



جامعة دهوك
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ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

"المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني"

17-16 كانون الاول 2020 (المجلد الثاني)



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An Analysis of the Narrator's Alienation in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

This study sheds light on the inner conflict experienced by the Narrator in consequence of life bitter experiences. The Narrator's inner conflict needs a confrontation with her past memories and association with nature through her alienation from the society. As a result, the Narrator's alienation empowers her to re-join the society as a strong woman who accepts her past and hopes for a bright future.

Keywords: Alienation, Nature, Journey, Oppression, Abortion.

الملخص

تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الصراع الداخلي الذي تمر به الراوية نتيجة لتجارب الحياة المريرة. يحتاج صراع الراوية الداخلي إلى مواجهة مع ذكرياتها الماضية وارتباطها بالطبيعة من خلال عزلتها عن المجتمع. ونتيجة لذلك، فإن عزلة الراوية تمكنها من الانضمام إلى المجتمع من جديد بصفاتها امرأة قوية تقبل ماضيها وتأمل في مستقبل مشرق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العزلة، الطبيعة، الرحلة، الاضطهاد، الاجهاض.



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Introduction

Alienation means a separation or withdrawing of a person or a person's emotions from the values or traditions of his/her society and family. It also means estrangement or seperation. Moreover, alienation indicates the loss of a person's connection with his/ her society.¹

Margaret Atwood who was born in 1939, is a significant Canadian novelist. She lived in Canada and tries to express her time or surroundings through her writings. She also wants to reflect the culture of the 1960s and 1970s in her writings. The novelist's aim is to develop the Canadian culture as well as to present the relationship between the Canadian identity and women's social rights. At that time, the Canadians wanted to get their own identities, freedom, and independence from the control of other countries like Great Britain, France and the United States. As much as concerned, Atwood sheds light on women as victimized by oppressive male society.

Women are considered as objects as if they are without feelings. They just carry out men's instructions and are defined: "... as an oppressed group and have traced the origin of women's subjugation to male-defined and male-dominated social institutions and value systems."² So, they feel that they are spiritually alienated from their surroundings as they can't express their opinions. However, Atwood shows Canada's new world or culture through protecting women's rights. She concentrates on the disturbances women confront in their lives since their society is a male dominated one.



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As a matter of fact, Atwood tries to change the social customs that women should be supervised by the masculine society. A woman should be at home to raise her children. Man is superior, woman is inferior and is referred to as: "struggling in her pursuit of captivating a husband."³ So, a woman appears in her new way of life in which : "... the subjection of women were no longer considered as irremediable natural states, but as a result of social institutions for which Man and not God was responsible."⁴ Hence, women realize their own rights against degrading situations.

Atwood presents the idea of women's alienation in her novel *Surfacing* (1972) in which the alienated Narrator rebels against social restrictions. She is frustrated by the social rules of her society, and wants to renew herself through her alienation. The Narrator has no real name. This means that she has no real identity and she doesn't belong to the society or culture. According to Annis Pratt, *Surfacing* is a story of a: "quest for rebirth and transformation."⁵ In addition to that, Atwood presents *Surfacing* as it: "has often been seen as the protagonist's personal/ spiritual/ or rebirth journey."⁶

The Narrator's Alienation in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Surfacing deals with the unnamed Narrator who is upset by the social disturbances imposed upon her throughout her life. The Narrator is disappointed due to her bad experiences which make her distrust everything around. Throughout her relationship with her ex-husband, The Narrator realizes that men's only aim is that they control women. She is also upset by the fact that women should bear the consequences of



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marriage and sex like pregnancy, saying: "It was my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator."⁷ Her affair with her ex-husband causes her trauma when the latter obliges her to abort her baby as he is already married, and has children. When aborting her child, the Narrator feels guilty, expressing that: "whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been, one, I didn't allow it" (*Surf*, 137). The Narrator is victimized by her ex-husband to the extent that she cannot protect her child. When aborting her child, she sacrifices her natural inclination of giving birth to her child. She is dissatisfied with the idea of bringing a child in such a violent society. In return, he doesn't feel guilty as he doesn't consider her feelings as true ones.

As women exploited by men for their physical appearance, the Narrator proves her dissatisfaction of this social habit, asserting: "I would like to back out the door, I don't want them staring at me from behind; but I force myself to walk slowly frontwards" (*Surf*, 29). So, women are considered as objects in the hands of men. As a result, women are frustrated and depressed as they are treated as consumable objects. They are penetrated by the look of men. This leads women look beautiful to be accepted and admired by men. Such kinds of women are represented by the character of Anna who expresses her fear of seeing her without make up by her husband. She says: "He doesn't like to see me without it...He doesn't know I wear it" (*Surf*, 52).

After her failure in marriage and abortion, the Narrator begins thinking of her parents, blaming them as they leave her without caring.



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She expresses her need to a re-birth journey, returning back to her home of childhood in the town. In this respect, Hilary Trapani mentions that:

Surfacing narrates the protagonist's search for her father, last seen at her childhood home on a remote island in the borderland between America and Canada. It is a narrative that combines elements of fairy tale, quest narrative and detective story together with an awareness of the limitations of any form of representation, including language, to capture a state referent.⁸

When setting the journey with her companions, Joe, her boyfriend, and the married couple, David and Anna, the Narrator discovers about her father's death. At this time, she cries to express her traumatic feelings. She is also angry with her parents as she expects that they are responsible for their death. In her opinion, her parents have to stay alive and not to leave her. They have to look after her. So, a desire of encounter starts in her. She wants to encounter her parents who are god-like creatures. She believes that they leave hints that she has to trace, saying: "I'll have to listen carefully, if I trust them they will tell me what is allowed" (*Surf*, 170). When going back to her childhood island, the Narrator expresses her regret for not having a map, saying: "Now we're on my home ground foreign territory. My throat constricts as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing" (*Surf*, 4). Moreover, she is nearly lost in the town, mentioning: "Now I'm in the village, walking through it, waiting for the nostalgia to



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hit, for cluster of nondescript buildings to be irradiated with inner light like a plug-in creche, as it has been so often in memory, but nothing happens" (*Surf*, 8).

At her childhood home, the Narrator feels that everything is changed and cannot feel the place as she feels in the past, saying: "Nothing is the same, I don't know the way any more" (*Surf*, 5). Besides, Sutapa Roy describes the Narrator as she: "is introspective and contemplative about her feeling that leads her to examine her feeling of non-belongness."⁹ The Narrator starts a journey to search for her father. She wants to understand herself by finding out the personality of her father. She is angry with her missing father for leaving her alone in her life, saying: "All at once I am furious with him for vanishing like this, unresolved, leaving me with no answers to give them when they ask. If he was going to die he should have done it visibly, out in the open, so they could mark him with a stone and get it over with" (*Surf*, 38). Anyhow, she gradually finds out that: "it was no longer his death but my own that concerned me" (*Surf*, 76). Sometimes, she justifies her father's situation.

The Narrator dislikes violence towards nature. When watching the Americans who come to the lake for fishing, she disagrees with their harmful acts which hurt nature, expressing: "I couldn't any more, I had no right to. We didn't need it our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they call it these were no longer the right reasons" (*Surf*, 86). She describes her association with nature as:



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Slowly I retrace the trail. Something has happened to my eyes, my feet are released they alternate, several inches from the ground. I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly, the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark. (*Surf*, 131).

The relationship between the Narrator and her mother is so cool that she is indifferent to her dying state in hospital, stating that:

She [the mother] may not have known who I was: she didn't ask me why I left or where I'd been, though she might not have asked any way, feeling as she always had that personal questions were rude. "I'm not going to your funeral", I said. I had to lean close to her, the hearing in one of her ears was gone. I wanted her to understand in advance, and approve. "I never enjoyed them". She said to me (*Surf*, 11).

Then, the Narrator adds admitting that: "We came to have faith in her ability to recover from anything; we ceased to take her illnesses seriously, they were only natural phases, like cocoons. When she died, I was disappointed in her" (*Surf*, 21). Hence, there is no warmth between the Narrator and her parents to the extent that she cannot tell them what happens to her concerning divorce and abortion. She also describes her parents as: " They were from another age, prehistoric, when everyone got



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married and had a family, children growing in the yard like sunflowers; remote as Eskimoes or mastodons (*Surf*, 104). Yet, she thinks that she has to accept reality and she: "also feels that she has to confront the events of her childhood, in order to feel whole again."¹⁰

In order to find and encounter her parents, the Narrator should be alienated from her companions. She is satisfied that she should associate herself with nature and be less human. She distrusts all physical objects and tries to free herself by going out in nature as it is the only source of comfort. She also tries to know more about her parents. However, the Narrator has no any token left by her mother. In her mother's notebook, the Narrator finds notes concerning weather only, saying: "All she put in it was a record of the weather and the work done on that day: no reflections, no emotions" (*Surf*, 12). The Narrator describes her mother as she is so close to nature, saying: "Standing beside the tray for the birds, her [mother's] hand stretched out; the jays were there too, she's training them, one is on her shoulder, peering at her with clever thumbtack eyes, another is landing on her wrist, wings caught as a blur" (*Surf*, 76).

The internal pain that the Narrator endures is a "state of amnesia in which she has suppressed the facts of her own life story."¹¹ One of the facts that leads her to lose her sanity, is her ex-husband's order of having an abortion. After the abortion, the Narrator wishes death as she feels guilty, saying:



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I have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget (*Surf*, 31).

David Staines states that the Narrator: "wishes to be not human, because being human inevitably involves being guilty, and if you define yourself as innocent, you can't accept that."¹² Besides, the difficulties that the Narrator witnessed in her life makes her suspicious and unable to trust people. She is asked to marry Joe but she refuses, explaining that she has no desire to do the same previous experience again, saying: " It was true, but the words were coming out of me like the mechanical words from a talking doll, the kind with the pull tape at the back; the whole speech was unwinding everything in order a spool" (*Surf*, 60).

The problems in the Narrator's life make her numb. She has no feelings towards her boyfriend, Joe. She sees him as a physical object rather than an emotional human being. The Narrator decides to return to her relationship with Joe just to examine him during her stay on the island. She compares Joe to her ex-husband, stating: "He's good in bed, better than the one before, he's moody but he's not much bother, we split the rent and he doesn't talk much, that's an advantage" (*Surf*, 26). So, she has fear of oppression made by men.

When becoming close to nature, the Narrator feels that her life is completely changed, mentioning:



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Through the trees the sun glances; the swamp around me smoulders, energy of decay turning to growth, green fire. I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply (*Surf*, 121).

Through nature, she can understand her true self. In this respect, Irena Dudova explains that:

As the narrator wanders the field, she travels in time and finds out that the more time she spends in nature, the more she becomes aware of her identity as a descendent of previous generations, as part of a natural world and last but not least, as a woman.¹³

The Narrator alienates herself from people and society around or from civilization to go through nature. She describes her alienation from society as: "Everything from history must be eliminated" (*Surf*, 128). When arriving the lake of her childhood, the Narrator claims that the violent events happen to her, let her return back to her childhood landscape, saying: "As though the first view of the lake, which we can see now, blue and cool as redemption, should be through tears and a haze of vomit" (*Surf*, 7). The act of washing herself in the lake refers to her willing of purification. She wishes to purify herself from the disturbances



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of life and society, saying: "When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface" (*Surf*, 172).

When diving into the water, the Narrator meditates and observes her father's drawings that renew her. According to Branko Gorjup, the Narrator organizes: "a metaphorical journey back into time and into primordial landscape."¹⁴ She changes her lifestyle and seems to be an animal. She eats what she finds in wilderness just like animals. Her wish is to be part of nature, expressing: "I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. /.../ I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (*Surf*, 175). She also suggests that there is no need to use human language, stating: "why talk when you are a word" (*Surf*, 175). During her association with nature, the Narrator finds herself strong enough to return back to human world. She can also connect between herself and the society.

The Narrator expresses her communication with the gods of nature, stating: "These gods, here on the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten, were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed; and freely" (*Surf*, 104). She also adds that she: "didn't know the names of the ones I was making the offering to; but they were there, they had power" (*Surf*, 105). In addition to that, David Staines argues that her alienation is a profit, mentioning: "At the end of surfacing, the woman returns to the surface haven shaken off past encumbrances and willing now to begin anew."¹⁵ The Narrator hopes that she is reborn again and has a brighter future. To regain her society, people, and Joe, means that



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her alienation on the island teaches her a lesson of returning back enlightened.

The Narrator's comfortable shelter is in nature where she is away from human society. When meeting her mother's figure feeding birds, the Narrator feels so frightful that the figure senses and disappears, mentioning: "I squint up at them, trying to see her, trying to see which one she is" (*Surf*, 176). She thinks that the spirit of her mother turns into a bird. On the following day, the Narrator encounters her father's figure comparing him to a wolf, yet the figure is not terrible. Then she believes that his figure is associated with nature, saying: "the thing you meet when you've stayed here too long alone" (*Surf*, 180-81). Therefore, she becomes satisfied with the idea that they are caring parents that they do the best to support their children with safety. She also comes to the fact that her parents are good and strong enough to adapt themselves to such natural conditions. Besides, the communication with her parents' spirits urges her to overcome her alienation. She expresses that: "I was a coward, I would not let them into my age, my place. Now I must enter theirs." (*Surf*, 171).

The Narrator realizes eventually that she has to return back to the city to survive as she cannot be alone on the island. She also realizes that her alienation from the society is not a solution, and it leads to an inevitable death for her. When putting off her blanket and putting on her clothes, she regains her humanity and true identity. She accepts the idea of living again in the city, saying: "I re-enter my own time" (*Surf*, 185). In this way, she can please her parents who raise and protect her well.



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Moreover, when accepting the idea of going back to the city, the Narrator is worried about her relationship with Joe.

She still distrusts Joe that if he provides her with freedom or captivity. She thinks of whether she joins Joe or not, expressing that she refuses to be a victim but she should re-join the outer world, saying: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that, I can do nothing. I have recent, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone" (*Surf*, 150). However, she seems to have confidence in him as saying: "I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet" (*Surf*, 186). Besides, she understands that if she can give birth to a child from Joe, she has to protect it as her parents protect her, saying: "if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me. /.../ it must be born, allowed" (*Surf*, 185). So, she accepts the child as a strength not a weakness. She has to accept what happens to her in the past and eagerly wait for the future.

As much as the Narrator's transformation is concerned, the title itself refers to her rebirth and change from one stage into another positively. She is transformed from being victimized into being free woman from the social constructions.

Conclusion

Surfacing deals with the journey of the Narrator from the city to her childhood home in the town in the company of her boyfriend, Joe and the married couple, David and Anna. The Narrator has to set up the



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journey to get rid of the social disturbances like marriage, oppression, abortion and divorce. She wishes to repress her hurtful experiences as she is considered dead in life. After the trauma of her abortion, her life becomes hard and complex. So, a desire of alienation captures her. On her journey to the town, the Narrator becomes in real need for alienation in spite of the favour of the company for her. She feels that she has nothing to do with human beings.

By getting close to her past memories and nature, the Narrator gets enough courage to renew herself. Nature is a good source of inspiration. Moreover, the spirits of her parents enable her to recover from her inner psyche. She becomes mature, wise, and enlightened. Alienation empowers her to face the challenges of life. However, she understands that this life is not completely good or bad, but it has the two sides of good and evil. She also realizes that it is impossible to withdraw herself from the society, so she decides to re-join the city as a strong woman who cannot be exploited by men. Throughout her alienation, she is taught that instead of being a victim, she becomes a victor as she emerges from the damages of society and its people. The Narrator fights against the social powers that imposed upon her. Finally, she gets confidence in herself as well as freedom.

Notes

¹ M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, *A glossary of literary terms*, (United States: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), 6.

² Quoted in María Victoria Sánchez, "Rites of passage from a gender perspective in *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood," Bachelor's thesis



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<https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Mar%C3%ADa+Victoria+S%C3%A1nchez%2C+%22Rites+of+pass> (accessed November 5, 2020).

³ Quoted in Ibid.

⁴ Quoted in Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in Helena Viies, "The protagonist's quest for transformation in Margaret Atwood's "Surfacing", PhD diss., Tartu Ülikool, 2018<https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=THE+PROTAGONIST%E2%80%99S+QUEST+FOR+TRANSFORMATION+> (accessed November 2, 2020).

⁶ Quoted in Katie M. Moss, "Margaret Atwood's Divided Self," (An Unpublished M.A. Thesis: University of Vermont, 2011), 37.

⁷ Quoted in Margaret Atwood, "Surfacing," (United States: Random House, Inc., 1998), 22. All the subsequent quotations references to the novel are taken from this edition, with the abbreviation (*Surf*) and the page number (s).

⁸ Quoted in Hilary Jane Trapani, "Violence Postcoloniality and (Re)Placing Subject: A Study of the Novels of Margaret Atwood," (An Unpublished M.A. Dissertation: University of Hong Kong, 1994), 14-15.

⁹ Quoted in Sutapa Roy, "Home Ground-Foreign Territory: Study of Non- Belongingness in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing and Amitav Ghosh's The Shadow line," The Golden line, Vol.1, No.1, 2015, 69.

¹⁰ Quoted in Gonul Bakay, "Examining Female Madness in Atwood's Surfacing Madness or Awakening," Proceeding of the 6th Global Conference, (United Kingdom: Oxford, 2013), 3.

¹¹ Quoted in Harold Bloom, ed., "Bloom's Modern Critical View: Margaret Atwood," New ed. (New York: Yale University, 2009), 161.



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¹² Quoted in Coral Ann Howells, ed., "The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood," (USA: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 18.

¹³ Quoted in Irena Dudova, "You Wanted to Know Where You Were and Who I Was: Searching for Identity in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Sharon Butala's *Wild Stone Heart: An Apprentice in the Fields*," (An Unpublished Bachelor's Diploma Thesis: Masaryk University, 2010), 4.

¹⁴ Quoted in Howells, 139.

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