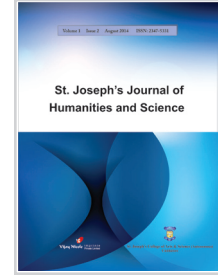




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## A Feministic Reading in *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood

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### Abstract

Canadian literature mainly focuses on nationality and regional themes because of the huge immigrations. It has faced many obstacles in its growth and many of the Canadian novels focused on gender equality in the society. Canadian women writers focused on women seeking to evolve identity of their own. Margaret Atwood one of the major novelists and poets is greatly concerned with women's equality, violence against women, convergence of Canada and identity of women. Her novels have portrayed how Canadian women are humiliated and usurped. They are treated like children because of their innocence and vulnerability and are considered as passive victims. Atwood's women in *Surfacing* cannot act of their own, for their actions are connected with men and they are just dolls for men who both physically and sexually humiliate them. Atwood symbolizes women's condition in the society and their relation with nature - the theory of eco-feminism-through her novels. This paper introduces the author and focuses on Feminism in general and Atwood's views on feminism in particular. It mainly focuses on the feministic views of Atwood in her novel *Surfacing*.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Eco-Feminism, Sexual humiliation, Identity, Patriarchal.

### Introduction

The term 'feminism' or 'feminist' first appeared in France and then in Netherlands in 1872 thereafter in Great Britain in 1890 and finally in United States in 1910. The term 'feminism' denotes that women should have the same rights, power and opportunity that men have and that the present situation should be changed to give equality with men. One of the recent literary studies is the women's work and women's perspectives. The feminist critics prove that women have been misrepresented through ages and they raise voice against men's domination, because they

consider women as doormats. The ideology of many critics is that western culture is a patriarchal culture. Feminist literary criticism represents one of the most important social economic and aesthetic revolutions of modern time. The main aims of feminist criticism are to expose patriarchal premises and prejudices, to promote revaluation of literature by women, and to examine social, cultural and psycho sexual contexts of literature.

Virginia Wolf in her work 'A Room of one's own' has discussed the problems of women writers. She says that lack of room and lack of finance put a brake on women's ambition in literature. Elaine Showalter,

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a leading figure in the school of feminism is fighting tooth and nail for the rights of women by writing several articles. She has turned her attention to the world of literature to see how far it has misrepresented women through the ages.

Simone De Beauvoir, partner of the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre said that she found the origin of female subservience to men, not in any natural inferiority, but in the age old dominance of men. Elaine has made two issues in feminist criticism: the first is how women have been represented in literature and second the problem of women as writer. She has identified four models of difference: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural. Showalter redefines gender in literary studies and Harry Blamires comments on her criticism and writes in his book *Towards a Feminist Poetics* as:

Showalter's reasoning is a far cry from the near hysteria of extreme Feminists who demand in literature an expression of female sexuality. This will burst through the bonds of male logic with a poetic power. That defies the tyranny of logo centric meaning. (81)

Showalter divides feminist criticism into two distinct varieties: woman as reader and woman as writer. The first type is concerned with the concept of woman as a consumer of literature produced by male-writers. In the second type woman is the producer of textual meaning. Elaine hopes to establish a visible world of female culture and to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature. Of these analysis there raises a term 'Gynocritics' which tries to fit women between the lines of the male tradition. In the book "*A literature of their own*" Showalter writes on English women writers. She says that there are patterns and phases in the evolution of a female tradition which are feminine, the feminist and the female stages.

The first phase, the feminine phase dates about 1840-1880. During this period women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievement of male culture. In this phase the feminist content of feminine art is typically oblique, because of the inferiority complex experienced by female writers. The second phase, the feminist phase dates about 1882-1920. This period gained strength for women the right to vote and women writers began to use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wrong womanhood. The third phase the female phase ongoing since 1920, women show more independent attitudes. They realize the place of female experience in the process of art and literature.

The representatives of this phase such as Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf redefined and sexualized the external and internal experience. Especially deconstruction of Jacques Derrida is considered crucial in feminism. Margaret Atwood, the most prominent figure in Canadian literature is often closely associated with feminism. She always tries to empower women through her appealing novels. She had not only reflected upon society but has also explored how women are marginalized.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born to Carl Edmund Atwood and Margaret Killiam Atwood in 1939 in Ottawa. The occupation of the father was that a prominent Entomological researcher, who had a drastic effect on the eventual career of his daughter. Atwood began writing at the age of six and realized that she wanted to write professionally when she was sixteen. Atwood began studying at Victoria University in the University of Toronto Harwood's Radcliffe in 1962 and pursued her further graduate studies at Haward University on her Ph.D. Atwood has won more than 55 awards in Canada and Internationally.

Novels of Atwood throws light on feminism which stresses issues on how women are colonized, victimized and silenced. Women themselves are predators in some of her novels who are responsible for their own humiliation, downfall and disruption and later on they achieve survival and freedom. Atwood's representation of gender explores the social myths defining feminist-representations of women bodies in art, the social and economic exploitation of women as well as women's relation with each other and with men.

Atwood had written many novels, short-fiction, poetry and criticism. Her literary career began as a novelist with her novel *The Edible Woman* (1969) with the theme of alienation which also, echoed in her poetry. *Surfacing* (1942) was considered to be Atwood's most remarkable novel which expressed Atwood's strong nationalist as well as feminist ideologies.

As a feminist, Atwood used parody to deconstruct male discursive form of writing in her gothic romance novel *Lady Oracle*. The novel which brought international recognition for Atwood was *Life before Man*. It was her most domestic novel with its triangular plot. *Bodily Harm* (1981) focuses on the contrast between affluent thinking and the brutal reality of power and sexual politics.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel, a tale of a bleak future portraying a time where women are prized only for their reproductive gift. *Cat's Eye*

(1988) focuses on the issues of women through art, for the first time in history. It exposes male prejudices against women's creativity and talent, and shows how art can be used as a weapon against tyranny in all its manifestations.

*The Robber Bride* (1993) is a feminist thought provoking novel. It examined Toronto lifestyle and women's friendships.

Most of her novels grapple with the politics of gender and deal with women's experiences in a male dominated society. They present women caught in oppressive stereotypes from which some women struggle to create a female space for themselves. This may be done through autonomy of thought, through self-definition and self-reconstruction of one's own history, through creative composition, oral or written, through bonding among women and through a refusal to the role of subjugation.

Margaret Atwood has related nature with women thus formulating the theory of Eco-feminism in her novels. Atwood's woman Anna in *Surfacing* puts make-up because of David and he uses her body for sexual pleasure. The narrator is hurt more physically, as well as mentally.

*Surfacing* is set in the Canadian wilderness of Northern Quebec and it is the story of a young woman travelling back to her family home to investigate her father's mysterious disappearance. The nameless narrator and her three friends arrive on a desolate island; she looks for her missing father with increasing concern. The narrator realizes that the island is exerting its own unique hold for the memories from her repressed past which floods out from ancient objects abandoned, and she is slowly going crazy. Through this novel Atwood questions a woman's conventional social and sexual roles. It touches the health risks associated with hormonal contraception. Atwood brings out male supremacy, the power inherent in pregnancy, the social implications of makeup, the false ideology of marriage, the notion of natural woman and the psychological mechanisms that men use to exert control over women.

The novel asserts that woman is oppressed by two authorities, the power of traditions and that of physical and cultural colonization. Women and men are two victims of the modern world. Women are not only oppressed by men, but by racial segregation, imperialism and by themselves as well. They cannot give up men because their fate is always connected with them and it is an ideological concept. The male

power on female and how they destroy them forms the part of the novel.

*Surfacing* is a deeply ambiguous and ambivalent novel with four main characters. The narrator is an unnamed woman, having a partner named Joe. They travel together with another couple, Anna and David by car to rural Quebec where the narrator's parent's home was until, her father went missing mysteriously: "I can't believe I'm on this road again" (*Surfacing* 1).

The narrator does not give details of her companions, keeping for herself all the suppositions. She makes and subsequently, tries to interpret her father's sketches of indigenous rock drawings and maps of the lakes of that region. The narration is full of reference to the unnamed woman's past, that she has not been Joe's partner for a long time and she is uncomfortable with her own body, because of the aborted child. Now the narration occurs where her actual external search becomes more and more inward. She brings her boyfriend Joe, and a married couple Anna and David. Paul, the narrator's father's friend provides no information on how to locate her father. The narrator finally convinces herself that her father has gone mad and is still alive; with all her worries she accomplishes her work.

Being woman, the narrator fears, when David proposes to stay in the island, for her crazed father's reemergence. David constantly insults Anna and she feels that he is a womanizer. Joe proposes the narrator and she refuses telling him how she left her last husband and child. She explains the sexist attitude of men in her group and their trips into the wilderness. She begins to dissociate herself from them and from civilization. The narrator becomes frightened of living the modern life and she even fears of this life for the novel embraces western thoughts. These binary categories bring the nameless narrator numerous pains; she relieves herself from the burdens of dichotomy and returns to the city even though it burdens her. Actually, the narrator grows up in a remote island but she goes back to her birthplace and finds herself captivated by the mysterious power of nature like the female characters in the fairy tales. Usually in tales, female characters get more associated with nature and live with nature. The narrator feels more comfortable and safe on the island than the city life. She believes and senses nature with ease. In the rural environment of the island she feels a kind of safety and according to the *Observation in Margaret Atwood: A Biography*:

In the night I had wanted rescue, if my body could be made. To sense, respond, move strongly enough,

some of the red light-bulb neurons, incandescent molecules might seep into. My head through the closed throat, neck membrane. Pleasure and pains are side by side but most of the brain is neutral, nerveless, like fat. I rehearsed emotions, ramming 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. (Cookie 112)

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 the fact that she is taking part in doing something bad to nature. The nameless narrator, being a woman, cannot cope with her life in the city, for men in the city think women are only for their bodily pleasure and treated women as mean creatures. Hence she has to fear all the nights in city and hence the narrator moves to her home land and leads a happy secure life. As a matter of fact, she would like to become a beast, living 'naturally', having the body covered by fur, not wearing clothes or do whatever humans do, free from any taint of the civilized world. She was victimized psychologically but now she is determined not to let anybody kill her 'self'. She is living a double life in order to repress the memory of abortion, broken marriage and the child "I have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't... lapse, relapse I have to forget" (42).

It is through David, that *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. According to her getting married is nothing but to surrender the values of woman. According to Atwood marriage should be of mutual love; if not it is meaningless. Thus in one of her interviews she says that getting married would be a kind of death. To forget her past she wants to become again pregnant by Joe and she wants to raise the baby far from civilization.

Now the narrator comes to a conclusion that the masculine culture has subordinated an innocent feminine nature. Frye also supports this view in his writing for he assumes that the sexual and maternal myths are older in an agricultural society as eventually hunger and exhaustion brings the narrator to sanity. Thus the woman narrator in *surfacing* undergoes physical and mental oppression by the men and eventually goes mad on the island.

Atwood even shows through David and Anna's relationship the sexual power politics in the society in its most destructive form. Their relationship is like a game and David is the one who sets the rules of the game and his wife Anna has to work hard to catch up with the constantly changing rules. It is David who has to assert himself as the dominating one in the final analysis and who must always win the game. David throughout the novel uses Anna's femininity against her to uphold his sense of masculine superiority by putting her down. Anna has completely surrendered to the ideological representation of women within the male centered societal frame.

Anna is a person who fits with all the demands of David. David launches constant insults at Anna yet she digests everything he does to her and puts a false happiness upon her face. At one stage Anna confesses to the narrator that David is a womanizer. The subjectless Anna hides poorly behind her make-up. David wants Anna always to be in her make-up else he would punish her. David treats Anna as a sexual pot.

This novel draws attention to the oppression of woman in a male-defined order of hierarchy and the oppositional role that has made man to behave as though he is empowered at the expense of woman. In the novel Anna, embodies the role of victim of patriarchy. Eco-feminism supports the claim of victimization regarding the patriarchal society as an aggressive one. Anna is set to be the best example to show that there is a long way to go for gender equality in reality.

Anna is oppressed by David and this is evident when asked for her occupation she gives a standard answer that "I'm David's wife". This shows her lack of relationship with her husband. Throughout the novel Anna is treated only a little more than a means of obtaining sexual gratification for David. The narrator is the only woman who is strong enough to break away the clutches of male-dominated society. She saves Anna from her husband as she was a strong, independent, multifaceted character who serves as a compliment to the feminist movement. But Anna is a sly woman who through her constant chatter had helped the narrator to understand her in a better way. Unlike Anna, the narrator asks for a stable condition in her marriage, even though she had a previous relationship with her former lover in the city she breaks all the affinities and tries to establish women's role in the society. She strongly refuses to become the victim with the system of patriarchy for she believes that besides fighting back there should be always a solution to the problems.



Thus, Atwood's feminist concerns and her socio-political visions are expressed in this novel *Surfacing*. The protest against the female sex role, the aggressive attitude and behavior of men towards women are also portrayed.

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