

### **A Feminine Search for a True Personality in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing***

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#### **Abstract:**

“As a woman I have no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (Virginia Woolf). Gender is not an issue related to a particular sex, it is a human issue, which affects the entire society. A woman struggles to assert their self, identity and equality in a society where a woman is always considered inferior to a man. The entity ‘society’ is created by man and he assigns roles to women and imposes different aspects of behaviour upon them where equality is never assured. Change is the only thing which is permanent, woman has a new role in today’s society. The new woman has emerged to fight against bias and gain a position on her own. In spite of all the challenges she faces, the new woman accomplishes her mark in every field she indulges in and competes with men in all areas. The majority of Atwood's characters are women who are exploited by male dominance. *Surfacing* examines issues related to the politics of gender, such as the patriarchal attempt to eradicate women's self-identity, the gradual carving out of female space by women through a variety of strategies, and women's search for identity, self-definition, and autonomy. This paper attempts to highlight and projects the protagonist of the novel, who strives hard to make her free from male dominance to gain her uniqueness.

**Keywords:** Society, gender, discrimination, suppressed, feminism, new woman.

A woman has always been considered as chattel in all societies. The view of women, both imaginative and mythical are negative. Gender has become a vital issue and a formidable question which has to be resolved. This gender issue is closely related to the issue of women's identity and freedom. Women have been suffering from the pre-historic period silently and tolerating all disgraces and indignities. This oppression becomes an inseparable part of their lives. The male-dominated society has always treated women as a commodity or dumb animals. The superior attitude of men and their ego never accepts woman to be equal and grant them rights. The Patriarchal society moulds women as helpless creature, a deprived soul who has no dreams and identity on their own. They are considered shadows of men who have no existence without men. The Gender roles are assigned and allotted by men and they decide how a woman should behave in society and family. She is always ignored and neglected in society. Virginia Woolf rightly quotes: "Imaginatively she is of the highest importance. Practically she is completely insignificant.....some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell and was the property of her husband" ( Woolf 45-46). Nevertheless, the image of a new woman has undergone a major change. She is no longer a meek creature to bear humiliation and oppression, she is a strong woman, stronger than man both emotionally and mentally. They are strong assertive, domineering, bold and ready to break the existing social norms to establish their identity. She has established her identity in all walks of life and succeeds in retrieving her encroached place. There is a radical change in the condition of women. The traditional standard equation of women has changed and women are more aware of gender identity and gender roles but the roots are still in search of their stability in this male-dominated society. This continuity of male domination is a major concern for writers like Atwood, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou. Alienation in relationships especially between men and women is a constant theme in their writings.

In *Surfacing*, the relationship between man and woman is that of a victim and victimizer. The nameless protagonist is sexually exploited by her male art teacher and her fake husband. She experiences this alienation and feeling of being singled out many times in her life. Even in her homeland Quebec she feels singled out as an outsider as if in a foreign territory. She is not even comfortable in her homeland where she has come in search of her father. Ann, the other female character is equally victimized by her husband David. The protagonist is surprised to see the loveless and artificial relationship between Ann and David, a filmmaker who dominates, exploits

and humiliates his wife. The author mocks and satirises the values of the modern world which imposes women like Ann to live in the mask of artificiality. She is a sample of women, who are powerless to assert themselves and lives under the grievous shadow of her husband and pretend to be happy.

Atwood's bold, courageous and frank portrayal of her characters. Her choice of characters and their passion and desire for revenge against male domination has secured a definite place in feminist literature. Her characters are dynamic, aggressive and assertive. They are ambitious in search of recognition and identity. She highlights the betrayal of women at the hands of men. Her protagonists find themselves in challenging situations but these challenges fail to conquer them or break their spirit. Instead, they emerge stronger to claim their identity. For them, identity is synonymous with empowerment. The unnamed woman protagonist in *Surfacing* is unique in many ways. Despite being victimized in numerous ways she survives by overcoming all innumerable obstacles. Not only does she survive, despite being severely subjugated and exploited, but she also becomes a role model for millions of unidentified women worldwide who are being harmed by male chauvinistic society. As a result, *Surfacing* is the protagonist's attempt to conceal her identity.

The unnamed protagonist is a typical Atwood heroine, the modern woman who is an artist fighting for an independent identity and survival in a male-dominated society. She is controlled by some fear or anxiety which never allowed her to become an artist. Through her personality, Atwood depicts to the world the malicious components of orientation segregation and taunts the man-centric endeavour to obliterate the selfhood of women and the progressive carving out of female space by women through different techniques. The protagonist in *Surfacing* is sexually exploited by her male art teacher who forced her to have an abortion. She is an artist by profession who is denied a chance to flourish her natural artistic talent. The most horrible aspect is that the man who exploits her is also an artist. He ruins her and the artistic sensibility in her and never allows her artistic sense to blossom. He exploits her docile nature and imposes his ideas in her art and paralyzes the artist in her. As a result, she is not able to pour her ideas into her canvass and forced to follow his instructions. In that way, he has tarnished the womanhood and artist in her. As a result, she experiences death as an artist when she was not able to pour out ideas in the canvass. Thus Atwood presents how a male-dominated society demolishes the intellectually, emotionally and morally unnamed protagonist by suppressing her creativity and forcing her to

abort the child. She is manipulated by the male chauvinistic society and prevented from developing into an artist and denied her self-definition and autonomy.

Atwood's *Surfacing* has been analyzed from an eco-feministic perspective where both woman and nature are exploited and oppressed. Eco-feminists strongly say that the dominance of one sex over the other is directly related to the environmental rape of the planet. Eco-feminists relate the exploitation of any gender, race, class, sexuality and physical ability to the oppression of nature. Atwood relates the oppression of women by the male-dominated society to the exploitation of nature. The nameless protagonist of the novel is an eco-feminist who comes in search of her father to an island which is her home town. The unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* feels an absolute harmony with nature and merges with it. She discovers her lost identity in the silent environment and attains fulfilment and completeness which is described by these words; "the lake is calm, and the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing" (191). As the protagonist merges with nature she slowly gains freedom and relates her life to that of nature. The journey to her native land has turned into a real journey of self-discovery and assertion of her character. She surrenders herself completely to nature and breaks all shackles and chains that strangle her life. The sense of oneness that she nourishes with nature integrates her into the environment. She states: "The animals have no need for speed, why talk when you are a word. I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (210). She assumed herself as a part of the landscape. It helps her to acquire a purpose and identity for her ruined life. Her harmony with nature opens a new world of love and trust for the rest of her life. She defines a purpose for her life. To the nameless protagonist, the affinity to nature is spiritual, in a sense it helps her to cleanse herself from old stigmas and memories that haunt her life. Thus she transforms into a new dynamic person with an unquenchable power and spirit to encounter the city with great vigour, energy and wisdom. Consequently, she unravelled a new vision of life which enables her to encounter the truth and realities of life and transcends all her social, physical and psychological barriers. Thus the nameless protagonist evolves a new identity for herself in this patriarchal society. Finally, she locates her identity with the silence of the lake. "lake is calm, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing" (191).

In the male-dominated world, women are conditioned to be victims, the objects of the male self's power. They are subordinated to the principle of Identity conceived as masculine sameness.

Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, "for him she is sex -- absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is incidental, as opposed to the essential ... He is the Absolute she is the Other" (Beauvoire xvi). Atwood expects her protagonists to live normal life as men. So she empowers her characters with more strength and vigour to convert their inferiority to superiority. Her characters never relied on their male counterparts or support from the social structure for their existence. They developed the courage to raise their voices against all discrimination and humiliation and establish a distinct identity for themselves. The unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* arises from a male-defined and structured society after having a meek, vegetable existence, allowing others to dominate her life. But now she reconstructs her life and is determined to plant the seed of life within her. Initially, the protagonist too is a victim who is been molested, exploited and humiliated at every step of their life by this male-dominating society and a victim of her husband's cruelties. The protagonist's past wrong affair and the forced abortion cuts her off completely from the whole world of humanity. However, she gets out of such a kind of life and is determined to live a life with a purpose. Finally, she resurrects herself as a non-victim and assumed the power to overthrow all obstacles and survive. She herself states: "I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless, and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. . . . Withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death" (206). She changed her image and decides to give birth to a second child and make her an artist in that way trying to fulfill her desire to be a renowned artist. She finally refuses Joe's love proposal who wishes to dominate and control her life. She finds Joe as a killer and victimizer because he takes part in the victimization of Anna in *Random Samples*. She finds Joe's incompleteness desirable. "He isn't anything, he is only half formed and for that reason I can't trust him" (223). Thus Atwood nourishes womanhood by proclaiming that there is no need for a woman to suffer endlessly as a tongue-tied.

On the whole, Atwood fictionalizes the quest of her women protagonist and unfolds her emergence not as a victim forever, but as a force that survives in spite of repression and displays a spirit of transcendence and a resultant victory. Hence the struggle to establish an independent identity is accomplished. The unnamed artist protagonist in *Surfacing* transforms into a self-confident and potential woman who strives for total freedom from men and society and to change the whole concept of women in society. Atwood pictures how the subjugation of one gender is an exploitation of nature. Today in this modern world women emerge more forcibly in spite of all

degradation and gained a definite position and identity for themselves in the realm of life in this patriarchal society which considers women as the weaker sex.

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