Chapter II

Spiritual Transformation of ‘Self’ in *Surfacing*
Although Atwood refused to be pined down as feminist writer, her writing style conveys the emotional desolation of the lives of female characters in novels, as is clearly exemplified in *Surfacing*. The images and the use of language in the novel portray a Canadian identity, the essence of which could be found in simple drive to survive. The novel clearly vindicates that the positions we hold in our society are not innate constructs but social one. The protagonist feels that she has lost her self by society: she moves into the world devoid of all values but towards the end the novelist makes us realise that social order cannot be changed and individuals should shape their minds in the formed frame of society.

Identity for the protagonist in Canadian society has become problematic because of her being a victim of colonial forces: she has been colonized by men in the patriarchal society and by cultural colonisation. Atwood attacks the framework of male dominance by implicitly criticising it and the novel revolves round a protagonist who is at odds with feminine gender roles. The nameless protagonist senses victimization in her relationship with her former lover and she feels she has been controlled by her acceptance of his control. She was for the lover “a certificate framed on the wall. His proof that he was still
young”.¹ She was forced abortion by her lover which haunted her throughout the novel. She believed that the unborn child was imposed on her: “I never identified it as mine … it was my husband’s, he imposed it on me…”(28) He even forced abortion, “He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn’t a person, only an animal….he expected gratitude, because he arranged it for me, fixed me so I was as good as new.”(138).

The narrator feels that male authority in her society is responsible for bodily violation experienced. Although the protagonist freely entered a relationship with a married man, and did have a choice concerning the abortion, she feels that she succumbed to pressure while opting for the abortion illustrating how women in:

> An age of supposed sexual freedom, remain bound in a social formation that assigns man a role of sexual aggressor and women that of passive victim and sexual object².

The narrator is not even able to tell her parents about her divorce and abortion, and consequently remains suspended between the ‘real’ and the ‘fabricated’ identities through out the novel. She is scared to reveal the secret to her parents because “they were from another age, pre-historic

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when every one got married and had a family…children growing in the yard like sunflowers”. (138) She puts her parents off “there would be too many explanations (3) and she has no choice but to indulge in fabrication; because her parents and society will not accept her divorce. (23) She is very conscious of the fact that the supposed freedom of the 1960s has brought about new perils for women.

Before this sexual revolution, a woman had to hold out on sex until she was married for reasons of decency and unwanted pregnancy. The 1960s revolution, the protagonist feels, has made “my status a problem, they obviously think I’m married but I am safe I am wearing my ring”. (17) Because she doesn’t want to be surfacing apart from the society she is living in, her choice to end her pregnancy, and her lover’s compulsion for abortion make her question the position of a woman in the society. Michael is very right in asserting that:

Atwood’s narrative strategy disrupts conventional boundaries as a way of exploring the means by which male-centred cultures ensure their own hegemony.  

The sin of abortion leads her to a strong guilt complex, from which she wants release. Most often she feels that for her there is no redemption: “I could have said no but I did not; that made me one of them too, a killer …

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since then I had carried that death around inside me.’(139) Although she appears calm outside, her emotions are suppressed which cause her mental imbalance. She is all the time haunted by her guilt and does not consider herself totally innocent or helpless. Her main dilemma is that she wants to be powerful without being in any sense evil. Her craving for power is expressed in her dream of childhood: “inside were pebbles, purple black and frightening I knew if I could get some of them for my self I would be all-powerful: …. I had no idea what I would do with the power once I got it; if I’d turned out like the others with power I would have been evil.” (31) According to Iqbal Kaur, Atwood does not seem to be trying to establish her protagonist’s innocence but seems to be emphasising the fact that:

For the female individual to survive, she must recognise and reject not only the pathology of social and sexual arrangements but her own participation in these arrangements as well.\(^4\)

The male dominance shattered her self-image and integrity as an autonomous individual. She voices this idea in an interview with Graeme Gibson:

If you are defining yourself as innocent, you refuse to accept power you refuse to admit that you have it, then you refuse to exercise it, because the exercise of power is defined as evil, and that’s like people who refuse to get involved in politics because it’s dirty.5

She recounts that her fake husband / lover got in the way of her artistic ambition also. By arguing that there have never been any important women artists, he wants her to acknowledge her inferiority and be satisfied with it. Iqbal Kaur rightly points out,

Infact 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 way6.

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, even Paul is surprised to see the narrator without her husband when she

6 Iqbal Kour, op. cit. pp. 21-22
returns to the island to look for her missing father. He feels that “a man should be handling this.”(21-22)

The protagonist’s pangs of guilt are so intense that she gets the feeling that even the unborn babies have eyes “and can look out through the walls of the mother’s stomach”.(26) She confesses that the memories that she had been nourishing were like “fraudulent passports” and she has locked herself into a circle of guilt, which is a kind of death. She sees the embryo she hopes growing inside her as being of special quality “a time traveller” with the “unravelled” paths, potential already in its protobrain.(185) She believes that baby must have watched the whole slaughter scene through her womb. Her admission of her complicity in allowing the abortion brings her a deep sense of her own evil. Her insistence on her innocence as a ‘nice’ victim of male aggression is a shield behind which she tries to hide her own guilt. Wayne Fraser points out.

The constant repetition of “he said” in her version of the abortion underlines the fact that her passivity is a defensive mechanism to ward off her guilt and sense of evil… she has deceived herself into believing that she is the victim of a masculine ethic which equates with American lust for power.7

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The protagonist is totally isolated and recalls her illicit affair with her art teacher “For him I could have been anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that’s where I learned. I worshipped him, non-child–bride, idolater, I kept the scraps of his handwriting like saint’s relics...he was an idealist, he didn’t want our relationship to influence anything; it was to be kept separate from life”.

(143) Having been betrayed by her lover, the word “love” itself turns to be ‘meaningless’ for her and leads her to believe that for men “Love is taking precautions”.

(74) She felt shattered when her lover showed her photographs of his wife and children, “they had names, he said I should be mature”.

Atwood explores the ways in which a ‘individual’ (self) gets implicated in power relationships of the society and establishes its position in forms of ‘domination’ or ‘victimization’. Her heroines are a study in female psyche alienated due to a lack of companionship and their predicament is more touching when they long for the human touch, sensitivity and companionship. When the protagonist recalls in Surfacing her lost innocence days she recognises that she was not merely a victim but an actual participant in the game of cruelty. She recalls how in their childhood he and her brother collaborated in a kind of murder: “we killed other people besides Hitler, before my brother went to school and learned about him and the games become war games.”

(124)
After these childhood pleasures which she shared with her brother, she feels her life has been a persistent struggle of dependency on the world for “identification, self-value, and feeling of worth; in the process she most often experience ‘the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces her to an object and then makes her feel inferior to other objects’. Although she appears very calm from outside but her inner self is segmented; she thinks that her inner “self” has been split into halves.

For her self division, repression and marginality have become a part of life. She is plunged in a solipsistic world which does not allow her normal self to get stabilized. The world she lives in is misfit for her. She feels she is isolated person caught up in terrible atmosphere, the consciousness of her as an individual bereft of emotions substantially contribute to this condition of the protagonist. Barbara Hill Rigney rightly argues that the narrator’s mind was already troubled before she underwent the abortion, because she would never have allowed the operation, if she did not already have a “split psyche”. Similarly, Erinc Ozdemir says, that “early in the novel there is an indication of the protagonist’s sense of powerlessness, not only in relation to the evil surrounding her, but also in relation to her own guilt-consciousness due to
her typically feminine inability to justify her own transgression.”

She refers to her so-called abandonment of her child, which she later reveals to be an illegal abortion, as the unpardonable sin; it was no use trying to explain to them why it wasn’t really mine.

The images of imputation showing her split psyche occur when in the text we have Madame in the grocery store who has one arm, the narrator and her brother wrapping their legs in the blanket pretending “Germans shot our feet off”. (1) The schoolyard game of placing one’s finger through a hole in a box and pretending it was a “dead finger heads metaphorically and literally separated from bodies.” The protagonist also attempts to understand yet another kind of split – that between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. She must come to terms with her self as perpetrator as well as victim, or at least as a “correspondent in her own victimization”. (97) She is ready to face Americans now who ultimately represent the ones in power, and realizes ‘what she wanted to vanish is evil’. She was victimized psychologically but now she is determined not to let anybody kill her ‘self’.

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8 Erinc Ozdemir, *Power, Madness and Gender Identity in Margret Atwood’s Surfacing: A Feminist Reading.*
The nameless narrator is in search of her lost father in Canadian wilderness. The search however covertly seems to be of her lost and divided self. She decides to take off her clothes and take animal identity and stops speaking and then embarks upon a spiritual quest in which she ultimately finds her dead father as well as her lost ‘self’ which had been alienated by the pressures of the Canadian society. In other words, once she gets tired of her social life woven around a network of lies and artificiality, she returns to her native island to trace her roots. Her quest is to live life in its totality, for which it is essential to unfold the reality of her roots. Her quest is set against the backdrop of water as the lake and island give shape to her search. She finds her home ground to have lost its charm and is disillusioned at the condition of her native island: “Nothing is the same. I don’t know the way anymore”. When she reaches the island, the view of lake is, “blue and cool as redemption should be through tears and haze of vomit”. The lake is not complete in itself; it is the dam that controls the lake.

From the outset of the novel we are made aware that the surfacer is divided: “the protagonist has spent most of her life in metaphorical ‘border country’ maintaining a precarious balance between truth and lies,
between reality and fantasy, between sanity and utter derangement”. (2) It seems she is living a double life all along and also reveals later in novel that her inner self is different from her social 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) To achieve the forgetfulness, she locks herself into her head, and becomes seemingly indifferent to of what is going on around her. She feels that she is not alive, and she does not deserve to be alive, because of her crime. In this way she protects herself from emotional harm, though at the cost of loosing ‘self identity’. G. Woodcock rightly argues that:

Until the end of the novel her loss of identity with her true self prevent her from having a stable and strong selfhood that, Atwood may be suggesting is necessary for earning a name.9

Society makes her forcefully succumb to the prevailing constructs of feminity, as a product of patriarchal male-created ideology. Right from the beginning, the protagonist has hesitations to live her own life “I have to be more careful about my memories” (61), she says “I have to be sure they are my own...I ran quickly over my version of it, my life checking it

like an alibi”. (67) She began to perceive her reflections as distorted and as other, the body is considered the domain of women and it is moreover in polar hierarchical opposition to the mind, the domain of man. Therefore man is associated with brain and reason. The protagonist believes that the trouble is all in the Knob at the top of the bodies which mind. I’m not against the body or the head either. Only the neck which creates the illusion that they are separate… if the head is detached from the body both of them will die”. (70) Seats states:

If reason is seen as colonising, disciplined (and male) its opposite is necessarily other and the body identified with desire, irrationality, helpless passion and subversive appetite becomes a colonised, contingent and probably female one.10

The neck symbolizes thus for her the Cartesian illusion of the duality of mind and body, which in turn alienates people from their bodies and the instinctive part of themselves.

The most seminal issue debated in the novel is the relation between ‘self’ and ‘society’: a significant part of an individual’s perception of the world depends on his or her socio-cultural and historical inheritance and upbringing. It is therefore not unlikely that one’s social position, gender, and race directly influence perceptions and thoughts of the individual.

The protagonist remembers her days of innocence, her childhood days, by reviving memories of her childhood, and prepares herself to come to terms with her own past. This specific act of return is recognition of the relevance of one’s personal past, which she finally recovers in the novel, is her own humanity. We can find the relevance of her past to her present self which seems to be a lost ‘self’ embedded in urban distortions. She recounts that as a child she felt like a person from another culture because she could not participate in the power games of other children. Initially, she believes she is a victim and accepts the victim role unquestionably, accepting the society’s definition of woman as a role occupant to fulfil the functions assigned to her by Canadian society. She identifies herself with the Heron: “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”.(177)

The protagonist revolts against the ‘American way of life’ because she feels the pattern of society has constrained her and her self has been marred by this ideology. Rigney says that:

In order to become an autonomous approach the condition they themselves have entered as withdrawing is not possible because she believes men and women are victims.\(^\text{11}\)

She decides to fight against the modes and customs of the society with which she found herself in conflict. She in the course of the novel becomes aware that she is not a victim as she thought herself to be, but she is not even an “American”, which to her are the representation of evil. She believes animals share the innocence of females, the heron and all other animals killed for food become deified. Anything we could do to the animals”, She believes, “we could do to each other : we practiced on them first”.(115) Consequently, the heron which is killed is the symbol for protagonists victimized self, and she feels she is herself responsible for her victimization. The protagonist exemplifies Atwood’s stand that there should be a position in between those extremes: positions of victims and victimizers. As Ozdemir points out:

I think there has to be a third thing again; the ideal would be somebody who would neither be a killer or a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony… [in Surfacing] it’s seen as a possibility finally, whereas initially it is not.12

While going through the novel the reader often comes to the conclusion that the protagonist has not learned anything from society in her formative periods of life, because “her family lived between two

12 Erinc Ozdemir, Power, Madness and Gender Identity in Margret Atwood’s Surfacing: A Feminist Reading.
anonymities, the city and the bush.” Even George Woodcock believes that protagonist’s parents had fear of the world:

    In fact it seems to have been largely because of fear of a world about which they knew a great deal in one way or another that the parents erred in bringing up narrator to be so ignorant of life beyond the home and the island that she must learn about it in shameful indirection from her most knowing and by implication, her more corrupt brother.13

She often compares her drawings and the drawings of her brother because it is through these drawings that she recovers a part of her childhood ‘self’. When she opened the drawings of her brother “explosions in red and orange, soldiers dismembering in the air, planes and tanks… could be seen”(84) but when she was searching her scrap book “I searched through it carefully, looking for something I could recognize as myself, where I had come from or gone wrong but there were no drawings at all, just illustrations cut from magazines and pasted in”.(85) Such a contrast clearly vindicates that the protagonist was brought up in an environment where a woman saw her ‘self’ through the roles assigned to her by patriarchal world. Iqbal Kaur rightly argues:

    Atwood is a serious artist and she draws the reader’s attention to the fact that the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it,

and dominate it today are men. In such a world as this ‘feminity’ is associated with inferiority, passivity and submission to male authority in all spheres of life. Atwood’s protagonist is nameless but it is not just she who is without a name and thus without an identity. In fact none of the women had names then.

The Protagonist recollects her childhood memories which exemplify that the roles for women are assigned by the society: their passivity and submission is the only thing expected by them. She recounts that as a child she did not receive any guidance from her mother and unlike other mothers who taught their daughters how to dress, please men and survive as a woman “she was no judge of the normal.”(102) Throughout the novel she draws the contrast between herself and her brother. She identifies her brother as having ability to cope with power and evil whereas she identifies herself as an innocent who wants to be powerful but is scared of being an evil. Her dilemma is that she believes power is associated with evil. For her brother mere survival is not enough “my brother saw the danger early. To immerse oneself, join in the war, or to be destroyed. Though there are to be other choices”.(183)

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14 Iqbal Kour p. 29.
Atwood is satirising the artificial values of patriarchal society where men apparently claim to be supporters of women’s equality but in practice deprive women of freedom to live their lives freely. It is through David, says Bouson, 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.”

Even Cheryl Mary Quental argues

It is from the lives of particular persons that the general life of the society evolves and it is again the general life which in its turn shapes individual lives.

Apparently David shows contempt for Americans and displays the consciousness of his race in this regard– “if we could only kick out the fascist pig yanks and the capitalists this would be neat country”(34)– but in reality he is affected by American way of life and is crazy in running after the American ideology of power. He firmly believes that “the balance of power” has to be maintained at all costs. As Anna states: “He has got this set of rules if I break one of them I get punished, except that he keeps changing them so I’m never sure …he likes to make me cry


because he can’t do it himself”. (116) David is a prototype of cold and calculating man, who is forever hiding or ignoring feelings. It is one of the reasons why in the beginning of the novel the protagonist identifies herself with David but gradually realises that he was a calculating man: “David is like me, I thought we are the ones, that don’t know how to love, there is something essentially missing in us, we were born that way.” (131) David is forever hiding or ignoring feelings of love as a sign of feminine weakness. Whenever David gets chance he uses language to tease, disrespect and drain Anna. He makes constant reference to the female anatomy.

Through David, Atwood shows some aspects of cultural colonialism, particularly how the American intrusion have shaped the attitude of Canadians. The protagonists reason for being into her home town embraces David because he is a mechanized man of metropolitan modernity, who hardly bothers about his roots and has disowned his parents long ago the way you are supposed to in the society in which he lives. Atwood even shows through David and Anna’s relationship sexual power politics in the society in its most destructive form. Their superficial intimacy consisting mostly of verbal power games is a show they put on for the audience in their case which is Joe and the protagonist. 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 feminity against her to uphold his sense of masculine superiority by putting her down. Erinc Ozdemir writes:

“He basis his marriage on power over, which is, for him, much easier and safer than power-to, characterized by openness, confidence giving and sharing”. Throughout the novel he doesn’t speak to her wife politely and calls her “uncultured and vulgar” goose.¹⁷

David is making a film and is operating a Camera to gather “random samples”. He records everything that lies in their field of view which makes the camera an object of victimisation. As Rama Krishnan has pointed out:

Random-samples the imagistic sequence being shot by David and Joe epitomises their desire to reduce the plurality of the world to a linear sequence of accessible frames …. ‘Random-samples’ is a modernist

¹⁷ Erinc Ozdemir, Power, Madness and Gender Identity in Margret Atwood’s Surfacing: A Feminist Reading.
creation that seeks to raise amnesia to the level of art by perpetuating fragmentation.\textsuperscript{18}

David says that he is a “Renaissance Man getting random samples” (4) but when he shoots dead heron the protagonist equates him with Americans and believes him to be not different from those who killed the bird. He is a pastiche American who has surrendered himself and his self respect in order to have the satisfaction of appearing true imitation.

David forced his wife Anna to pose naked in front of the camera. He demanded her to yield to his desire to expose her body to his camera first by “menacing gentleness” and finally by using physical power. David uses sexual politics when he is enhancing Anna’s self consciousness. When she keeps refusing to pose naked, he punished her by remarking that “she likes her lush bod…. even if she is getting too fat” (129) “come on take it off…. we need a naked lady …. we need a naked lady with big tits and big ass”(128). When Joe tried to stop him “shut up, she’s my wife” (128) as though she was his commodity to destroy, and was there for him to order “That is what I like service”.(30) Narrator does not want to get caught up in this fight. She is unwilling to be David’s victim so she chooses to stay aloof and remained silent observer of the war between David and Anna. Narrator sees David as an “American” in

spirit despite his alleged hatred of Americans. She detects in him the very egotism she associates with Americans and she believes that she can defeat David by denying him his sexual power: “you don’t turn me on.” (147) The protagonist feels victorious, she defied male authority by defying the ‘American way of life’: “power flowed into my eyes and I could see into him, he was an impostor, a pastiche, layer of political hand bills, pages from magazines, a fiches verbs and nouns glued on to him and shredding away, the original surface littered with fragments and tatters.” (146) His camera rapes Anna as after some resistance Anna submits silently. David is not still satisfied and then he commands his wife: “look sexy now, move it, give us a little chance” (145). Iqbal Kaur rightly points out:

It makes women like Anna feel helpless, powerless, and expressionless. But the protagonist displays tremendous courage to react against male oppression. She unwinds the camera film and throws it into the lake in spite of Anna’s warning to her ‘you better not do it …..they’ll kill you.  

Anna has completely surrendered to the ideological representation of women within the male centered societal frame. She talks in an artificial language; she collaborates with the men because she cannot fight them. She is among those women who measure their own worth in relation to

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19 Iqbal Kour, p. 27.
their success with men. In the beginning of the novel protagonist believed that they were happily married – she believed that “they must have some special formula, some knowledge I missed out on” (34) but later she came to know their superficial intimacy is a show they put on for the audience. What sustains their relationship is the asymmetric balance of power for the maintenance of which Anna constantly strives lest she might lose David. Anna works constantly hard with the changing roles of David and the Protagonist observes that Anna “was desperate her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was a fight”. (147) Emotionally she is totally immersed in the system which is followed by David, despite the fact that she is aware of the meanness of David’s ego-trips. Anna collaborates with men because she cannot fight the system.

George Woodcock observes:

Anna has completely surrendered to the ideological representation of women within the male-centered frame; she can only exist and feel safe behind a façade of make-up, she talks in an artificial language and artificial face.20

Even Rigney believes that:

Anna is not an artist but an object of art, the product of artifice as much as if she had stepped from the pages of the scrap books of the protagonists childhood pictures of ladies… artificial face which Anna poses protagonist “ones thought to be Anna’s own”.  

Her body is also trapped in the meaningless mechanical act of love-making with David: “an animal at moment the trap closes”. (76) Infact, Anna is among those women who measure their worth in relation to their success with men. She desires to live up to the decorative aspect of feminine women and is actually conscious of her looks so that she can attract David. According to Barbara Hill Rigney:

David and Anna as the protagonist sees them, are divided and separate, he is the criminal and she is the victim, balanced forever in some terrible polarity of opposition, she is hiding behind her make-up and the screen from cigarette smoke, reading murder mysteries but never realising that she herself is the victim of another kind of murder.  

Though initially protagonists found David and Anna’s marriage perfect, later she found them like: “the wooden man and woman in the barometer house”. (34)

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In the novel the camera takes the central position as an instrument of rape, as an instrument of victimization, and all that comes within the frame of camera is recognised by narrator as the power of camera. She believes, that it will steal the soul and fears that the next victim “will be me”. She destroyed the film when they want to capture her in picture, and thus refuses to be their victim. She thinks that she can even save Anna from being one. By keeping herself out of the frame of camera, the protagonist undergoes some kind of psychological spiritual re-birth, which allows her to survive in the society. The narrator searching for her lost father, virtually searches for her lost self which is divided between the social ‘self’ and her inner ‘self’. Her self is so alienated that in order to become whole again she decides to take off her clothes, revert to animal identity and embark upon a quest in which she finds her dead father as well as her lost self because the danger of living in a false self is to lose one’s self identity. The descend into the animal state towards the end of the novel expresses a desire for a wholeness for protagonist that is impossible within the society. In this connection Patricia Gold Blatt states:

Protagonists of Margaret Atwood’s novels are women who begin with trust in socially established paths, such as marriage, family and friendship,
but they become disillusioned and turn their unhappiness inward, regarding themselves as unworthy and as failures.\textsuperscript{23}

Erinc Ozdemir also says that:

the wholeness of the self depends on the individual’s sense of embodiment or unity between her /his body and mind … the protagonist of \textit{Surfacing} experiences such a division between her body and mind, which has left her with an unfeeling body.\textsuperscript{24}

This is the main reason for her inability to experience love as her body is numb, she prefers to reduce love making to a purely physical act, without feelings of pleasure or love: “Pleasure is redundant, the animals don’t have pleasure.”\textsuperscript{(155)} Moreover, she can only sustain some kind of sanity by keeping “busy preserve at least the signs of order, conceal my fear, both from others and from him. Fear has smell, as love does”.\textsuperscript{(72)} Her lover for her was an object: “he was merely an object in bed like a sack or large turnip”\textsuperscript{(86)} and while the mass around her accepts the circumstances and situations passively, being incipient of the social ideologies she transverses and refurbishes for being, she is afraid of emotional involvement, and unable to relate herself to others. When Joe asks her they should get married she believes we’re living together anyway. We don’t need a certificate for that” \textsuperscript{(80)}.


\textsuperscript{24} Erinc Ozdemir, \textit{Power, Madness and Gender Identity in Margret Atwood’s Surfacing: A Feminist Reading}.
The narrator feels that something has happened to her, which caused numbness and fragmentation. Although she tries to keep her most painful experience of abortion into logical version of it—an attempt “to keep the death away from me” (137)—she soon becomes aware of the nature of duality she is imprisoned within: “I’m not against the body or the head either; only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate.” (70) When she talks about her relationship with Joe who is her lover, she says she has divided him in categories. Her relation with Joe is only physical not emotional: “Everything I value about him seems to be physical; the rest is unknown, disagreeable or ridiculous, I don’t care much for his temperament.” (51) The moment Joe asks her to marry him he would loom large on her: “he was growing larger, becoming alien, three dimensional.” (81) She is a woman who has lost touch with reality of her own life. According to Rigney:

She is a psychological suicide a woman with no name, an artist with no art form and no past or tradition that she can recall correctly. She can neither feel nor communicate effectively. She has a lover she cannot love. She is a mother without a child and a child without a mother. \(^{25}\)

George Woodcock rightly states about protagonist:

We realize … “I” is … emotionally undeveloped – she sees herself increasingly … as head detached from its body “or mental activity

detached from the senses and the feelings”, and this distancing …. has enabled her to create … a false persona … the reunion … Will be achieved through the rite de passage which will signal “I” development into true character.26

The protagonist is reluctant to accept that language mediates everything. She feels alienated from the words that have been passed down to her; she feels that they have not come from her own experiences, her own values or ideas. It can therefore, safely be argued that the narrator’s search for her father is symbolically her search for ‘self-identity’ and the identity of her discourse. Afraid that the patriarchal society and the destructive nature of society will invade and trap her in their language, she decided to live without language. Moreover she also decided to keep her “blood egg” away from the “knowledge of words”.(156) According to Belsey:

To be able to act deliberately within the social formation, the child must enter into the symbolic order, the set of signifying systems of culture of which the supreme example is language.27

By not teaching the child a language, therefore, it will be kept out of ideology of society; it cannot identify itself in a subject- position because it does not distinguish itself in language as “I” from “You”. In other

26 George Woodcock, Introducing Margret Atwood’s Surfacing. p. 49.
words, when the child learns a language, it takes its place as a subject in ideology, without language, therefore the child stays outside ideology and consequently becomes a non-subject or a non-entity. The Narrator uses silence as a means of defying male dominating society.

Again, in the novel nature seems to be a part of female discourse; whereas men are identified with civilisation, knowledge and technology. Even the protagonist’s father is representation of such men who stand for science and rationality, and accept women’s subdued position in society. It is clearly revealed by a sharp contrast between protagonist’s parents. Her father leaves his daughter with a number of words that she needs to decipher, whereas her mother leaves her a diary in which no emotions, no feelings are described only the passing of days and seasons. It seems that the narrator’s mother either did not trust language or could not use it for her female experience. The mother seemed to trust on silence and is remembered by the protagonist as “quiet as a tree”.

Even the protagonist realises that “language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole… lake was the entrance for me.” (141) She even realises that “it would be right for my mother to have left something for me also, a legacy his was complicated, tangled, but her’s would be simple as a hand it would be final. I was not completed yet, there had to be a gift from each of them”. (143) After a long search she
finally knows that it is in the scrap books—“the gift itself was a loose page, the edge torn, the figures drawn in crayon”.(152) She also realises that she has lost her identity by defying nature, by letting a man persuade her to abort a child. Her mother had tried to fight patriarchy “jumped off the barn roof attempting to fly, and she broke both her ankles” (117) but the protagonist will complete her journey towards that other space, towards her inner self where she will find her own female discourse, but in order to get there she has to immerse herself in “other language.”

The above analysis of the novel Surfacing clearly affirms Howell’s assertion that it is the “record of a gendered quest for a new language”.28 Some of the questions novel raises are arguably linguistic and reveal the author’s deep distrust for language. In the novel the narrator is in search of her own voice, and needs to “clear a space” in order to find her own discourse, her real self. We are told that as a women she felt “trapped in a language that wasn’t mine”,(100) as an Anglophone in Quebec she has to confront problems of translations, (5) and as a Canadian she has to compromise the American cultural influence: “If you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them”.(123) Thus her quest is also a quest to find her own “dialect amidst the languages available to her.”

Margaret Homans argues that:

- the protagonists are often not only alienated from language because it belongs to the hegemonic, and therefore male discourse, but also because they belong to a social, racial group of nationality.²⁹

This observation completely befits the protagonist of *Surfacing* who finds herself trapped between the two cultures: the French Canadians and the English “Americans”. She does not like the first group because ‘they turned themselves into a cliché’ and disowns the second group for spreading ‘evil’ in various ways. She does not speak their language, and does not dress in same fashion. She notices right from the beginning that she does not speak the same language as other people do, for example as the two men speak or as Anna speaks. She is, what Rigney calls:

- an incarnation of the evil queen in ‘snow white’ who sits before her mirror but never asks fatal questions.³⁰

While burning the papers of her parents, she actually abandons language altogether and decides to live like the animal that had “learned what to eat without nouns.”(175) Being away from language and its divisions, she is isolating herself totally from her society in order to go through ritualistic process of healing which is necessary for her to regain herself. Later on, she even moves beyond the state of organic being, “not an animal or a

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tree, (she is) the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow (she is) a place” (75) – and turns out to be an essence of feminity, the place of recreation. “A compromise between using the existing language to represent female identity and completely abonding it”, according to Margaret Homans, “would either be to accept the dominant discourse as a neutral tool” or to “invent a separate language outside our present discourse in order to show an existence”.31 However, as long as this separate language is not found, women have to accept and use the patriarchal language or become silent. In her article “Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text,” Catherine Belsey points out:

Many feminists are concerned with women’s marginal position in male-centred ideology. This marginal position could best be defined as a position located somewhere outside the hegemonic ‘space’. Therefore, within the margins of the hegemonic and thus male space we find the space of women. Contemporary feminist fiction often centres on female protagonists who are in search of their own female discourse – or perhaps we should say, after Homans, their very own howl – which they might find in language, in silence or…elsewhere.32

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The social forces and society disturb narrator and cause her to have an opposite self, who can cope with the society or the self away from society. She somehow wants to escape the restrictive boundaries of society, by taking refuge in nature, she believes that she needs to find another place in order to be her true self and in that place only she allows her true past to surface. The images of drowning in the novel are symbolic of narrator’s lost ‘self’ and her return to the state where there are no dualities but ‘wholeness’. R. D. Laing believes that:

fair of engulfment is one of the forms of anxiety experienced by the ontologically, insecure person, who has lost his / her sense of stable identity : The individual experiences himself as a man who is … saving himself from drowning by the most constant , strenuous, desperate activity . 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 anaesthetic, pale green and then day light, I could remember nothing.\textsuperscript{33}

Erinc Ozdemir also believes that:

the protagonist’s memory of her mother saving her brother from drowning when he was little and her memory of the foetus taken out of her womb, triggered by the Sight of her father’s drowned body in the lake ,are signs of her fear of her own self being drowned. She has to dive into the

\textsuperscript{33} R. D. Laing, \textit{The divided self: An Existential study in Sanity and Madness}. Harmondswrth. 1970. p. 44.
lake to confront the reality of her fathers death and by association her
foetus’s –before she can be saved from ‘drowning’ and ‘surface’ again.\textsuperscript{34}

When she dives into the water, her true past began to surface which
instigates her transformation: “Then I recognized it; it wasn’t even my
brother I’d been remembering, that had been a disguise … I killed it. It
wasn’t a child but it would have been one, I didn’t allow it.(137) The
‘killed child’ could symbolize her own inner self which she let others to
call. She could have allowed it to grow but she killed it and the memory
of her abortion, reinstates and reaffirms her conviction. Accordingly, it
can be argued that even water has a symbolic function in the novel and
the protagonist dives into it and comes out of it reborn, like coming out of
the mother’s womb. As Grace states, water will purge the protagonist
from the sin she has committed, as she dips her “head beneath the water,
washing [her] eyes” and “leaving [her] false body floated on the
surface”\textsuperscript{35}. Water, not only transforms the narrator, but also her baby
Grace states that the Surfacer feels that her foetus is “a goldfish now in
my belly, undergoing its watery changes,” which makes it possible for the

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\textsuperscript{34} Erinc Ozdemir, \textit{Power, Madness and Gender Identity in Margret Atwood’s Surfacing: A Feminist Reading.}
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surfacer “to experience the visions of her parents and, hence, to understand their significance as parts of herself.”

Many critics agree that there are some religious connotations in *Surfacing*. Indeed, the narrator’s references to “Our father, Our mother”(83) can be recognised as a personal, pre-Christian spirituality, which for Carol Christ, reflects “the newly named power, the transformative energy of life to death and death to life” through which Atwood shows that “her protagonist has discovered the great power worshiped by the Canadian Indians.” It is asserted that, “the Surfacer’s spiritual journey takes seven days, echoing the biblical seven days of creation. In a spiritual way, therefore, the Surfacer is reborn and “re-created”.

Carol Christ believes that a mystical experience will lead to “union or integration with the powers of being, ... [and] that mysticism involves and transforms the whole self . . .” Moreover, when the mystical experience concerns women, their “grounding in the powers of being often leads to new found self-awareness and self-confidence”. Christ continues that “the female experience of the transformation of

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parts of her body into plant, animal, and infant is perhaps the most complete human incarnation of the great powers”.

The opening of fence could also symbolize the removal of restrictions of society. Once she has a clear vision of reality, she dissociates herself from society as the novel’s society and natural world cannot coexist. The life of woman is constricted by social boundaries, and the restrictions imposed by society which she defies. George Woodcock rightly points out that the “solitude is of course a necessary condition of the spirit quest, so is the shedding of all the attributes of human existence, of all that makes one human and social” she has shunned the society “I am by myself… (away) from any rational point of view .I am absurd , but there are no longer any rational points of views.”

She believes that truth is in nature “truth is here” (164), and thus is no need to see guidance from society “nothing guides me”. (165) She even shuns the human food and eats “fruits peaches, yellow fibrous halves”, (165)... she wants to be one with nature, and to take an animal identity, so that everything that is artificial is destroyed, including her shoes and clothes. She even burns all the images connected with her parents and sleeps like a cat around her space rustles, owl sounds “across the lake or inside me, distance

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41 George Woodcock, Introducing Margret Atwood’s Surfacing. p. 65.
contracts.” (174) She believes that the “garden is a stunt a trick... it cannot exist without the fence” (174), and she must resist the fence” and with it all the restrictions imposed by the fence. She has been non-communicative in the society, but in this desolation she feels that water is “multilingual” human language which enabled her to enter into some mystical communion with nature achieving oneness with whole universe. Rigney very aptly argues that:

Atwood’s sending the Protagonist into this state is the psychological journey as the protagonist is close to mental collapse in the beginning of the novel ... her immersion in the wilderness as well as her religious ecstasies are metaphors for her journey through her own subconscious mind, that place in which she can discover her past and affirm her identity, much as in a process of psychoanalysis.42

When surfacer looks at herself in the mirror she does not consider her physical changes a distortion of the self, but rather as new self, she has been reborn and now regards herself as a “natural woman”. The mirror symbolises the fragmentation of self: it gives the picture of the body in front of the mirror, but there is also another body, the other self. In the protagonist’s view this other self in mirror is a distortion of the real self because it acts like human being. The only recourse left to her is to decolonize the mind by building bridges between self and society.

42 Barbara Hill Rigney, Women Writers: Margret Atwood. p. 53.
Withdrawing from society according to her is not possible because “alternative is death”. (185) She has to purge herself, shedding all traces of guilt and false self— “noise came out like something being killed a mouse, a bird.” (184) This feeling gives her a sense of confidence and she thinks that she must return to her human state: what her parents teach her. Both of them appear to her in separate visions, her mother hands outstretched feeding the blue jays as the protagonist remembers her in life, and her father who is before her eyes into a manifestation of her own illusions “the thing you meet when you’ve stayed out here too long alone.” Thus narrator gradually reintegrates all parts of her lost self through the acceptance of her past.

Through a spiritual transformation of a self to a divided self, “to non-self, other, or place,” the Surfacer “must henceforth embody both worlds; never again can she inhabit one or the other. This acceptance of duality,… informs each level of the narrative” during which the protagonist finds her own identity as a reborn human being: her parents show her a way to trust and she learns to trust herself as she says towards the end “To trust is to let go”. (186) She decides to return to the human world healed and whole, due to a mental transformation which can keep her within the society, and yet prevent her from surrendering entirely to the ideology of society. She returns with new powers to recreate bond
between society and self and affirms communion between individual and society. She now understands her parents in terms of their fragile humanity, the pain behind their choices and the paths they follow in their lives. She sees through the weakness of her companions, to their essential goodness, the possibility lying hidden within them. So she re-enters the human world with new eyes and it is her child that she thinks will bridge the gap between ‘self’ and ‘society’. She understands the need to have compassion and the utility to live with other creatures. Joe comes offering her “a new freedom” (186) and she takes the challenge so that cycle may continue and whole humanity might be awakened to share in fullness of existence. Robert J. Roth rightly points out:

> The kind of self which is formed through action, which is faithful to relations with others will be fuller and broader self than one which is cultivated in isolation … man’s relation’s to others are essential for the full development of self.\(^{43}\)

Thus what is regarded as madness by society that is protagonist’s acting out her urgent need to heal together mind and body outside the realm of society is a process of self realisation.