

Women's Alienation in Margaret Atwood Book "Surfacing"

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Abstract: The present study attempts to analyse the theme of woman's alienation in Margaret Atwood's novel "surfacing". In her novel, Margaret sheds light on the alienation that woman and particularly the narrator lives in patriarchal society. The unnamed narrator who is a talented and an artist woman turns back to Canada to search for her father, so she begins to feel like an isolated and alienated person. Because of her father disappearance and her mother detachment the narrator feels like an abandoned child who doesn't have parents also when we read the book we find that there are a number of factors that contribute to the narrator's alienation including her memories and bad experiences, losing her child due to abortion and lacking trust in her closet friends. In fact, being alienated has a negative impact on the narrator's personality because it will lead her to move away from society, to become introvert and more than that it will lead her to madness acting like an animal living in the forest. In surfacing, the unnamed narrator understands the patriarchal factors behind her alienation and, therefore, she decides to resist them.

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is an internationally famous Canadian, postmodern and feminist writer specialized in women's literature, she has actively engaged in the Canadian feminist movement, she writes many novels including "the Robber Bride", "the Cat's eye", "Alias Grace", "Life before man", the Handmaid's Tale", "the edible woman". In most of her works, Margaret Atwood tries to shed light on feminist and gender issues. She also tends to discover the conflict between women and their struggle to realize and to confirm their real identity in a society which is mainly patriarchal. Surfacing is the second novel of Margaret Atwood it was published in 1972 three years after her first novel "the edible woman". Surfacing narrates the story of unnamed narrator who turns to Canada to find her missing father, accompanied by a couple that she recently knows and her boyfriend Joe. In her family house the unnamed protagonist remembers her past and she recalls feelings and events, she tries to find clues that can help her to find her father but without vain, being alienated and being disconnected affect the narrator's mind so immensely leading her to wildness and madness. This paper tries to demonstrate the factors that lie behind the narrator's feeling of alienation at different levels; Personal level, psychological level and the social level. And also it tries to determine the ways that the unnamed narrator adopts to resist alienation.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Surfacing is one of the major novel written by Margaret Atwood including different themes such as the domination of

men over women, power relationships, female/male relationships, and alienation is one of the most important themes in Margaret Atwood's novel "surfacing". Jackson defines alienation as "a long term process of self – disillusionment, starting in infancy, can produce the basic feeling of negative essence and alienness from others." (Jackson 270). In sociology, alienation may be defined as a feeling of loneliness, a separation, a dissociation and disconnection from others, from her family, her society and also from herself, it closely related to the state of being isolated ("Chapter 1 female alienation" 13). in her article *Alienation, Isolation and Re-establishment of Identity in British Modernist*, Marcek describes alienation as an umbrella which contains powerlessness, senselessness, pointlessness, lawlessness, social isolation and cultural and self-estrangement (Marcek 8). In fact, there are three types of alienation: The individual's alienation from herself or himself, individual's alienation from society, and lastly individual alienation from God. (Daronkolace et al. 202). The individual's alienation from herself can be defined as an individual's feeling and belief that he or she is somehow inferior or abnormal when compared to others. Individual's alienation from society refers to an individual's disillusionment; he or she secretly feels and cognizes himself or herself not to be one of the others, he or she feels and believes himself or herself to be contradistinctive, or negatively different and separate from them, the individual exclude himself or herself from others, does not identify himself or herself with others, he or she does not consider himself or herself as a part of or a full member of society (Jackson 24). Last but not least individual's alienation from God which means that the individual made himself or herself strangers to God because of his or her sin.

III. ANALYSIS SECTION

The personal level:

At the personal level, the narrator's alienation can be explained by three major factors which are her memories in the island, her violation of the moral values of her parents, and lack of sense of true identity and selfhood all of these factors affect the narrator's persona and lead her to madness.

The narrator's memories in the island:

Memories play a dominant role in making the narrator feels alienated. When the narrator returns to the remote island to search for her father, her past memories try to surface in her mind, they crowd her mind, and they drive her

into space which is isolated and alienated from other people especially the three-persons who accompanied her to this island. These memories force her to be unconscious of people surrounding her and to live behind the superficial world. The unnamed narrator finds herself immersed in her past memories, the memories of her mother's sickness, the death of her brother and the bad experience that she lived with the person who she calls my husband. All these painful memories and bad experiences disturb the narrator's mind and troubled her leading to odd behaviours and madness. Actually the narrator starts behaving as an animal in the forest, she prefers to keep silence rather than to talk, she says **"the animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word"** (Atwood 195). These memories built a wall around the narrator personality and alienated her from other people. As the remote island is isolated, the narrator feels isolated within herself, living within herself and lacking contact with other people.

The narrator's violation of the moral values of her parent:

Violating the moral values of her parent also plays a significant role in making the narrator feels alienated and separated from them. Through her relationship with a man who has already married and having an abortion, the narrator feels that she betrays her parent's truth on her, she says **"leaving my child, that was the unpardonable sin; ...and I didn't have any excuse, I was never good at them"**(Atwood 31). For the narrator her abortion is a sin that destroys her and leads her to lose her purity and innocence which considered as the moral code for her parents, the narrator feels guilty about not being good enough to her parent and that what explains her long absence, **"the narrator distance herself from her parents for nine long years"** (Esther Margaret and Ravindran 45), she chooses to settle in the city far from them which resulted in her alienation. Having an extramarital sexual relation with a man who is already married is something the narrator thinks that it contradicts the morals and principles that her parent taught her, for this reason she believes that they will not forgive her, she states **"they never forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce; I don't think they even understood the marriage which wasn't surprising since I didn't understand it myself"** (Atwood 31).

The narrator's lack of sense of true identity and selfhood:

Lack of sense of true identity is another factor that lies behind the narrator's feeling of alienation. Lack of identity makes the narrator not only feel alienated and separated from people with whom she feels very close and intimate, but it also makes her alienated from herself. From the beginning till the end of the novel the narrator seems nameless, she 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"** (Atwood 181). All the characters in this novel have names like David, Anna, Joe also minor characters like Paul, but the narrator remains nameless which explain her

lack of sense of selfhood and true identity. The narrator becomes unconscious of the other, intimacy and sense of belonging become meaningless for her, she even finds herself marginalized and isolated, After living in the nature for a while the narrator realises that being detached from people will not help her to discover her real identity. Thus, she decides to turn to society, to reclaim her real identity and to integrate with people. In doing so Margaret Atwood turns the unnamed narrator's story into a universal theme that covers all women around the world (Hill Rigney 100).

The psychological level:

As we have mentioned before, the narrator's memories, her lack of sense of identity and the violation of her parent's moral values make the protagonist powerless and alienated. Therefore, these factors will not only affect her personal life but it will also affect her psychological situation.

At the psychological level, there are some factors that contribute to the alienation of the narrator and affect her psyche which are the betrayal of her x-lover, her abortion and failing to trust the other.

The betrayal of the narrator's x-lover:

The betrayal of her formal lover is one of the most contributing factors that make the narrator feels alienated and suffers psychologically. She states **"he said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again"**(Atwood 30). The narrator loses her trust in the man whom she loves because he betrays her, and forces her to get rid of her baby, he even has already a family which makes him appear as a selfish person

it was my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use, I couldn't prove it through he was clever: he kept saying he loved me (Atwood 37).

When the narrator has an abortion the professor does not stay with her in the hospital, because his real child has a birthday party, **"he wasn't there with me, I couldn't remember why; he should have been since it was his idea, his fault. But he brought his car to collect me afterwards; I didn't have to take a taxi"** (Atwood 86). Since the beginning, it seems that the narrator doesn't have a good relationship with her former lover, she claims that **"it was good at the beginning but he changed after"**(Atwood 43). The professor considers the narrator as a sexual object which will turn to it whenever he likes, the only thing that he wants from her is to enjoy and to satisfy his sexual pleasure, **"he wanted to be pleased we should have kept sleeping together and left it at that"**(Atwood 44). He forces her to kill the baby because he doesn't want anything that can destroy his family or his career. Thus, he obliges the narrator to commit "a betrayal against life" (Alban 190)

The narrator's abortion:

The narrator's exposure to abortion also affects her psychological state and makes her feel alienated. This abortion hurts her and makes her suffer a lot; even she tries to convince herself that she experiences divorce no abortion that's why she uses the word divorce instead of abortion " **they must have mentioned it to Paul; that, but not the divorce**" (Atwood 25). The narrator prefers to think that she gets divorced because divorce doesn't mean killing a baby, a foetus which is considered as a shame and as sin " **leaving my child, that was the unpardonable sin**" (Atwood 31). When her former lover talks about the divorce he considers it as a simple and legal thing, so that she can do it without withdrawal. Undoubtedly, abortion is not an easy thing for a sensitive woman like the protagonist, the narrator finds herself alone and no one tries to stand in her side to support her " **they take the baby out with red plastic, I saw it running down through the tube**" (Atwood 85-86). When the narrator has an abortion, she doesn't feel anything, there is no physical pain but the psychological pain is unpleasant and unbearable. The loss of her baby makes her psychologically traumatized (American Psychiatric Association) and deeply alienated to the point she feels that she is the only creature on the earth.

The narrator's failure to trust the other:

Her lack of confidence in others contributes to the narrator alienation at the psychological level. The narrator feels that the other tries to hurt her, they plan something against her and this is what the American Psychiatric Association referred to it by paranoia. In their article " **Paranoid Personality Disorder**" Katie Lewis and Jeremy Ridenour states that " Individuals with this disorder tend to carry pervasive feelings of mistrust towards others, to perceive others and their environment as being dangerous regardless of

evidence of threat, and to hold grudges or act in a vindictive manner towards others in response to perceived attacks or slights" (Lewis and Ridenour 1). The narrator suspects that the others want to kill her, she is confused and worried about her father all the time, she also doubts everything said to her, when David for instance tells her that they have found her father's body in the lake, she is unresponsive thinking that he and Anna are making it up to get back at her for the sexual incident with David. Later when she was in the island alone, she sees the hunters and she thinks that they want to kill her, the protagonist cannot trust anyone even her lover Joe who comes to the island to look for her; she thinks that " **he may have been sent as a trick**" (Atwood 207).

The social level:

At the social level, the unnamed narrator alienation can be manifested through the social pressure, constant movement of the narrator's father, fear of failure in Relationships, lack of proficiency in the French language, and lack of trust in close friends.

The constant movement of the narrator's father:

The father of the narrator's constant movement from one place to another because of his work when she was a child is one of the reasons that contribute to the narrator's feeling of alienation. This lack of stability deprives the narrator of having a strong relationship with others especially other children in school. Each time the narrator goes to a new school and since she is a new student, she encounters maltreatment from other children; they try to disturb her and torture her. Therefore, in order not to get disturbed by other children, the narrator begs God to be invisible because " **being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded, it arouses in others disgust and pity and the desire to torment and reform**" (Atwood 49). However, when the narrator fails, she realizes that people " **have the wrong God**" (Atwood 49).

Social pressure:

Social pressure is another factor that contributes to the narrator's alienation. This social pressure starts in her early childhood, and it was imposed on her by her parent mainly her mother, and consequently, it shaped her into a certain gender role, this is what Judith butler called performativity in gender roles, she states " **gender is not a way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceeded; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts**" (Butler 519). Throughout the course of the novel the narrator is always doing house chores like Washing dishes, dries the plates, weeds the garden, leans the cabin, and weeps the floors. The narrator learns to do so from her mother who was occupied by household tasks while her father was occupied by outside tasks. The narrator states that gender roles are learned behaviours from childhood, according to her during childhood " **the brain is neutral ...what to feel was lie what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it**" (Atwood 79). Indeed this social pressure leads the narrator into a total withdrawal from what surrounds her and keeps her alienated from society.

The narrator's fear of failure in Relationships:

Fear of failure in establishing a perfect and strong relationship with people is another cause that lies behind the narrator's feeling of alienation. In her relationships with other people, it seems that the narrator lacks commitment and emotional involvement in her relationships with other people. Although her friends accompany her as a favour, the narrator wishes to be away from them, " **I wanted to keep busy, preserve at least the signs of order, conceal my fear, both from others and from him. Fear has a smell, as love does**" (Atwood 83). During their stay in the remote island, the narrator tries to occupy herself with works so as not to talk or to stay with Joe, Anna, David, the narrator always cook, washes the dishes, weeds the garden, cleans the cabin so that to avoid interaction with them. Lack of commitment in her relationship with other people makes her appear as passive

and as a victim letting other people deciding and planning her life (**“Chapter Three: The Narrator’s Spiritual Journey ” 171**), the narrator’s relationship with her x-lover doesn’t seem as power balance between men and women but it’s unbalanced relationship; one has more power and dominance over the other, the narrator seems as a colonized by her x-lover and this is what leads their relationship to fail . Because of the painful experience that she lived with her husband, the narrator becomes afraid of people, she even doesn’t trust them.

The narrator’s lack of proficiency in the French language:

Language also plays a huge role in making the narrator feels socially alienated especially in a county like Canada where people tend to speak French not English language, when she was at the store to get some food, the narrator feels embarrassed speaking French to them simply because her high school French makes her accent sound like a tourist, the narrator wishes not to be an American

I hesitate: maybe the traditions have changed, maybe, they no longer speak English . “Avez- vous du viande haché ?” I asked her, blushing because of my accent. She grins then and the two men grin also, not at me but at each other. I see I have made a mistake, I should have pretended to be an American (Atwood 28-27).

The language barrier created a major separation between the narrator and the residents, when you know a language, you can speak it and be understood by others who speak that language. Hence, Language plays an important role in building relationships with others, even the narrator speaks French but dialectical differences can create misunderstanding, for her she agrees that” **if you live in a place you should speak the language” (Atwood 28).**

The narrator’s lack of trust in close friends:

Lack of trust in close friends also contributes to making the narrator feels alienated socially. Although Joe is the boyfriend of the narrator, she doesn’t accept to share a life with him, she thinks that Joe is not a trustworthy person. When he suggests to marry her, she refuses and even he says that living together will never make any difference, she says “no” and she tells him that she has married before and has a child but it doesn’t work “ **I’ve been married before and it didn’t work out, I had a baby too, my ace, voice patient. I don’t want to go through that again, it was true, but the words were coming out of me like the mechanicals words from a talking doll” (Atwood 93-94).** Later despite her rejection of him at first, the narrator feels that she can live with him, so she decides to make love with him to regain the life she lost after the abortion, she wants to make her aborted child surface once again within her “**forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been poisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent” (Atwood 173).** Despite the alienation that she has experienced at the personal, psychological and social level the narrator decided to regain

her power and not to be a victim of alienation any more as Bertha in Charlotte Bronte, “Jane Eyre” who is a beautiful West Indies lady who married to Mr Rochester by keeping his life dark, Bartha behaves as the wild animal, she sets fire to Jane’s old bed then she burns herself and everything she touches (**Bronte 254**). On the contrary, the narrator decides to turn to the city to start a new life.

Narrator’s resistance of alienation:

Life on the island helps the narrator to take decision concerning her life and it helps her to resist and to fight her alienation. Having a baby in her womb looking for a male companion, and getting rid of her past memories are the ways that the narrator adopts to make herself powerful and able to overcome her alienation. The first thing that the narrator thinks about is to get pregnant again by having sex with Joe, she is sure that if she gets pregnant, she will give life to this unborn baby that she lost because of her abortion , she insists to protect her second foetus and she realises that she needs to survive and to turn to her natural state . The narrator promises herself to give birth to a child so as to free herself from the guilt of the past, through pregnancy she wants to rediscover herself and to give another meaning to her life.

Looking for a male companion and a trusted lover also is a another way that the narrator uses to resist alienation, the narrator starts to accept Joe as someone she can trust, Joe comes back to the island to look for her, which shows that Joe loves the narrator and doesn’t want to give up and to leave her alone on the island. When the narrator shows Joe and Paul in the boat arriving at the island and calling her name “ **he calls my name, then pauses, are you here? Echo: here, here? I watch him, my love for him useless as a third eye or a possibility ” (Atwood 207),** she realizes that she can trust him “ **he is only half-formed, and for that reason I can trust him” (Atwood 207),** she can live with him all her life and she can build a family with him. The narrator recognizes that Joe wants to marry her because he loves her not because he wants to conquer and to control her as her previous lover did with her in the past. Indeed, at the end of the novel the narrator becomes less alienated and suspicious of the other and more emotional (**Malathy 69**).

Getting rid of past memories also plays a significant role to enable the narrator to resist alienation. The flashbacks of her childhood and the trauma of her abortion affect her and make her feel more alienated and traumatized. To resist alienation the narrator decides to destroy and to burn everything that reminds her of the past “**everything from the history must be eliminated” (Atwood 189-190),** such as the scrapbooks, the albums; the compromised illustrations, the photos, even the fake wedding ring. Now she realises that the past will not help her by anything, she discovers that the past just contributes to increasing her sadness and depression, the past will never turn back or support her, the narrator surfaces and forces herself to forget anything that has a relationship with the past. In this way the narrator find a new way to relate

herself to the world, she stops behaving like a victim and she realizes that keeping invisible and withdrawing from society will never Support her, but it will just make her feel painful and more alienated.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through the course of the novel, we have seen that there are a lot of factors that contribute and increase the narrator's alienation, psychological trauma, and even behaving like a wild animal these factors such as the memories of her childhood, Lack of sense of true identity, the trauma of her abortion, the betrayal of her X-lover, Fear of failure in establishing a strong relationship with people, all these factors influence the narrator's persona leading her to madness. Going back to her home to search for her father makes her remember everything that she has gone through in her life which makes her feel more alienated. However, her decision to stay in the northern Quebec Island alone and her connection with nature raises her consciousness and awareness of herself, of her identity as a human being. The narrator realizes that harmony with the world is the best treatment for her alienation and this is the greatness of the novel, the narrator gives up believing that she is powerless and she decides to turn back to the city to start a new life with Joe. In new woman in Atwood's surfacing **Dr G.J Sathia Seelan** describes the journey of the narrator in "surfacing" as **" a journey from death to life and he said that the narrator" grows from ignorance to knowledge and illusion to reality. It is the predicament of a modern young woman who struggles for her rightful place in society"**(qtd. In Balachander 83).

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