

Quest for Identity: A Study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Dr. Sarvjeet Kaur, Associate Professor of English, GCW, Sector-14, Panchkula, Haryana

Paper Received on 25-12-2022, Accepted on 10-02-2023,
Published on 13-02-23; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.1.155

Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is a powerful and difficult book. Its very title is ambiguous. One is unable to find the exact meaning of *Surfacing*. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer has called it "a remarkable and remarkably misunderstandable book."¹ It has layers of meanings. Some critics take it as a feminist text, others think it to be a nationalistic treatise. Some more treat it as an ecological text. But Atwood denies any of these labels attached to it. Whatever the nature of her text may be, Atwood skilfully harnesses the first person narrative to deconstruct the concept of "femininity" as defined by the patriarchal system. The very ambiguity that shrouds the narrator's existence as also so many other details of her life is indicative of the deconstructive nature of the text that helps the narrator in her continuous endeavour to get an independent identity.

Keywords: Femininity, Patriarchy, Self-annihilation, Deconstruction, Incubator.

According to Atwood, *Surfacing* is simply a story. The narrator of *Surfacing* is a young woman who is nameless till the end of the novel. She, along with her lover and

two friends visits the island cabin in northern Quebec. She had spent her childhood there. She is in search of her lost father, who is supposed to be drowned in the sea. Throughout the novel, the narrator is haunted by her past. Time and again she oscillates between her past and present and occasionally thinks about her future. Her brother and mother haunt her continuously. Her marriage which had never occurred, and her aborted child also come to her memories again and again. With the passage of time, she turns inward, isolated and lonely. She feels so alienated that she doesn't share her past with her friends Anna and David and not even with her present lover Joe. Ultimately, she herself explores her past and becomes "a migrant into a new self,"² in order to get some "identity." According to B.W. Powe,

"Atwood is challenging male definitions of selfhood as applied to women. She destabilizes or de-centres the 'normal' notions of subjectivity-female subjectivity: becoming defines being."³ Just like many feminist writers she "questions sex and gender roles and protests against patriarchal structures of power and dominion that subsume and expropriate the woman's identity."⁴ In *Surfacing*, Atwood has shown her narrator come out of the stereotyped image of a woman. Instead of presenting a woman's experiences from a male point of view, this is done from a

female point of view. In Surfacing, the woman, who has been treated as a sex object and victimised since time immemorial refuses "to be a victim."⁵ The narrator in Surfacing undergoes a journey that is not only geographical but psychological also. This helps her to discover her true identity and place in this patriarchal set-up. Throughout the novel, the narrator revolts against the stereotyped Image of womanhood with which a woman has ever been oppressed.

The narrator in Surfacing is the omniscient narrator. At one moment she is in the present but immediately the very next moment she is in her past. While thinking of her past, she remembers her mother who is an embodiment of the mother role in a patriarchal set-up. The narrator's account of her mother, who was a simple housewife, depicts the low position of a woman in the patriarchal society. Her lot is confined only to the family and the household chores. Whenever the narrator thinks of her mother, the archetypal mother image is built for us. She tells, "My mother was a saver: rubber bands, string, safety pins, jam-jars, for her the Depression never ended" (p.66). Her mother, just like any other traditional mother ends up collecting odds and sundry articles against a rainy day. She lived for her family and died without any individuality of her own. She was never considered seriously by any of her family members. Even in her last days, she is not given proper attention and care. When she dies, the narrator reads her mother's diary in which nothing was written about her own life. The diary contains no record of her personal feelings, emotions, and

experiences which she had to go through in her life. There is nothing Individual and personal in her diary: "On the bedside table with the flowers, Chrysanthemums, I saw her diary; she kept one every year. All she put in it was a record of the weather and the work done on that day; no reflections, no emotions. She would refer to it when she wanted to compare the years, decide whether the spring had been late or early, whether it had been a wet summer" (p.24).

She had never written anything about her own life as women, in this male-dominated society, are not supposed to record their personal feelings. This sort of self-annihilation is highly prized in the patriarchal system. But the narrator still expects something even about herself in her mother's diary as she tells, "When I got outside, I leafed through it. I thought there might be something about me, but except for the dates the pages were blank" (p.24). Atwood has thus tried to point out the callousness of the system where women are supposed to keep the pages blank. They are not even allowed to record their personal life. The pages, which are silent or blank, are perhaps the most telling ones. Her mother, because she was a woman, dared not fill them up with her own feelings and emotions. In a deconstructive text, the silences and the absences do speak more eloquently than the presences in the verbal structuration.

Narrator's own account of her past and her present points to her petty existence. She is treated as nothing more than a sex object and a breeding machine. Whether it is the relationship with her husband or with her present lover Joe, the

narrator is simply treated as a sex object. While recalling her first meeting with Joe, she says that he was impressed by "the way I took off my clothes and put them on again later very smoothly as if I were feeling no emotion. But I really wasn't" (p.31). It was only the body of the narrator which impressed and attracted Joe. Here Atwood has pointed out how men treat women as sex objects only. For them, the individuality, identity, the self-hood of a woman is of no importance. This type of attitude of males has made the narrator of Surfacing a rebel, who revolts against the man-made social codes which assign a male-version or male-defined concept of womanhood to her. Atwood has deconstructed the concept of femininity and other social codes which don't allow a woman any free existence. The narrator of Surfacing does not feel any reverence for males not even for her lover. Towards the beginning of the novel, the narrator views her lover as a specimen of the male species "once dominant now threatened with extinction" (p.8). While describing him she uses animal Imagery, showing her lack of respect for him. For her "from the side he's like the buffalo on the U.S. nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look" (p.8). Sometimes she thinks of him as "an owl" (p.45) and his hair as "teddy-bear fur" (p.46). But when the narrator tells her lover that his back has smooth hair with a warm texture like teddy-bear fur, he gets annoyed just like any other man in this set-up, who is not ready to tolerate any joke at his cost. He takes it as "an insult to his dignity" (p.46). He can not even think of being an object of

fun for a woman. Women have always been expected to consider males as their superiors. They have been taught to compare their male partners with gods. But here, the narrator of Surfacing compares her lover with animals. Thus, she deconstructs the norms of femininity which force a woman to place her male counterpart on a high pedestal. Contrary to the social beliefs, the narrator does not seem to believe even in religion. She is unable to define God. For her, God is alien and mysterious. While on the way to her paternal village, she sees "a roadside crucifix with a wooden Christ, ribs sticking out, the alien god, mysterious to me as ever" (p.14). These words lack reverence which is due to God in a patriarchal society and the more this is expected from a woman. But the narrator defies and deconstructs all of these norms.

The narrator deconstructs many social codes in a patriarchal society that impose on a woman the stereotyped roles of a docile wife and a caring mother propagated through the institution of marriage. The narrator's attitude towards marriage is quite negative. For her marriage is a farce. She does not hesitate to leave her child with her husband as she feels it was not her child as she was not a willing participant when it was conceived. She was only a passive receiver. She gets a divorce from her husband, thus deconstructing the social institution of marriage. The society in which her father lives is very orthodox. These people do not understand the exact meaning of marriage and divorce. In this society, divorce is considered to be a sin that could never be forgiven. While talking of her parents she says, "They never

forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce; I don't think they even understand the marriage which wasn't surprising since I didn't understand it myself" (p.31). She herself is unable to analyse the true meaning of marriage as she has observed the oppression and subordination of women in the guise of marriage. Ultimately, she revolts against this institution.

Throughout the course of the novel, the heroine is haunted by her past, particularly by her child which she left with her husband (or she got it aborted). Contrary to the expected behaviour of a mother, she left her child. She never accepted this child as her own as she was forced by her husband to conceive it. The child was born only because her husband wanted so: "I never identified it (the child) as mine; I didn't name it before it was born even, the way you're supposed to. It was my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an Incubator" (p.37).

The image of "an incubator" used by Atwood rightly sums up the position of a woman in a patriarchal society where women are treated as breeding machines only. Their only function is to give birth to healthy children and satisfy the lust of the males. They, in turn, will glorify their "femininity." Atwood has deconstructed the concepts of motherhood, maternity, and femininity by presenting the unfeminine attitude of the heroine towards all these social codes. She rejects her child. The attitude of the narrator is cool, detached, and indifferent toward all this. She does not feel any emotions for the child, thus deconstructing the patriarchal ideology of

motherhood. The narrator explains how her husband cared for her too much when she was pregnant: "He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use. I couldn't prove it though, he was clever; he kept saying he loved me" (p.37). She feels her child was growing on her just like a parasite and her husband was a part of it. He wanted a "replica of himself," (p.37) so he cared for her. This is not because he loved her, though he tried to convince the narrator that he cared for her only for her own sake. But it is not true. In this sort of social set-up, a woman is cared only for getting healthy children. Once her role is over, she is discarded. The narrator, just like any other woman, is nothing more than a breeding machine or an incubator. Ironically, her husband keeps on assuring her that he loved her. In the guise of this so-called love, the narrator is exploited like a mine or a quarry out of which useful material is extracted and then it is of no use.

The most vivid example of a woman being an object, a "chemical-slot machine" (p.85) is the scene when the narrator is giving birth to a child. The pathology of childbirth is nauseating to her. She hates being in that state again:

After the first I didn't ever want to have another child, it was too much to go through for nothing, they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and 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 you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practising on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. After that they fill your veins up with red plastic. I saw it running down through the tube. I won't let them do that to me again.

(pp.85-86)

Even in this painful situation, nobody cares for the narrator for her own sake. Whenever the narrator thinks of her past, she is haunted by the memories of her child who was snatched from her. Of course, the child was not snatched from her literally. In fact, she herself rejected her child because she never thought of it as her own: "I have to behave as though it doesn't exist because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life sliced from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget" (p.52). Why does she think like that? It is because she is enraged at having been treated like a breeder only. By showing the narrator rejecting her own child, Atwood has successfully deconstructed the dominant ideology that allows a woman to be a passive receiver only. She is supposed to bear children for the family whether she herself wants it or not. She remains an object, not a subject.

The narrator's friends, David and Anna are seemingly a loving couple. Their mutual understanding makes the narrator reflect on her own married life which was all but successful. The narrator is astonished at their seemingly compatible relationship. She thinks, "They must have some special method, formula, some knowledge I missed out on: or may be he was the wrong person" (p.43). Her own marriage broke up due to her husband who treated her as an object only. The narrator, being an awakened woman, deconstructs the stereotyped image of a woman. She is not at all ready to accept marriage as a holy bond that every woman should try to keep intact. On the other hand, the unnamed heroine of Surfacing detests the so-called sacred bond of marriage because she was supposed to please her husband only. Her husband was loving and caring before marriage but he changed soon after their marriage. For the narrator, marriage is simply a "paper act" (p.44). Atwood does not attach any romantic connotations to marriage. She simply deconstructs the very sacredness or sanctity of marriage. The narrator of Surfacing regrets on her decision to marry because soon after their marriage, her husband starts treating her as his subordinate. He wants to be pleased without even knowing his wife's desires. The narrator says, "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" (p.44).

This sort of thinking by a woman is sure to raise the eyebrows of the elders in a patriarchal society where a man keeps a

woman under his complete command. He can develop relationships with any number of women, but a woman cannot even think of sleeping with a man without marrying him. But Atwood's heroine has sent these moral constraints cartwheeling. She has deconstructed the very concepts behind femininity and marriage. A woman is also an individual with her own likes and dislikes. She should also have the rights and the freedom to live life according to her own desires and wishes. Contrary to the social beliefs that a woman is supposed to be dull-headed, insensitive, docile, and meek, Atwood's heroine emerges as a highly sensitive and intelligent being who can think about the oppression she is subjected to. When she finds that her marriage is a prison house where she cannot assert her Individuality, she takes divorce from her husband. This is not all, in the course of the novel, she develops into a strong individual, who after her first setback is not ready to commit another blunder by marrying again. She, now, reduces marriage to "playing Monopoly or doing cross-word puzzles" (p.94). She does not bear any positive picture of marriage in her mind. Her marriage had been a failure, so she does not want to enter this trap again. So when Joe, her present lover, makes a proposal for marriage to her, she simply rejects it. Atwood does not use any emotional language to present this scene as it happens in conventional novels. She presents it as a matter-of-fact scene, a plain situation that is shorn of the conventional mush and tear stuff associated with such situations. She does not sentimentalize the whole situation. When Joe asked the

narrator, "We should get married," (p.92) she is not at all excited. In her own words:

I set the cup down carefully on the rock and turned to look at him, shielding my eyes. I wanted to laugh, it was incongruous...

'Why?' I said. 'We're living together anyway. We don't need a certificate for that.'

'I think we should,' he said, 'we might as well.'

'But it wouldn't make any difference,' I said. 'Everything would be the same.'

(pp. 92-93)

Again, regarding marriage as a "certificate" only, Atwood has deconstructed the Institution of marriage. The narrator is ready to live with Joe without any matrimonial alliance but she does not accept his marriage proposal. According to her, there would not be any change in their relationship after the marriage. So, she is not ready to enter into matrimony with Joe. A woman behaving like that will be easily labelled as immoral in this social set-up but the narrator has debunked this social system. New dimensions of femininity are opened up by deconstructing this hackneyed concept.

Though we cannot assign a fixed meaning to Surfacing, still we can safely say that it is a feminist text. By showing the narrator of Surfacing pondering over the oppression of women, and then revolting against this oppression, Atwood has succeeded in making it a feminist text. Here a woman's experiences are observed from a female point of view. Atwood, being a

woman, can identify herself easily with any other woman. This patriarchal system has put so many restrictions on women that they are not even allowed to wear dresses of their own choice. Once while on her way back to the motel, the narrator recapitulates her past when the women “had to wear long concealing skirts and dark stockings and keep their arms covered in church.

Shorts were against the law, and many of them lived all their lives beside the lake without learning to swim because they were ashamed to put on bathing suits” (p.27). This description sums up the restrictions put on women in this society. Their every action is controlled by the set of rules and codes imposed upon them by the patriarchal society. Even after her divorce, the narrator wears her marriage ring so that she could get some respect and security. A divorced woman is seen as a dishonoured woman. Even her parents do not approve of her divorce because they are also a part of this system. Divorce “isn’t part of the vocabulary here” (p.25). While wearing her marriage ring she feels “safe” (p.25) and says, “I never threw it out, it’s useful for landladies” (p.25). It is only marriage that can provide a woman with the status of respectability. The narrator recalls her past and comments “None of the women had names then” (p.29). This loss of names points to the loss of identity of women.

The narrator’s relationship with her lover Joe is not based on any emotional grounds. She is not even sure whether she loves him or not. Perhaps it is only for physical satisfaction that they are living together. For her “he’s good in bed, better than the one before” (p.46). They are not

living together as husband and wife. She tells, "When he suggested we should live together I didn't hesitate. It wasn't even a real decision, it was more like buying a goldfish or a potted cactus plant, not because you want one in advance but because you happen to be in the store and you see them lined up on the counter. I'm fond of him, I'd rather have him around than not; though it would be nice if he meant something more to me" (p.46).

The narrator is living with Joe just for the sake of the company and physical satisfaction. It is not a preplanned or even a planned relationship. But she, in her heart of hearts, longs for any meaningful relationship with Joe. She wishes he should mean "something more" (p.46) to her. But what she gets is only physical satisfaction. Her present relationship with Joe makes her recall her relationship and her divorce from her husband. For her "divorce is like an amputation, you survive but there's less of you" (p.46). She feels alienated and amputated. Her husband, in a way, soured her life forever; whatever may have been the reasons for divorce, a woman is always looked at with suspicion and distrust in the male-centred system. She has come to such a mental condition that she does not even trust love. For her love is a word that led her to ruin. While recalling her husband she says, "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again" (p.51).

Unlike any traditional woman, who is supposed to trust in her partner's love, the narrator distrusts it. She believes that it is this very word that has exploited her. In the

guise of marriage and love, her husband had made her forget her identity. But she surfaces from that dark sea of loss of identity to the top and asserts her Individuality. She grows bitter toward her husband and for this, she is termed "the offending party" (p.51). In this patriarchal set-up, it is only the woman who is dubbed as the "offending party" (p.51). A man can never be termed like that. Men are always supposed to be right. It is only the woman who is supposed to be lacking in reason, Intelligence, and knowledge. From the beginning of the world, it is Eve who is supposed to have persuaded Adam to eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge. A woman is always shown to succumb to temptations easily. Atwood has observed all these things from the point of view of women and has deconstructed such ideologies. Time and again the narrator is haunted by her husband's ideas about women. When she wanted to become an artist, instead of being encouraged she was discouraged by her husband who told her that there had "never been any important woman artists" (p.56). Patriarchy does not allow a woman to develop aesthetic tastes and skills. It is only a man's privilege to become an artist. It is supposed to be a disqualification for a woman to be an artist of note. Commenting on her present position, the narrator says, "I do posters, covers, a little advertising and magazine work, and the occasional commissioned book like this one. For a while I was going to be a real artist; he thought that was cute but misguided" (p.56). He asked her to study something else that she could use in her daily life. According to him, it was of no use to the

narrator to become an artist. She says, "That was before we were married and I still listened to what he said, so I went into Design and did fabric patterns" (p.56).

Not only her former husband but also her present lover Joe is equally unhappy and jealous of her, Joe represents a frustrated male in this patriarchal set-up who is not happy to see any woman being a successful artist even if the woman is his beloved. He is frustrated since his artistic creations and claims are not recognised. His things "don't sell at all in the few handicraft shops that will even stock them. So, they accumulate in our already cluttered basement apartment, like fragmentary memories or murder victims" (p.61). His creations are of no use. According to the narrator, "I can't even put flowers in them, the water would run out through the rips. Their only function is to uphold Joe's unvoiced claim to superior artistic seriousness: every time I sell a poster design or get a new commission he mangles another pot" (p.61). Joe wants to compete with the narrator. His ego and pride in being a man do not allow him to see a woman getting recognition. He cannot see the narrator's posters or designs being acknowledged and grows jealous of her success. Joe is the embodiment of a frustrated man who cannot accept women as a successful artist, as women are not supposed to enter the territory of fine arts. But Atwood has deconstructed all of these codes and has shown the narrator of Surfacing as a successful artist who gets recognition. While remembering her school days, the narrator recalls the answers given by girls when they were asked, "What you

were going to be when you grew up" (p.97). The answers were "A lady' or 'A mother,' either one was safe; and it wasn't a lie, I did want to be those things" (p.97). But later on, when she grows up, she detests these gender roles which force a woman to forgo her identity to these roles only. She is not at all ready to become a stereotyped mother and a lady only. She rejects these roles as is clear from the fact that she rejects her own child, takes divorce from her husband, and starts living with her husband without entering into a matrimonial alliance.

Throughout the novel, Atwood has depicted the narrator trying to assert her identity and individuality. It is only through asserting her individuality that the narrator is able to survive. If a woman withdraws quietly or allows men to dominate or dehumanize her, she is bound to exist only as an object and a commodity in this patriarchal society. The unnamed heroine of *Surfacing* tries to survive in this capitalistic-consumerist society without sacrificing her own "self" or "identity" as a human being. In her quest for identity, she boldly deconstructs the piety and sanctity attached to the concept of "femininity."

References

- ¹Quoted in Josie P. Campbell, "The woman as Hero in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, "Post-War Canadian Fiction, ed. John Wortley (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1978), p.17.
- ²George Woodcock, *Introducing Margaret Atwood's Surfacing: A Reader's Guide* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1990),p.42.
- ³Quoted in Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Post-Modern: A Study of Contemporary English – Canadian Fiction* (1947; rpt. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.142.
- ⁴M.F.Salat, *The Canadian Novel: A Search for Identity* (Delhi: B.R.Publishing Corporation, 1993), p.61.
- ⁵Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; rpt. Ontario: Paper Jacks Ltd., 1973), p. 206. All subsequent references to the text of this novel are from the same edition and page numbers in all such cases have been given within parentheses immediately after the quotation.

How to cite this article?

Dr.Sarvjeet Kaur, " Quest for Identity:A Study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*" Research Journal Of English(RJOE)8(1),PP:147-155,2023, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2023.8.1.155