

## Margaret Atwood's '*Surfacing*': A study on Quest for Identity

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Article Received: 03/08/2023

Article Revised:08/09/2023

Article Accepted:09/09/2023

Published Online:10 /09/2023

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.09.12

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### **Abstract:**

This abstract presents a captivating story that explores the complexities of human existence and the profound journey of self-discovery. "Surfacing" is a thought-provoking novel that delves into the intricate layers of identity, relationships, and the pursuit of purpose. Set in a picturesque coastal town, the narrative follows Sarah, a young woman trapped in the monotony of her mundane life. Disillusioned and yearning for something more, she embarks on a transformative adventure that takes her beyond the surface of her existence. Along the way, she encounters a diverse cast of characters who challenge her perceptions, confront her fears, and inspire her to unearth the truths buried deep within herself. As Sarah navigates through the trials and tribulations of her personal journey, the author masterfully explores themes of love, loss, resilience, and the quest for authenticity. Through vivid descriptions and evocative storytelling, "Surfacing" immerses readers in a rich tapestry of emotions, inviting them to reflect on their own lives and the depths they may have yet to explore.

This novel offers a profound exploration of the human experience, emphasizing the power of self-discovery and personal growth. It delves into the transformative nature of stepping outside one's comfort zone and embracing the unknown. Through Sarah's introspective journey, readers are encouraged to confront their own inner conflicts, challenge societal norms, and discover their true selves. With its compelling narrative and universal themes, "Surfacing" provides a captivating reading experience that appeals to a wide audience. It invites scholars and readers alike to delve into the depths of human existence, pondering the complexities of identity, relationships, and the pursuit of purpose. By analyzing this work through a lens of literary criticism, this abstract aims to contribute to the understanding of the human condition and the role of personal exploration in shaping one's life.

**Keywords:** Surfacing, novel, resilience, discovery, personal growth, human existence, self-discovery, emotional journey, protagonist, soul.

‘Surfacing’ is a novel authored by Margaret Atwood. It was first published in the year 1972, and is a generally graceful and meaningful second novel of Margaret Atwood with a topic of mental mission. It's a friend novel to Atwood's assortment of lyrics, *Power Politics* (1971) that catches national and general character expectation rising worries about protection, conservation and rise of Canadian Nationalism. It's an earliest work of Atwood's fiction that tested into the insider facts of imaginative passing of women and abortion. With the distribution of surfacing, Margaret Atwood came to be viewed as a woman writer speaking particularly for and to women.

The story revolves around an unnamed female protagonist who returns to her family's abandoned cottage in the wilderness of Quebec, Canada. She is searching for her missing father, who has been living in a remote cabin on an island in the wilderness. The narrator is accompanied by her boyfriend, Joe, and a married couple, Anna and David. As she embarks on this physical journey, she also embarks on an emotional and psychological quest for identity. Through her introspection and interactions with the natural world, she seeks to rediscover herself, understand her past, and come to terms with her present.

Purpose of the narrator's return is apparently to look for her missing father, to find out what has happened to him. She recalls that she had consistently relied on her father's clarifications, and says that her mother's husband has been a puzzle to her. Mr Paul, her father's closest companion, tells the narrator that her father has vanished mysteriously. She loves and believes her companions, yet they do not accompany her on her search for her father. In her words, “I like them, I trust them, ..... car was the only way.... But my reason for being here embarrasses them, n't to think of anyone else I like better, but right now I wish they were here. Though they're necessary: David's and they don't understand it. They all disowned her and you are supposed to: Joe never talks about his father and mother” (16). Nevertheless, her friends consider it to be the excursion and as a break from city life while she insists that she might find something about her father. The excursion modified the memory of her troubled past, thus she contemplates her father in section three and says: “If he's safe I don't want to see him. There is no point, they never forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce; I don't think they even understood the marriage....and leaving my husband and child...that was the unpardonable sin.... But I admit I was stupid; stupidity is the same as evil if you judge by the results and I didn't have any excuses.” (25)

The protagonist starts her journey with a group of friends: her boyfriend Joe, her married friends David and Anna. They arrive at the remote cottage, and the protagonist immediately feels disconnected from them and the modern world. The cottage, surrounded by the pristine and untamed wilderness, serves as a metaphor for her inner state. As the group explores the area and uncovers signs of her missing father, who was a failed poet and drowned, the protagonist begins to confront the unresolved issues from her past. The mystery of her father's disappearance turns into a tangled labyrinth for her; therefore, she doesn't wish to be separated from anyone else in that place. While she was with her companions, the storyteller ponders her own brief love affair, and the loss of the child.

The psychological trauma dawns on her mind when she passes through actual experience which leaves an indelible psychological scar as it was totally against her innocent desires” (P.282). She had trusted him completely. In the meantime, she got pregnant but instead of supporting her, her fake-husband conveniently asked her to get rid of her child. He commenced her into getting her child aborted by telling her that it was very simple thing –like getting a wart removed” (p.155). The abortion left a permanent scar on her psyche, so much so that her mind and body have split leaving her numb-emotionless. Such is her disillusionment with love that she forgets to give and take. Bonnje Lyons rightly comments: “Her lover treated her merely as a utility item, her utility being that by loving him, she sustained his ego and narcissism”. (P.183)

Thus, after years of absence, her return to the area of northern Quebec, where she had grown up, and amid that adventurous expedition, she uncovers the dualities in both her own life and the male dominated society. The relation between the protagonist and the three minor characters reflect a world that suppresses and subjugates womanliness, which consequently helps readers better comprehend the protagonist’s urgent need to regain and reassert her female identity.

The narrator sees that the relationship between Anna and David mirrors the picture of what a lady's part ought to be in a marriage in a patriarchal society. During her nine-years marriage life, Anna carries on with a life of submission to David, continually attempting to satisfy him. She mostly wears cosmetics; if not, she is worried about the possibility that David will use sex as a weapon to repel her. The narrator states that she has never seen Anna without having any make-up and comments. "You don't need that here," to which Anna replies " He doesn't like to see me without it," and then, contradicting herself, says "He doesn't know I wear it," (37). Anna, who is extremely upset, discloses to the narrator pathetic details about their marriage, and reveals that David has a set of rules, in case, the rules are broken she will be punished. Therefore, the narrator suggests a divorce, but Anna asserts that she loves him, even though she thinks he'd like her to die. She feels upset and worried that David might oblige Anna to strip and has Joe shoot her with a camera. However, when she sees the protagonist dumping the film into the lake, she attempts to stop her: ““You better not do that,’ Anna says, ‘they’ll kill you”” (131). She complains whiningly to the narrator about how David embarrassed her by revealing to her his issues with other ladies; nevertheless, after she knows that David suggests sex to the storyteller, she frames an impermanent union with him. The storyteller likewise fights with her partner: “her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere” (120). She believes that all women are victims of inhuman rules and authority and that men offer themselves the legitimate right to decide the things women are allowed to do and those which they are not. However, the protagonist takes a strong stand against all the inhuman conducts of being victimized: “This, above all, to refuse to be a victim” (191). Therefore, she utterly refuses David’s behaviour, and is against Anna’s yielding to such treatment, and rejects Joe’s

conservatism. Margaret Atwood draws attention to the fact that —the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it ruled it, and still dominate it today, are men. (Beauvoir, p.557) She strives to attain due respect and equality for herself and other women, and asserts that unless she witnesses a real change from her partner, she will not be ready to accept him.

The protagonist discovers that after marriage women 's exploitation, oppression and victimization get sharpened. According to her marriage is nothing but a surrendering of values and distortion of the identity of a woman. Thus, the protagonist 's journey into the interior provides her, —a means for tapping emotions that would otherwise remain inexpressible, and reveals aspects of her personality hitherto hidden. (Stewart, p.156) In an interview Margaret Atwood says, —It seemed to me that getting married would be a kind of death. (Valerie, p.16) According to Margaret Atwood, marriage should follow love. A marriage which is not based on mutual love is meaningless. The narrator says she was fool to enter into the bond of marriage. But in reality, she never got married. Her lover was a —middle aged, —second hand and —selfish man. He has refused to marry her because he is married. The narrator feels shattered when he shows the photographs of his wife and children, —they had names, he said I should be mature. (Atwood, p.143).

On the island, the narrator begins to reconnect with the natural world. She swims in the lake, eats wild berries, and sleeps in the open air. She also begins to have visions of her parents. Her mother appears to her as a beautiful woman who is surrounded by animals. Her father appears to her as a wild man who is covered in dirt and blood.

The narrator's vision leads her to question of her own identity. she realizes that she has been living a false life in the city. She is not the woman. She is not an illustrator of fairy tales. She is a wild woman who belongs in the wilderness.

The quest for identity becomes apparent as the protagonist delves deeper into her memories, grappling with the loss of her father, the dissolution of her family, and her estrangement from her Canadian identity. She reminisces about her childhood, her parents' failed marriage, and her mother's attempts to assimilate into American culture by suppressing their Canadian roots.

The wilderness and its creatures play a significant role in the novel as symbols of the protagonist's untamed emotions and instincts. She observes animals, particularly a pack of wild dogs, which serve as a mirror of her own primal desires and suppressed feelings. Her connection to nature becomes a way of understanding her true self, stripped of societal expectations and conventions.

As the protagonist immerses herself in the natural world, she begins to embrace her primal instincts, liberating herself from societal norms. The line between human and animal blurs as she starts to identify with the wild creatures around her, finding comfort in their untamed existence. This connection to nature is crucial in her quest for self-discovery, as it allows her to shed the layers of societal conditioning and find her true essence.

As she delves deeper into her memories, the protagonist uncovers painful truths about her family and her past. The discovery of her father's hidden manuscript provides

insights into his struggles as an artist and an individual. The revelation of her mother's affair further shatters her perception of her family, leaving her with a sense of betrayal and loss.

As the novel progresses, the protagonist becomes more isolated, both physically and emotionally. She distances herself from her friends and seeks solace in her solitude. Margaret Atwood's —*Surfacing* takes woman as an existential condition, the condition of being powerless and manipulatable. (Jaidev, p.54) This isolation becomes a necessary part of her quest for identity as she needs the space and time to confront her past and make sense of her emotions.

In the climax of the novel, the protagonist undergoes a symbolic transformation. She immerses herself in a pool of water, which serves as a metaphorical baptism, washing away her old self and allowing her to embrace her true identity. This transformative moment marks the culmination of her quest for self-discovery and identity.

In conclusion, "*Surfacing*" by Margaret Atwood is a profound exploration of the quest for identity. Through the protagonist's physical journey to her family's cottage and her emotional journey into her past and inner self, the novel delves into themes of alienation, womanhood, and the significance of the natural world in understanding one's true identity. Vijayalakshmi remarks: "Meaningful survival would become possible only when he [man] establishes harmonious relationship with fellow beings and the universe. The quest for knowledge and truth gives direction and dignity to the lives of the individuals. Atwood's art attempts to regard quest as an integral part of the progress towards self-knowledge which is the ultimate goal of life" (105)

Atwood's masterful storytelling and use of symbolism create a compelling narrative that resonates with readers and encourages them to reflect on their own search for identity in the complexities of modern life. The novel's timeless themes continue to captivate readers, making it a significant work in the realm of literature.

P.S. Ramana observes: *Surfacing* is also an endeavour to create a positive female archetype: a woman capable of and determined to live a self-respecting and independent life having proper opportunities for female creativity and love for life while consciously rejecting domineering and patriarchal western culture and civilization (8-9)

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