

## The Quest for Wholeness and Individuation in Atwood's novel *Surfacing*: A Psycho-Feminist Approach

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### Abstract

*Most of Margaret Atwood's novels depict women facing external and internal obstacles in their attempt to attain self-realisation as they are internally divided because of encountering the harsh realities of life, or living in a community ruled by patriarchal conventions. Many women characters, especially Atwood's protagonists, suffer from psychic split because of specific external factors and are haunted by mental and emotional traumas. This paper studies Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) by examining the events that take place in the protagonist's mind as part of her long-running quest for wholeness; highlighting the mental process she undergoes to achieve such an aim. As a feminist writer, Atwood's primary aim is to explore women's inner psyche, their conflicts and search for identification. The writer wants to highlight the terrifying gap existing between man and woman. The paper attempts to assert that self-realization is at the heart of her novel under consideration.*

**Keywords:** Individuation, Domination, Patriarchy, Feminism & Surfacing.

## I

The dilemma of fusion and individuation, also referred to as attachment and separation, is a significant existential developmental task facing human beings across time and culture (Yalom, 392-395). Indeed, separation is implied in the word 'exist' ("ex-ist" = "to stand out"). We are driven towards separation because to grow and differentiate ourselves necessitates separation from the comfort of the care-giver. Rank referred to this as birth trauma, which he thought was symbolic of all emergence from embeddedness (145:123). To grow thus implies separation, autonomy, self-reliance and individuation. With individuation, however, comes isolation. As one embraces one's personal attitudes, direction in life, hopes, and dreams, one inevitably becomes aware of being an entity separate from all others. One realises that one is the author of one's own life; one is free to make choices; but one is also responsible for one's choices. This awareness invites anxiety as the individual now stands alone in the face of the world with all its terrifying aspects (Fromm, 1941:29). Individuation is thus inherently anxiety-provoking. To relieve this anxiety, the individual finds comfort in fusing with another being, because by merging with another one loses oneself, and therefore, one's awareness of one's separation and its accompanying anxiety. Indeed, Yalom argues that fear of isolation is a significant driving force behind interpersonal relationships. He argues that relationship difficulties are fundamentally about the fusion-individuation dilemma (395-402). Playing on the word "apart", Bugental (1965) suggests that our fundamental interpersonal task is to learn how to be at once "a-part-of" and "a-part-from" the other. Applied to love, Fromm suggests that mature love is "union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality ... in love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two," (17).

Psychoanalysis is one of the proper means that could be used to analyse, understand and dive deep into the human psyche, which, to my understanding, is the element that prevails in Atwood's novel, *Sufacing*. The novel's plot develops in a sort of abstract setting, where the protagonist's mind, rather than a physical location, is the main arena of conflict. The study endeavours to elucidate the incidents that occur within the unnamed protagonist's mind as part of her continuous process of questing for wholeness. In fact, Atwood's female characters encounter difficulties and hindrances outside themselves in their quest to attain a complete and stable self, as they experience internal divisions because of living in a patriarchal community where conventions of masculinity prevail. Thus, being internally divided, they experience psychic traumas by being haunted by outside entities.

## II

The protagonist, affected by past traumatic experiences, immerses herself into an introspection journey; an exploration of her own unconscious with the purpose of overcoming her traumas and being able to feel complete again. The novel can be conceived as a protest against and rejection of the sex role men have designed for female and it exposes men's aggressive conduct towards women. Women, who have been subjected to male-dominated societies, opposed and confronted the dehumanization and maltreatment they faced throughout history. Feminism and the suffering women faced were the focus of great feminist writers. Challenging the masculine, hegemonic order of society, all women movements have been striving tirelessly to better their life conditions and attain their independence and equal rights.

Atwood, as a feminist writer, had devoted most of her works to explore women's inner psyche, their internal and external conflicts, and their struggle for realizing their true identity and wholeness. The attempt to be assertive and gain self-realization is the gist of Atwood's female protagonist in her novel, subject of this study. Like other female authors, such as Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), Anne Sexton (1928-1974), Adrienne Rich (1929-2012), and Denise Levertov (1923-1997), Atwood is eager to uncover the terrible suffering of women in the western culture. Her novels, specifically *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Bodily Harm* (1981), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1983), tackle feminist issues in the modern Canadian society. Other than battling against male bull-headedness, the objective of Atwood's female protagonists is to accomplish self-definition as women. The novel, *Surfacing*, marks the denunciation against the females' sex role and the greedy and hostile conduct of men against them. In the view of Richard Lane, a different female voice has for some time been heard in Atwood's novel, *Surfacing*; it is a voice which expresses issues of sexual orientation, subjectivity and narrative control (71).

In *Surfacing*, Atwood explores the quest for identity and selfhood and through examining the protagonist's mental and psychic states, where reality and memory are fused. The unnamed protagonist experiences complete isolation and undergoes disconnection from people around her. As an individual, she sees herself alienated from the people with whom she is very close and intimate, especially the person she is in love with and her closest female friends. Moreover, because of her sense of lack of a true identity, that is hinted at when the novelist does not give her a name, she does not experience any sense of belonging and intimacy with those around her and even finds herself marginalized and dispossessed, which, as Natalie Cooke argues may indicate that she could "find herself in a much stronger position as a woman of the 1970s" (68). Atwood's *Surfacing* dives deep into the life of this nameless woman who stands for 'Everywoman' of the early 1970s as she contends to understand what it means to be an independent and fully self-reliant person with total control and awareness of her existence and aims in life. The journey that she ventures to attain this goal is really exciting, full of risk and difficulty. It is in reality an introspective journey, where the lady delves deep into her psyche to rediscover her true self that would reconcile the warring sides of the divided self, i.e., the conscious and the unconscious aspects. The basic goal of the internal struggle the protagonist experiences is to "free the self from the false wrappings of the persona on the one hand, and from the suggestive power of the unconscious images on the other" (Jung: 185). This internal journey mirrors the power she discovers in herself that enables her to achieve individuation and wholeness that results in the liberation of the person from all kinds of mental restrictions and psychic disorder, which help the individual rediscover her true self. In fact, the whole process of rediscovering one's real self and individual identity could be considered as a kind of psychological rebirth that is attained through exploring her psychic depths with a real intensity.

During her city life, and before meeting her boyfriend, Joe, the protagonist becomes pregnant as a result of having an affair with a married man, who was not ready to quit his own family; therefore, he asks her to have abortion. In fact, feeling that she was betrayed by the man, she got rid of the fetus, which left a deep scar in her psyche that she had to deal with and pass through a harsh process of healing and regeneration. She subsequently returns home with her three friends; Anna, the storyteller's companion and a model, David, Anna's husband and a movie producer, Joe, David's companion, a camera man and the narrator's partner. The

Purpose of her return is apparently to look for her missing father, to find out what has happened to him. She recalls that she had consistently relied on her father's clarifications, and says that her mother's husband has been a puzzle to her. Mr Paul, her father's closest companion, tells the storyteller that her father has vanished mysteriously. She loves and trusts her companions, yet they do not accompany her on her search for her father:

"I like them, I trust them, I can't think of anyone else I like better, but right now I wish they were not here. Though they're necessary: David's and Anna's car was the only way.... But my reason for being here embarrasses them, they don't understand it. They all disowned their parents long ago, the way you are supposed to: Joe never talks about his father and mother" (16) \*.

Her companions consider the excursion as a break from city life while she insists that she might find something about her father. The excursion modified the memory of her troubled past, thus she contemplates her father in section three and says:

"If he's safe I don't want to see him. There is no point, they never forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce; I don't think they even understood the marriage....and leaving my husband and child...that was the unpardonable sin.... But I admit I was stupid, stupidity is the same as evil if you judge by the results and I didn't have any excuses." (25).

The mystery of her father's disappearance turns into a tangled labyrinth for her; therefore, she doesn't wish to be separated from anyone else in that place. While she was with her companions, the storyteller ponders her own brief love affair, and the loss of the child.

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\* Quotations, with page references, are from the following edition; *Surfacing* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd. and Wildwood House, (1972).

Thus, after years of absence, she returns to the area of northern Quebec, where she had grown up, and amid that adventurous expedition, she uncovers the dualities in both her own life and the male dominated society. The personal connections between the protagonist and the three minor characters reflect a world that suppresses and subjugates womanliness, which consequently helps readers better comprehend the protagonist's urgent need to regain and reassert her female identity. The Protagonist sees that the relationship between Anna and David mirrors the picture of what a lady's part ought to be in a marriage in a patriarchal society. During her nine-years marriage life, Anna carries on with a life of submission to David, continually attempting to satisfy him. She mostly wears cosmetics; if not, she is worried about the possibility that David will use sex as a weapon to repel her. The narrator states that she has never seen Anna without having any make-up and comments "You don't need that here," to which Anna replies " He doesn't like to see me without it," and then, contradicting herself, says "He doesn't know I wear it," (37). Anna, who is extremely upset, reveals to the narrator sordid details about their marriage, and reveals that David has a set of rules, if she breaks them, she will be punished. Therefore, the narrator suggests a divorce, but Anna asserts that she loves him, even though she thinks he'd like her to die.

She feels upset and worried that David might oblige Anna to strip and has Joe shoot her with a camera. However, when she sees the protagonist dumping the film into the lake, she attempts to stop her: "'You better not do that,' Anna says, 'they'll kill you'" (131). She complains whiningly to the narrator about how David embarrassed her by revealing to her his issues with other ladies; nevertheless, after she knows that David suggests sex to the storyteller, she frames an impermanent union with him. The storyteller likewise fights with her partner: "her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, her life was the

fight: she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere” (120). She believes that all women are victims of inhuman rules and authority and that men offer themselves the legitimate right to decide the things women are allowed to do and those which they are not. However, the protagonist takes a strong stand against all the inhuman conducts of being victimized: “This, above all, to refuse to be a victim” (191). Therefore, she utterly refuses David’s behaviour, and is against Anna’s yielding to such treatment, and rejects Joe’s conservatism. She strives to attain due respect and equality for herself and other women, and asserts that unless she witnesses a real change from her partner, she will not be ready to accept him.

### III

Atwood, in *Surfacing*, depicts the estrangement of women in the Canadian culture and uses the disconnection of the storyteller to relate it with all Canadian women. She sees that men were forcing laws of patriarchy on women, through religion, marriage and language, and believes that men consider them just as "war-spoils" (16). Her sense of alienation is exceptionally alive within her, which indicates that children know their gender identity at an extremely more youthful age. The impact of the narrator's estrangement is her complete withdrawal from energetic life scenes and her name remains unrevealed till the end of the story, which indicates that she is an epitome of every woman whose mission for power is part of the quest for self-exploration that, in its turn, could help her advance in her healing process. Commenting on *Surfacing*, Emily Cho states that "discovering one's valid self is an agonizing and desolate quest" (Das 23). The narrator says being socially hindered resembles being rationally impeded; it stirs in others disturbance, regret and the longing to torment and change (221).

The puzzle of her father's vanishing is turning into a tangled labyrinth for her; therefore, she wouldn't have any desire to be separated from anyone else in that place. She conceives that: “I see now the impossibility of searching the island for him, it's two miles. It would take twenty to thirty men at least... and even then, they could miss him, dead or alive, accident or suicide or murder. Or if for some unfathomable reason he's chosen this absence and is hiding, they'd never find him.” (41). The physical Journey now transforms into a physical search for her father. Thus, she continues looking for signs of her father in that area and considers different potential outcomes, most abnormal of all is that he may be hiding in some place on the island. The pursuit on the trail becomes distinctly troublesome and the dread of her father's death is still clear and her fear, by all accounts, perhaps is much more concerned with her mental and psychic confusion.

In section ten Joe suddenly proposes to the protagonist, which makes her feel totally stunned. She rejects the proposal, then informs him of her marriage and the child, which suggests that all her conducts and decisions are driven by her mental confusion, that is why she believes that, "No one adores me Everybody loathes me I am setting off to the garden to eat worms" (118). The loss of her father turns into a mental and psychological dilemma of losing her identity as a woman. Therefore, she is physically mangled rather than being half dead. She would not like to wed Joe in the light of the fact that she is now baffled by her own first love affair and furthermore by the connection of Anna and David. She had gone absolutely distraught and believes that she must have the verification of her father's rational soundness and along these lines of his plausible passing, she is certain now that he is not a maniac

sneaking in the forested areas, "Crazy people can come back, from wherever they go to take refuge, but dead people can't, they are prohibited" (82). After refusing Joe's proposal, Joe and the protagonist discuss in detail something regarding their uncertain future. Suddenly and because of her sense of alienation, she offers Joe to leave the city flat and says; "I didn't love him, I was far away from him, it was as though I was seeing him through a smeared window or glossy paper" (114); she feels that he didn't belong to her and tells him frankly: "I don't love you" (ibid).

The protagonist overhears an argument between David and Anna who looks better and also happy but at this moment, David tries to persuade her to take her swimsuit off so that Joe can take some naked shots of her for a movie they are making. David urges her saying, "Come on, take it off... It won't hurt you, we need a naked lady...you'll go in beside the dead bird, it is your chance for stardom, you've always wanted fame" (105-06). This was the stance which was taken by Joe against Anna's yearning, which denotes total obliteration of Anna's personality. Anna and David are exceptionally furious, and David threatens to toss Anna into the lake if she doesn't yield. At last, Anna surrenders by removing her swimsuit and plunges into the water. The narrator imagines that David resembles her: "We are the ones that don't know how to love, there is something missing in us, we were born that way." (107). When she asks David about forcing Anna to degrade herself in front of Joe, he argues that Anna is deceitful, disloyal and senseless, David says "she goes with other men, she thinks she can get away with it, but she is too dumb, every time I find out; I can smell it on her.... God knows, it's not that I'm not jealous.... But she is devious, I can't stand that." (108). The narrator has had an abortion; it is a shock for the readers, as she has earlier revealed that she had a child whom she left with her husband when they separated. However, she acknowledges that "I thought, whatever it is part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It was not a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it." (115). This suggests that she simultaneously feels guilty about the abortion and seeks relief from guilt by denying the fetus, the identity of a child. She believes that she could not forgive herself easily for what she has done.

In section seventeen, David and Anna inform her that her father has been found by a few American anglers. His body was unrecognizable, yet Mr. Paul distinguished the materials as her father's. The narrator is suspicious and, when she asks where they found the body, they inform her that it was found close to the bluff where she was plunging. Although her companion stays away from her due to the news of her father's death, she is persuaded that "nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive." (124). It is observed that after discovering the body of the narrator's father, her response becomes odd, and she feels doubtful.

Her companions go back to the city of Toronto, while she continues searching not only for the truth of her father's death, but also for herself. Her mission is unsafe, troublesome and befuddling. She feels abandoned by a power, without which she lacks self-assurance and confidence. She knows she should stay alone in the lodge, however she is not in any way sure of her next step. She crushes the glasses, plates, books, covers and garments.

She sets fire to everything associated with human advancement; drawings, photos, maps, and she finally senses that she is purged in water like fire. Walking to the lake, she lies down in water and removes her clothes. She is hungry; she gathers some vegetables from the garden and eats them. She wants to reach her father and mother. Her journey is unmistakably not a

geographical but really a visionary one, and she searches for the force of the divine beings, the people of old Indian lords of nature, through a custom of individual filtration. In solitude on the island, she is suddenly awoken the following day by the sound of a power boat. She keeps running into the forested areas to stow away, as she supposes it may be the police or conceivably some visitors, she even thinks about whether they are American intruders. "They cannot be trusted. They'll mistake me for a human being, a naked woman wrapped in a blanket.... They won't be able to tell what I really am. But 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." (144). The narrator believes that her mother became a flying creature and her dad a fish. The following morning when she awakes, she understands, "I know they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when I summoned them. The rules are over. I can go anywhere now, into the cabin, into the garden, I can walk on the paths I am the only one left alive on this island." (148). She is now quite certain that her parents have disappeared for good and her stay there must be for a short time. She appears to be a victim of an unsuccessful love affair, "above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that, I can do nothing. 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." (150). Thus, she becomes ready to re-enter life by wearing her clothes, and wonders about the baby she is carrying. She thinks that it is her job to feed and look after herself so that she will be capable of giving life to a healthy child. Somewhere out in the dreamland, she sees a watercraft touch base with Mr. Paul and Joe in it. Joe escapes the pontoon and he calls her. He has returned specifically for her. He will not hold up any longer. However, at this moment he holds up, "the lake is quiet; the trees surround me, asking and giving 'nothing'." (151). It is obvious that her quest is for a true identity and her plunging into the lake suggests descending into the inner depths of her psyche, which results in achieving redemption and some sort of transformation. She "finally emerges as a kind of shaman," (Nilsen 133) attaining a new strength, freedom and confidence within herself, she gains self-knowledge and power to face life.

The novel ends without a clear ending about what the storyteller will really do a short time later. In any case, the closure is brimming with trust; a trust that depends on practical desires and an acknowledgment of one's own individuation. The narrator believes that another internal identity, which emerges within her, speaks about her "conceivable" future with Joe, who returns again to "protect" her; "I watch him, my love for him useless as a third eye or a possibility. If I go with him we will have to talk, wooden houses as obsolete, we can no longer live in a spurious peace by avoiding each other." (150). She perceives that Joe is redeemable and that her relationship with him could be successful. When uniting with Joe, the narrator senses that her aborted child is surfacing within her, "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake with it has been present for so long." (127). Everybody seems to be sure by the end of the novel that the narrator and Joe's relationship has been saved, "By screwing Joe She's brought us back together. Saving the world, everyone wants to; men think they can do it with guns, women with their bodies, love conquers all, conquerors love all, mirages raised by words." (129).

Atwood's protagonist fights bravely to break the old structure of life that her society imposes upon her. She mirrors the torment sensibility of a lady who is not prepared to trade off with the male overwhelmed society and is searching for an escape from this male-dominated

culture. It is seen that she abhors civilisation, resorts to some kind of primitive culture which she hopes to find in the heart of nature. The painful and harsh realities of life turn her into an independent and adventurous woman, who seeks to escape being victimized both politically and sexually. Her quest for wholeness results in the development of her mental state. This allows her to successfully assimilate certain aspects of her unconscious, which in turn empowers her to confront her traumatic past. The physical and spiritual journey helps the achievement of self-exploration that becomes the main factor for attaining individuation which denotes complete being. Jung says that individuation means “to become a single, discrete being, and ... it also includes the idea of becoming one’s own” (23). Survival makes it necessary for the individual to be totally concerned with the obstacles one faces in life; perhaps the most demanding of which are psychological in nature. Atwood’s protagonist in *Surfacing* experienced and successfully confronted this challenge.

### **Conclusion**

The unnamed narrator’s psyche is shattered into pieces as she loses parts of herself through abortion, divorce, and her parents’ deaths. However, with the help of nature and her experience, she faces her repressed memories and unresolved grief, and hence comes to terms with these traumas. By developing the ability to acknowledge, communicate, and express her sense of loss, she integrates her fragmented self and thereby reaches wholeness. Tracing Atwood’s protagonist in *Surfacing* as a traumatized subject gives us an in-depth understanding of her predicament and how she eventually overcomes her situation. It is only through asserting her individuality that the narrator is able to survive and become integrated into society. The unnamed heroine tries to survive in this patriarchal society without sacrificing her own self or identity as a woman. After a near-drowning experience that allows the Surfer to excavate parts of her repressed past, she essentially becomes one with herself.



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