t. She resists being subordinate. As Eleanor Rao points out in *Strategies for*

identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood, the narrator comprehends so many oppression in her life that she decides not to be a victim anymore: Images of victimization permeate *Surfacing*. The world of nature that surrounds the narrator and her companions is violated by technology, pollution and human lust. The protagonist, confronted by such evidence of victimization, is convinced that she herself is a victim. As a woman she feels handicapped in a man's world as a commission; as a Canadian she feels exploited in a country that she regards a sell-out. As a human being, she is pervaded by guilt (55).

Unlike Anna, the narrator asks for equilibrium in her "marriage". Her previous abnormal relationship with her ex-lover in the city leads her to try to break free from the established women role in the society. Unlike Anna she strongly refuses to be a victim within the system of patriarchy. Besides fighting back violently, there should be some placid ways to solve the problem.

The narrator is conscious that she will never be a woman like Anna. She has to resist. She has to fight. She has to walk her own path. The journey into the wilderness is a chance for her. After a few days' stay on the island, the narrator's long-denied past and the affection surface. She wants to experience nature. She rejects to go back to the city to conform to the male-constructed woman without any change. Then she decides to turn into a "natural" woman and lives a "natural" way there. The narrator is tired of civilization and does not want to pretend anymore. She wants to get rid of all the burdens of civilization.

Nothing can disguise the fact that humans are part of nature, indivisible from it. Even the narrator chooses to come back to civilization at the end of the story does not deny this idea. Nature and civilization, woman and men are not absolutely opposite. However, with a complete transformation in mind, it can be changed. Looking from a different angle, everything will be different. The borders between women and men and nature and civilization are not that hard to cross.

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