CHAPTER - III
A PSYCHOLOGICAL QUEST
(SURFACING)

Surfacing is more than any other of Margaret Atwood’s novels also is border country, halfway between poem and novel theological treaties and political manifesto, myth and realism. Surfacing is quite possibly the best of all her work.

- Barbara Hill Rigney

Surfacing (1972) is a most poetic and emblematic second novel of Margaret Atwood with a theme of psychological quest. It’s a companion novel to Atwood’s collection of poems, Power Politics (1971) that grappled national and general identity anticipating rising concerns about conservation, preservation and emergence of Canadian Nationalism. It’s an earliest work of Atwood’s fiction that probed into the secrets of artistic death of women and abortion. With the publication of surfacing, Margaret Atwood came to be regarded as a woman novelist speaking especially for and to women.

Surfacing is a work of an aura of complex suspense with multilayered meanings. The theme is psychological, partially detective thriller written in a brilliant sharp prose about contemporary life, nature,
families and marriage. The novel also demonstrates the complex question of identity for an English-speaking Canadian Women. Atwood’s concern about nature that reflected in number of thematic concerns is central to Canadian culture. It is a testimony or firm belief in the rights of the individual and themes of nature’s triumph over civilization. The novel was written in the early 70’s in the middle of the psychedelic movement where there was a conflict of values with the role of women, that society offers and demands from them.

*Surfacing* is an first person narrative with a simple story at the surface level and the central character is a twenty year old narrator or the unnamed protagonist who works as a commercial artist. She returns to her home town Quebec after nine years of abscon to find clues for her father’s mysterious disappearances. The novel ‘echoes the structure of Jack Kerouaec’s *On The Road* (1957), as the narrator travels by car back to her childhood home. Atwood’s protagonist is never named in the novel, and is often referred by critics as “the surfacer” who undergoes a significant metamorphosis during the course of time and apparently seeks to discard her identity as a human only to assume the identity of an animal. The protagonist makes a conscious attempt to metamorphosis like the central character in Atwood’s poem “Departure from the Bush” (1966) whose transformation takes place in an unforced way, in contrary to the surfacer’s
forced metamorphosis. *Surfacing* probed into the matters of underlying secrets of artistic death of women and abortion. Before the publication of the novel, the trauma of abortion and artistic disintegrity had never been dealt so extensively in any another novel. It addresses itself to the traumatic effects, and the suppression of artistic sensibility on a woman’s psyche. Including the protagonist of the novel, some of the protagonists of Margaret Atwood are seen as neurotic or crazy, both by the critics and the characters within the novels. However, little has been done, to explore and define the source and nature of neurosis.

The novel *Surfacing* is well balanced in the three part division: rising action, climax and falling action. The problem of the disappearance of her father, a tree surveyor and botanist, results in rising action as she sets out searching for the clues. So, the ‘search for her father’ and ‘the sense of a symbolic journey’ underlines the novel’s mythical implications from the outset. In a flat, emotionless tone, the narrative echoes the complete spiritual journey which dates back through flash backs. The eventual exposure of the sources of the nameless protagonist surfacer’s psychic anesthesia is analogical to Marlow’s symbolic journey in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The narrator is physically mutilated half-dead, cut into ‘two’ by her past experiences. The normal women is known by her passivity and obedience, and any kind of deviation from this norm
automatically renders her abnormal. This kind of abnormality and insanity in women is undoubtedly the result of oppression in a male dominated society. Phylli’s Chesler in her book *Women and Madness* (1972) describes madness in women as “an intense experience of female biology, sexual and cultural castration and a doomed search for potency” (31). It could be pertinent to examine the characters within the novels of Atwood, to explore and define the source and nature of the neurosis. Is the madness inherent to their nature or were they afflicted by it as part of their quest for a secure, happy life? The word ‘crazy’ is used to serve as a convenient term for what some critics have described as ‘neurosis’.

Mixed responses of various critics from all over the world towards the protagonist of *Surfacing* is different. Atwood’s avoiding of naming the narrator in *Surfacing* is to emphasize the universality of the narrator’s feeling of alienation from society. Isolated by the numerous roles, the narrator feels emotionally numb. Her anger arises from the standard roles forced upon her and which she is supposed to play in her life. Through the life of the narrator who is alienated, Atwood explores a woman’s place in all its facets, as a human, a wife, a religious person, a mother, and a sexual being. Her response to her alienation is to become an animal because she sees animal not as beast but as graceful representing that are better than humans, peacefully co-existing with nature. Atwood uses the narrative
device of a trip from an urban location in Ontario to a resort village in northern Ontario. Where the sign of American power is seen abundantly, where the difference between the urban and rural cultures portrayed in the novel has universal implications. The incidents and events that happen in the narrator’s life like marriage, divorce, love etc, can be true of any accommodating society anywhere in the world because to be human is the goal of the protagonist.

The protagonist’s journey towards wholeness involves several halves of the narrator’s self. She finds herself paradoxically on home ground, foreign territory, where the way is blocked, before his spiritual journey like Dante in the Dark Wood, the narrator no longer knows the way. Like, one of the major themes in the novel, the protagonist suffers from the loss of identity. As it is accepted that every human being needs his identity, that which helps immensely in the development of his or her personality. So, its true that the quest for identity is very important aspect of human predicament. The loss of identity would make a person very bad, unless an individual finds herself in the fullness of his capacity, he cannot play consistent role in the society. The novel clearly renewed emotional, intellectual and social needs of women who are grappling with a series of issues about women’s role in the society. Including identity and
representing the other themes like separation, madness, feminism, language and return to nature.

Canadians viewed the novel as a treatise on ‘nationalism’ the Americans considered it in terms of ‘feminism’. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer in *Continental Review* calls the novel as a “remarkable and remarkably misunderstand able book” (319). In 1972, when the second phase of feminism was as its peak, *Surfacing* appeared. Its having published during such a momentous period, showed the influence of all the feminists texts like, Betty-Friedman’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which demystified the woman’s traditional roles as wife and mother and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969). Simultaneously the novel was produced around the same time when the essays like *Paradoxes and Dilemmas* (1966), *The Woman as writer* (1975) appeared, clarifying her ideological position.

A review of existing critical responses to *Surfacing* shows, that none of the critics, either in India or abroad have adequately explored the feminist voice of the novel. In an interview with Gibson, Atwood defines the novel as a “ghost story”, in which she examines among other things like the great Canadian victim complex. The novel decries men’s imposition on woman in matters of profession, marriage and motherhood, which cripples her intellectually, emotionally and morally. The novel
questions and challenges woman’s place in traditional discourse and suggest a rejection of such discourse. It confronts, “convention and ideology, questioning what the masculine tradition has defined as “right” and “acceptable” (121) and works for opening a space from which a woman can speak her desire in her discourse.

The protagonist of the novel surfaces from under the swamp of the male discourse by narrating her experiences in her own discourse that is distinctly feminine. The question therefore arises is what are the forces acting strongly on women that turn them crazy? The primary force or the cause is perhaps the need for attachment, affiliation or affection. Since women have been both culturally and emotionally dependent on men, any disruption of attachment or affiliation is seen not as a loss of relationship, but a total loss of self, which is then seen as neurosis. The novel is structured like a journey of the protagonist, in which through her association with the people and nature, she becomes aware of different victims and victimizers. These concepts of attachment and security are seen and analyzed in a wider context as “psychic needs” as man’s existential conflict produces certain psychic needs common to all men. Hence she is forced to overcome the horror of separateness of powerlessness, loss and find new forms relating herself to the world to enable her to feel at home. These psychic needs are existential because
they are rooted in the very conditions of human existence. They are shared by all men, and their fulfillment is as necessary for man’s remaining same, as the fulfillment of organic drive, is necessary for the remaining. The distinct feminist voice of the protagonist, who surfaces from the depths of exploitation and oppression by a teacher and artistic integrity and motherhood are destroyed due to the atrocious misdirection of her male art teacher as well her fake-husband. Her professional aspirations, the creative and artistic talents suffer a serious set-back due to the authoritarian designs and tyrannical attitude of her teacher. As Josie P. Campbell says in *The Comen as Hero* that *Surfacing* goes: “quite beyond the borders of Canada, except in details of place despite her polemics in survival consciousness is the central task of humankind everywhere”. (18)

*Women’s Convention* (1979) defines, the discrimination against women is distinction, exclusion or restriction or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status. On a basis of equality of men and women of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. The protagonist of the novel becomes a ‘metaphor’ for all those who exploited and abused her because of their powerlessness. She reaches beyond recognition of one’s place, one’s predicament, beyond the mere will and continues the journey of self-
discovery and she desires to be a free and autonomous being. She not only struggles to survive in the society, but also desires to organize all the victims to protest against the oppression. Thus, *Surfacing* is the quest of a nameless woman who is ready to revolt. In other words, it is a blue-print of revolt.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist chooses to remain nameless why? What Doris Lessing says, in this regard is more convincing that “names are meaningless for women, since they are all male-derived, whether from husband or father” (121). This is one of the reasons why Atwood’s protagonist says: I no longer have a name, I tried for all those years to be civilized, but I’m not and I’m through pretending. Thus the story narrated by the nameless protagonist could be the story of the millions of unnamed women all over the world, who may identify themselves with her. The name of the protagonist is unrevealed in a manner her identity remains under a mask. But, it is accepted that every human being needs his identity that which helps immensely in the development of his or her personality. So, the quest for identity is very important aspect of human predicament because the loss of identity would make a person very sad. Unless an individual finds herself in the fullness of his capacity, he cannot play consistent role in the society. The novel reveals emotional, intellectual and social needs of women who are
grappling with a series of issues about women’s role in society without identity. It has been argued that, the most important means by which we derive the largest part of our understanding is language. So, the protagonist reveals her attitude to language when she asserts: “if you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them, you speak their language, a language is everything you do” (123). She seems to realize that, language is not an effective tool in her quest rather she concludes that the best wish to comprehend nature is to abandon language and become more animal like. From the time of creation there was indeed no separation between objects and their signifiers. In every sense these two were inseparable as per Christian theology. So, the protagonist attempts to break down the barrier between words and objects asserting that, “the animals learned to eat without nouns”. (144)

The tendency of concealing identity as a strategy to get respect for concession in a society is evident here. The story unfolds from initial signs of mental health issues to a full-blown psychosis, and in the process, the protagonist’s mental rezoning deteriorates. Having stayed out considerably for longtime, the protagonist could not utter native tongue, suddenly she has to act as an American to save her face. “I see I’ve made a mistake. I should have pretended to be an American” (28). Atwood uses the narrative device of a trip from an urban location in Ontario to a resort village in
northern Quebec Via northern Ontario, where the American power is seen abundantly and where the difference between the urban and the rural cultures portrayed in the novel has universal implications. Similarly, the incidents and events that happen in the narrator’s life like marriage, divorce and love can be true to any accommodating society and anywhere in the world. So, the exploitation of nature is connected to the oppression of women through the narrator. Though nature and women contribute to human society, they are repressed under men’s commanding power. As De Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex* “mother obviously is the person (it is) of extension of her natural nursing bond. Her own activities are thus circumscribed by the limitations and low levels of her children’s strength and skills. She is confined to the domestic family group; women’s place is the home” (77). In the male dominated society, they are only objects, and they have no names in the rural town. Everyone is called Madame; their only existence is to satisfy the physical, domestic and sexual needs for their spouse or male companion. Protagonist’s friends Anna and David, a married couple is the best example to present the stereotypical image of marriage. As Nancy A. Walker says in *Feminist Alternatives* that “rewards of the process of civilization in *Surfacing* call into question the values of contemporary society, especially as those values impose upon women masks of artificiality” (149). Anna is appalled at lack-luster, loveless and artificial relationship between Anna and David, a film director. She
realizes how Anna is always coerced to present an artificially pleasant face, with full make-up at the instance of her husband. David symbolizes the authority of patriarchy that exploits women in all respects. David asks Anna to take off her clothes for his Random samples. He persuades her in to doing it, “What is humiliating about your body, darling? David said caressingly we all love it, you’re ashamed of it? That is stingily of you should share the wealth, not that you don’t”. (136)

In a domestic scene, women play their role as daughters, wives and mothers facing complex and psychological problems defining their authentic self. As Robinson Sally in Anti-Logos Weapon suggests “Surfacing questions and challenges woman’s place in Traditional Discourse and suggest a rejection of such discourse” (122) both in urban and rural scenes of Canada. So, the anti-heroine Anna of urban culture in Surfacing brings home to us many aspects of contemporary urban Canadian culture especially values relating to love and marriage. This observation demonstrates how harmonious marital relationships are, if married by inequality and artificiality. In fact, David is more a tyrant than a husband to Anna. He humiliates her very often for the purpose of the film “random samples”. Thus, the protagonist wages a war on nude and semi-nude movies in which women are paid to act in an incident manner for the sake of stardom, name and fame. She ultimately demonstrates a
superior wisdom by unwinding the film and dumps it in to the lake. She looks at the whole exercise of a wife being stripped naked by her husband as atrocious. The narrator observes the psychological cruelty that men inflict on women through the way that Anna crumbles in the face of David’s cruel jokes. At first the narrator seems to feel masculinity power, and the image of American is closely connected to David, who is more than a ‘second-hand-American’, so “infested” and “garbled”. (152)

Anna’s make-up is a form of disguise behind which she hides from the world. The narrator is surprised to discover that, “shorn of the pink cheeks and heightened eyes her face is curiously battered, a worn don’s her artificial face is the narrator’s one” (43). Anna distracts the narrator from morbid thoughts and introversion. The narrator does not want to seek out the real human being because David seems even less real. Though he is an instructor in communications, he fails to communicate, most of all with his wife. In their relationship Anna believes that they have succeeded where she has failed they must have some special method, formula, some knowledge:

They must have some special method, formula, some knowledge I missed out on; or maybe he was the wrong person. I thought it would happen my doing anything about it,
I’d turn into part of a couple, two people linked together and balancing each other, like the wooden man and woman in the barometer house at Paul’s. (39-40)

As Atwood has remarked in *Survival*, “part of you is where you’ve been. If you aren’t for sure where you are (you may) retrace your history to see how you got there (112). Gradually the narrator comes to realize that marriage is not ideal, Anna’s admission that her husband does not know that she wears make-up is the first glimpse of subterfuge and deceit. Sex is used not as a means of communication but as a weapon. Ultimately, the narrator realizes that they do have a commitment. Through hatred they have achieved “a balance almost like peace”. Like the barometer couple, “glued there, without escape (138). How they alternate back and forth without communication is the dislocation in human relationships that which marks the narrators past. When the protagonist asks Anna why her marriage is successful she cryptically replies that you have to make an emotional commitment and just “let go” (47). The protagonist’s perception of the pitfalls, hypocrisy, exploitation, oppression and victimization of women in marriage gets sharpened and discover that marriage is no more than a surrendering of values but distortion of the identity of a woman. Thus, her journey into the inferior provides her a means for tapping emotions that would otherwise remain inexplicable which reveals the
aspects of her hidden personality. As a background to the kind of inquiry involved, one should bear in mind Lacan’s notion of relation between the imaginary order, dating from the child’s earliest experience of oneness with the mother, when everything is here and now, and the symbolic order, linked to the law of the father and the discovery of language as something which invades the subjectively and imaginatively constituted world of the child.

Though we never learn the central protagonist’s name, her turmoil is developed during the three sections of the novel. In part one, we see her interactions with her partner and friends during a time of stress. Not only do we learn about the traumatic event which has triggered a significant change in her character, and a disruption in her relationship with her parents, and about the nature of the event, an abortion. Through which the novel extends the exploration of feminist concerns that begun in Atwood’s two earlier lengthy publications: *The Edible Woman* (a novel) and *The Circle Game* (poetry). Her another poem “At the Tourist center in Boston” (1968) included in the collection *The Animals in that Country*, treats Atwood’s fear of what would happen to an Americanized Canada, The problem of the disappearance of her father, a tree surveyor and botanist, who goes researching rock paintings, and the protagonist’s search for her father is a symbolic journey that underlines the novel’s mythical implication from the
outset. Atwood also brings out the mother’s instinctive protection of her children into the novel, “when she did I was disappointed in her” (20). The narrator states, when her mother dies. She looks at her mother’s diary, hoping that there might be something about her. But the pages are blank, except for the dates. Her mother has gone, leaving no trace but the leather coat beside the window, “there is nobody in it, leather smell and the smell of loss” (174). The failure of communication with her mother is implied in their final conversation in the hospital where the mother lies, dying of cancer: “I had to lean close to her, the hearing in one of her ears was gone” (20). She has broken all her relation with her parents who lived in Quebee, and they could not comply with her “modernity, and then running off and leaving my husband and child” (31). The novel’s use of parody, irony, metafiction, intersexuality and deconstruction of national and social myths and concepts like reality and identity are characterizing post-modern traits. Atwood’s prose significantly, subverts the conventions of genre, plot, structure, usage and punctuation in shaping the open ended nature of conclusion. Surfacing distinguishes itself from texts, representing the tension between individual’s role in society and in nature.

The unnamed protagonist is an artist whose professional aspirations are of her obedience and tries to convince her, that she should not mind compromising her artistic integrity, since there have been no important
women artists in history. The implication is that women should not aspire to greatness in artistic creation. So her aspiration to become a ‘real artist’ is cute but misguided. Consequently, the protagonist ceases to be a ‘commercial artist’ or an illustrator and becomes a “paralyzed artist” (189). She is compelled to survive in a crippling state of utter humiliation and objection, manipulated by male-chauvinism. She is prevented from developing into an artist. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says that the word aptly sums up the plight of the women artist thus “she is a free and autonomous being like all human creature–nevertheless finds herself living in a world, where men compel her to assume the status of the other”. (29)

The predicament of the sensitive protagonist as an illustration of children’s books, *Ovebee Folk Tales* cannot give expression to the images in her paintings appropriateness to her sensibility. She is free either to include the stories of her choice meant for children or to exclude. It is her art teacher, who dedicates the terms to her in the choice of stories, colors and images of her paintings. She has accepted the myths and history of society. Her business is no more than to comply with his preferences and go in for ‘compromises’ at every stage. She recalls her own childhood games she played the days not allowed attending Sunday school like other children of her age. It reveals the constant struggle for gender recognition
is apparent throughout history. The literary works of both past and present show the continuity of struggle in works like, *The Holy Bible, The Canterbury Tales*, Atwood emphasizes that “gender bias all the way back to biblical times and will continue into the future” (282-3). On the one hand, the art teacher is hell-bent, who crushes the artistic sensibility of the protagonist. On the other, he uses all his skills to physically exploit and seduce her. He presents her a wedding ring and almost succeeds in creating the image of himself as her husband. The protagonist becomes prey to his sexism and is pregnant in the process. The abortion, which is supposed to be necessary for relieving her virtual husband from the peaceful future of all her complications, leaves a scar on her psyche. Besides, she feels that it has ‘planned death’ in her.

Following her disillusionment with the very concept and the institution of marriage, the protagonist is reluctant to marry Joe. As the novel describes woman’s position in the western society in the matters of profession, marriage and motherhood, through the narrator who is reverential towards nature, intensely private anti-American and introspective who represents the structures of life and find a new order. The protagonist identifies herself with the unborn baby but the abortion came as a base and dried up her human urge for creativity. She breaks her ties with her dear ones at the time of difficulty and complicates things for
herself and suffers emotional imbalance. Instead there are persons who are psychologically healthy, got over the crisis with the support of their dear ones, like their parents, husband and lover. The central character of Urmie of *The Binding Vine* (1993) by Shashi deshPande over comes her trouble when she is shattered by the death of her baby. She gets involved in the social problem of a raped woman. There are psychic cases of women everywhere. Both Maya in *Cry the Peacock* (1963), Monisha in *Voices in the City* (1982) by Anitha Desai are childless and they have serious injured problem with them is that they magnify ordinary situations, blow the out of proportion and succumb to self-heartedness. But the protagonist in *Surfacing* is a divided person, where her division is twofold between the past and the present though she looks through the photo album to discover her separation, it offers no clues. She even faces a number of disruptions in her personal life by the problem of communication, “the language is wrong (70), she never revealed the names of her parents her brother, her fake husband and ‘they’ are referred as ‘they’. Hence her world is divided between ‘I’ and they. Even her parents were divided alienated leading isolated lives. Their relationship suffers from a lack of communication and commitment.

The gap between the language and reality calls attention to what Atwood sees as the essentially alienating character of communication in
western technological society. She finds that language must be used economically with a purpose, like the birds do, “they sing for the same reason trunks bonk, to proclaim their territory, a rudimentary language (48). She finds positive values in Joe because he is often “off in the place inside himself where he spends most of his time” (52). Joe does not engage in useless verbalization as more civilized men like David does, but he chooses to his own primitive origin and uses language like birds. However, she chooses to remain alone on the island home of her parents, that which cannot be interpreted as an escape from reality. She is “not a passive solitary weeper; she makes decisions, performs actions, as well as endures events. In her heroic quest for the realization of her identity, the protagonist achieves her enlightenment; she negates all human links and associations. She rejects the world of male logic, the odious elements of civilization and its values, its clothing and its canned food. She rejects culture and retreats into the wilderness to become a ‘natural’ woman. She gives up eating processed food; as such food is contaminated in the same way, like society is contaminated by patriarchal ideology. They both are unnatural, constructed, man-made, as both threaten to poison her. So the narrator eats only the raw food that nature provides. As she likes to eliminate everything from the history, she destroys all the remnants that appear to her as misguided stratagems for the apprehension of the truth. She rages all the artifacts of her history, such as, scrapbook, the albums,
the photos and even her fake-wedding ring, including the legacies that should be ‘translated’ into new language. She takes off her, ‘human skin’, that is her clothes and runs through the woods and finally relinquishes to the lake, that is her ‘false body’ of clothes. She likes to destroy her links with the past by undergoing a cleansing in the waters of the lake that which resembles a ritual baptism. The narrator accepts her nudity, not to hide her shame, but for the practical purpose of keeping out the cold. This experiences of the narrator resembles, the mortification and humbling of the bodies of saints like Mary Magdalene who misused her sexuality before her baptism. She experience humbling of her body and its desires in relation to nature and this same humbling accords her the chastised woman like Mary Magdalene. She experiences wholeness and truthful perspective or past and future as a ‘national woman’ she accepts renegotiating her personal and professional relationships of casting off the victim hood involved in her earlier misuse of her own sexuality.

Life on the island provides the protagonist an opportunity to understand her past and thereby to develop a sense of her own present and future. She surfaces and struggles to have small things from her brother’s investigations, as a powerless woman in the presence of men, as a mother, unable to defend her fetus from her partners desire to abort it, as a powerless Canadian in the face of the Americans who seems to invade the
wild regions of Canada. So, *Surfacing* is no novel of escape, but a parable to demonstrate not only the necessity of making some kind of choice, but even greater importance of facing the truth, by exploring the feminist concerns depicted in her previous publications. The modern life, incomprehensible as it is to her, has made her immune to the nicer emotions of life, love, action, compassion. The brutality and facelessness of modern living agitate her throughout the novel, the flashback of her life with the so-called husband shifts back and forth. The divorce which has changed the reality, “only with me there had been an ancient and I came apart. The other half, the locked away, was the only one that could live. I was the wrong half, detached terminal” (117). The crisis brewing within her is to be ‘whole’ again.

The protagonist takes her inner journey, which is depicted in two different ways, first as a dive into the lake, where at the lake’s bottom; she confronts her father’s body and the memory of her aborted fetus. *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkin Gilman an example of a female narrator whose journey into madness leads to profound self-awareness. *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin’s is another example that describes the awakening of the protagonist named Edna Pontellier. Images of diving in *Surfacing* are made use of the Canadian writers because, Canada has always been associated with its landscapes including
prairies, forests with innumerable lakes, idyllic mountain ranges and Arctic
barrens in the far north with an area of 10 millions square kilometers. So,
theme of nature and wilderness has been reflected throughout Canadian
Literature by male authors as being hostile and dangerous. Parallel to that
image, the landscape was portrayed in female terms as being innocent,
innovative and beautiful.

Fredrick Philip Grove’s Autobiography *In Search for Myself* (1946)
is a synonym for the search of the own self and it is one of the most
famous texts of the 20th century. More women writers began to send their
female protagonists into wilderness, a place of refuge and rehabilitation.
The protagonist in *Surfacing* is no longer the same normal woman. She
had hidden her true self to the extent, that she had lost track of it;”what is
it? To have the past but not the present, that means you’re going senile”
(79). The seed of death, turns her cold towards life, of survival and so she
feels the need to plant the seed of life within her and she wants to be
‘whole’. Her mother becomes her guiding spirit into a world of specter and
a new mythos. The immersion of the narrator becomes reality when she
lowers herself into the lake. The lake becomes metaphor for language.
Since water functions as the ambiguous border between the narrators past
and present and functions as both border and entrance, stressing the
ambiguity of the binary oppositions. It is considered as an aspect of
wisdom, an epitome of symbol for metamorphosis and philosophical recycling. As a sign of purity, clarity and refreshment, water indicates depth and often used to symbolize things in literature. By, the protagonist’s experience in the lake, the lake itself loses the patriarchal label and becomes ‘multilingual water’ (172) hinting at a solution to the problem of suppression and repression, co-existence and she refuses to be a victim, “unless I can do that I can do nothing”. (185)

She hopes to discover her identity through pregnancy, a kind of renewal of life itself. Thus, she learns to trust herself as the self is a visionary realm of possibilities and nobility. Her sense of dislocation is conveyed by the recurrent image of the frog that her brother kept in a glass bottle in his laboratory. Like a frog, the assimilation and acceptance of the previous suffering of the narrator is the path towards her wholeness. As the second child of an English-speaking family in a predominantly, catholic and French Canadian area, the protagonist had been exposed to a distorted alliance of religion and sex. Despite her strong dislike and prejudice for Joe the protagonist feel that she could live with him, because he is only half-formed. When he calls her name, it’s an admission that she must re-enter the human world “if I go with him we will have to talk we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to begin. For us it’s necessary, the intercession of
words: and we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully. That’s normal, it’s the way it happens now (192). She makes love with Joe to replant in herself the life, which the abortion had destroyed earlier. She is pregnant and visualizes, how her aborted child surfaces once again” within (her) forgiving (her) rising from the lake, where it has been poisoned so long: she confronts the measures of change only within herself and sees only her ability to “construct a home” by a new set of rules she announces her autonomy of existence, rejecting all bounds except those of the urban child growing within her. The protagonist finds a reflection of her tragedy in the Quebee landscape, mutilated by the power-holding called Americans. The dominance makes her to develop a sense of empathy for the flora and fauna of the Quebec island. Power is used here for destroying the innocent creatures like beaver, woman and herons. The ruthless destruction of wild life shocks the protagonist. She discovers, that what men could do to women, could also be done to the nature. So, she protests against the destruction of wild life in the island, which is symbolic of protection of herself. She finds out how maniacs senselessly turn the forest into a graveyard of trees and how they humiliate their wives in their arrogance. Thus the protagonist walks out of all human society and discovers the truth, that woman is not a denomination of sex, but a symbol who stands for all those powerless, vulnerable, all the weak people, trees and animals. The elements of natural world like ‘water’ and ‘air’ work
together to provide powerful symbols. These symbols support and highlight the protagonist’s psychological quest into herself. Air is associated with consciousness or reason and water with the unconscious or feeling. The slaughter of heron incident initiates the process of self analyzing in the case of the protagonist and discovers that the hierarchy of victimization is that, the powerful gets the less powerful. She identifies herself with the heron, like Marian’s crisis in *The Edible Woman* who reaches a critical point. Even her protective nature makes her reacts with hostility to the American feminists who kills the fish for sport. The narrator admits her complicity in the killing of heron brings her a deep sense of her own evil. She confesses that “I let them catch it, I could have said no but I did not, that made me one of them too, a killer” (139). The first heron predicted the death of the second, and the second heron comes to symbolize man’s senseless exploitation of nature a traditional symbol of regeneration and rebirth.

The frequent appearance of the ‘fish’ support the main theme of separation and dualism. One of the Indian paintings the protagonist refers to is that of a figure resembling a fish, which symbolizes, the unity between the mind and the body, emotion and reason. She dislikes killing fish because it represents the goal of unity. She sees American river gods and different native Indian visions in which her parents appear as birds and
animals. “the protagonist’s journey is from innocence and powerlessness through the recognition of her complicity in evil to self knowledge and sense of power” (325). The narrator not only defines herself as innocent but she also thinks she is powerless. “I think, as I had idea what I would go with the power once I got it: I’d turned out like the others with power I would have evil”. (31)

The protagonist’s inner journey depicts with the well known feminist texts of the twentieth century that describes women temporarily shedding the constraints imposed upon them by society, come in terms with their own inner selves through a journey into the self as a period of rejuvenation and catharasis. As her journey is incredible, her experience proposes that men and women should work together to liberate that world from exploitation and oppression. The novel questions and challenges that woman’s place is traditional discourse and suggests a rejection of such discourse. It confronts the convention and ideology, questioning the masculine tradition and works towards opening a space from which a woman can speak her desires. Surfacing is more than any other of Margaret’s novels, which is half way between poem and novel or between theological treatise and political manifesto, where myth and realism become the prominent themes. With the writing of Surfacing Margaret Atwood turns from, The Life of buried, smothered women to examine that
other side of the coin. The women who have fought their way to realize freedom as artists. The destructive forces like love and sex are themes in Atwood’s writings which reflect the other distinctive force called death because protagonist thinks that sex is like death. She is able to understand that sex includes life as well as death. Just as some babies are born deaf or dumb without a sense, she says that marriage is like playing monopoly or doing cross word puzzles. She is tortured by Joe’s demand that she loves him because she does not believe that word ‘marriage’ has any meaning. The reaction of protagonist to a purposeless killing, of ‘heron’ reveals her understanding of birth of hers and others. For her, heron is a sacred object, mediator, like Christ to the Christian. The revelations that come to the protagonist through heron and the underwater image of death provides her violation of nature by society, is paradigmatic of the violation of women by men. Atwood as Canadian by birth uses her own personal experiences as the ground work for Surfacing. The narrator finds her true self underneath the painful truths, coping everything around her. She abandons all societal standards and lives as a single product of nature. The protagonist deconstructs the meaning of the legacy left behind by her father.

This legacy, which is in the form of Indian paintings by her father, guide and inspire her to the knowledge, that one has to fight in order to
survive and face the reality rather than escape from it. Directed by both her
discovery of different victims and victimizers and her father's message,
and her mother's guidance and inspiration the protagonist marches forward
to fulfill her objective as a new champion of the mute and vulnerable. She
realizes that mere invisibility in activism, and withdrawal can never do any
good to the society and so one has to be courageous and face life squarely.
This awareness enriches her understanding of her true self, vis-a-vis the
vices of the modern society. The protagonist toys with the idea of sharing
life with Joe, but she knows that Joe is not a trustworthy person. She is no
longer inclined to have imperfect relationships and predictable failures, it
is on this note, that the novel ends. The novel ends, but does not conclude,
leaving much scope for the debate as to what exactly the ending implies.
Even the novelist's observations with regard to her protagonist leaves
much scope for speculation. Consequently, there is no critical consensus
on the ending of the novel. Based on their interpretation, the critics on
Surfacing can be broadly categorized into three groups: Those who argue
that the novel is modern and has a conclusion. Those who contend that the
novel does not have a conclusion as it is a post-modern novel, and Those
who do not agree with either, but opine that the novel has no ending,
though not a conclusion.
Prominent among those critics who look at *Surfacing* as a modern novel with a conclusion are: Sherrill Grace, and John Moss. Sherrill Grace endorses the end part of the novel and she is of the view, that the protagonist's quest for realization of the self is fulfilled. Thus, the novel ends on a note of optimism. According to Grace, the protagonist, at last, "has found what she needs to begin a new, complete, and free life” (109). The protagonist has achieved the integration of head and body, resolving the amorphous parts of herself into a single coherent identity. The second group of critics, who look at Surfacing in terms of a post-modern novel argue, that the novel does not have a thesis. They are Robert Lecker, Eli Mandel, and Rosemary Sullivan. These critics seem to be a little intrigued by the ending of the novel. While Eli Mandel says that ‘nothing is resolved’ to bring about regeneration in the protagonist. The most striking comment on the ending of the novel is by Robert Lecker, according to whom, the novel is a parody of all the conventions, associated with a search for identity literature and it reminds at every turn about the futility of believing that self definition is possible.

The greatness of the novel is that it lends itself to different interpretations. One can say safely, that the protagonist emerges as a newly integrated and realized self in harmony with the world, by the end of her Journey. Atwood also expresses a similar opinion, when she comments on
this issue. According to her, the protagonist registers some kind of harmony with the world a productive or creative harmony, rather than a destructive relationship towards the world. However, one can discern that in Surfacing, the protagonist attains the affirmative and humanistic ideal, by the end of her journey in the Northern Quebec island. Her association with nature in the Quebec island raises her consciousness of victimization of women, in particular, and all the animate and inanimate objects, in general. Where her feminist consciousness reaches its climax, the protagonist makes ready the ground for revolt against exploitation and oppression of all beings. The protagonist in Surfacing awakens from a male-defined world, to the greater terror and risk, and also the great potential healing and joy, of a world defined by the heroine's own feeling and judgment. The protagonist decides to go back to the city to face life. She is determined not to withdraw from the battle field. She has ultimately found her true identity in her rebel role. She refuses "to be a victim", assumes for herself a new role and says: ‘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’. In The Literary Half-yearly, Volume 36, Nancy A. Walker says: “This "proclamation”, is a sign, that she is prepared to be a creator rather than being created to meet the need of others”. (77)
Thus, the protagonist fulfils the third and fourth basic victim positions annunciated by Atwood in her *Survival*. As the protagonist refuses to be a victim, she will create her own reality. She becomes subversive and feels that her future is uncertain with Joe. She acknowledges that she can no longer live with him in ‘spurious peace’ and her relationship with him fails sooner or later, more or less painfully. At the end, the protagonist feels she must look forward to her child, who is taking shape in her womb. She is determined to protect her second fetus, the ‘shape of a goldfish’, which is a fulfillment of her quest. Therefore, she realizes the need to eat to live and to bear her child. She says: “if I starve, it starves with me. It might be the first one, the first true human: It must be born, allowed” (222). The protagonist wishes to give birth to a truly human child, rather than a divine son, who she would like to bring up as an artist a supporter of an ideal society. So, she echoes the throttled wishes of many women, who have grown weary in life, due to oppression and victimization. According to Josie P. Campbell in *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood* ed. by Judith McCombs: “its human centrality, with its rare view of a woman’s enormous capacity, to confront heroically the ghosts of her psyche and .... to conquer them” (178). Although there may be no place for her - as a ‘female hero’ in her society, the protagonist now possesses the knowledge, that will help her child. She wishes to see her child as an embodiment of her professional aspirations - a real social artist,
who is interested in social welfare, "a vision of Heaven". The protagonist has turned away from" the catchword consolations of patriarchy, security, marriage, property etc. and arrived at a vision of an alternative organization of life through mother - child bonding." The protagonist not only struggles to survive with dignity in society and to face the reality, but she also desires to organize all the weak, victims to protest against the oppression of the strong, victimizers. Thus, the protagonist becomes a spokesperson of all the vulnerable and exploited creatures, by turning a feminist theme into a universal one, in which the battle is not only between the two sexes, but also between the strong and the weak. She ends up as an activist. Therefore, Josie P. Campbell in *The Woman as Hero* looks at the "woman protagonist as the hero"(18). Surfacing makes it clear that any meaningful feminism has ultimately to face up to the problem of unequal and unjust distribution of power.

This novel also stresses the imperative need to fight against gender bias and discrimination, thereby taking the support of all those groups, whose battle too is with human inequalities. Thus, Surfacing advocates the need for the human community, a global village. The protagonist of Atwood is finally sane, and novel shows that sanity is possible, although it may have to be reached ordinarily considered madness. The protagonist goes through the period of neurosis in an attempt to forestall the threat of
an identity annihilation. In the novel, the protagonist refuses to be bogged down by the meaningless relationships and the modern brutality. She chooses to return and cope with them.

Surfacing emphasizes, that women need to recognize their inner potential and empower themselves. It suggests, that women artists can create the new myths necessary to depict the integrity of a female, who is both courageous and womanly. It leaves the task for future mothers and daughters. In this novel, Atwood endorses the struggle for freedom without anarchy, order without oppression, and proposes, that all men and women should work together to free the world from exploitation and oppression.