

Self-Realization Through Physical as well as Psychological Journey In reference to Atwood's 'Surfacing'

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Received Date 18/12/22, Revised Date 17/02/23, Accepted Date 20/02/23, Published Date 21/02/23

Abstract:

In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, the nameless narrator undergoes a painful journey and process of shedding the false skin she had acquired in the city in order to obtain a psychic cleansing towards an authentic self. It is a worldview in which supremacy is seen to be a key axis of organization, the enactment of which is openly embodied within the organizing principles of Western culture. The patriarchal system is based on racism, sexism, class exploitation, and ecological destruction that does not allow psychological freedom to women. Throughout the novel, the narrator constantly struggles to get mental peace and strives to survive in the male-dominated society; she feels psychologically sick and devoid of emotions and yearns to speak and listen to a language that does not smell of masculinity only. She has to go through a psychological journey where "death and rebirth" are achieved. The journey is like the voyage of an epic hero who sails to the underworld of the inner psychic. At the end of her journey, she reaches self-knowledge and wholeness, where the self is no longer spilled.

Keywords: psychic cleansing, psychological, struggles, masculinity, dominated, spiritual, exploitation, patriarchal.

Not all journeys are delightful undertakings. In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, the nameless narrator undergoes a painful journey and process of shedding the false skin she had acquired in the city in order to obtain a psychic cleansing towards an authentic self. For the sake of self-realization, she succeeded in recognizing the superficial qualities of her friends, uncovering the meaning of love, and rediscovering her childhood; the narrator was prepared for change. She was ready to take the plunge and resurface in her true form.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, a novelist, poetess, literary critic, short-story author, and author of children's books, is a prominent figure in contemporary Canadian literature. Born in 1939 in Ontario, Atwood is a writer with a worldwide reputation. Internationally acclaimed as a novelist, poet, and short-story author, she has emerged as a most important figure in Canadian letters. Using such devices as irony, self-consciousness, and symbolism narrations, she explores the relationship between nature and humanity, the dark side of human behavior, and power as it pertains to gender and politics. Popular with both literary scholars and the reading public, Margaret Atwood has helped to outline and establish the goals of the latest Canadian literature and has earned a distinguished name among feminist writers for her exploration of women's problems.

The most distinguished plan running through the thoughts of all activists is the linkage between the women's psychic transformation and their oppression. This is the fundamental argument that stems from the idea that there is a link between the repression of women and the oppression of nature. It is a worldview in which supremacy is seen to be a key axis of organization, the enactment of which is openly embodied within the organizing principles of Western culture. In fact, it is fascinating to note how the prominent writers are so vocal about spelling out a number of items to be enlisted on the feminist

schema, such as equal rights, quality of work, child care, reproductive choice, and domestic violence, and then interconnecting it to the women's mental sentiments. This sentiment is echoed by the following assertion of Val Plumwood, "Ecological feminism is essentially a reaction to a set of big problems thrown up by the two great social currents of the latter part of the last century, feminism and the environmental movement." (Plumwood 92)

In this first-wave response, women should deny any 'female' characteristics and be more male-like. This view is illustrated by the following quote by Mary Wollstonecraft:

"What does man's pre-eminence over the brute creation consist of? The answer is as clear as that a half is less than a whole in Reason. For what purpose were the passions implanted? That man, by straggling with them, might attain a degree of knowledge denied to brutes. Consequently, the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness must be estimated by the degree of Reason, virtue, and humanity that distinguish the individual, and that from the exercise of Reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow." (Wollstonecraft, 179)

Second-wave feminism moves away from the stance that women are capable of being 'just like men' and argues, instead, that there do exist actual, more than socially constructed, differences between the two genders. However, the dualism inherent in patriarchy is adhered to, as this form of feminism contends that women should assume the dominant role, with maleness in the inferior position. Pursuant of this approach, the claim that it is time for female ways of being, which include their journey psychologically, emotionality including a greater connection with nature, qualities of nurturance and caring, assuming the dominant position culturally. Slogans such as 'The Future is Female' depict this kind of view.

The second wave of feminism and the green movement emerged at the same time, which threw light on women's psychological transformation as a big sign towards their independence. The meltdown at Three Mile Island prompted a large number of women in the USA to come together in the first ecofeminist conference - 'Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Ecofeminism in the Eighties' in March 1980, at Amherst. At this conference, the connections between feminism and militarization, therapeutic and ecology were explored. Drawing awareness to the modern ecological crisis compounded by overpopulation, consumption, and pollution along with the age-old patriarchal oppression of women, Eaubonne called on feminists to wed their cause to

that of the environment and break new ground into a post-patriarchal, genuinely humanist, and ecologically sustainable future.

The patriarchal system is based on racism, sexism, class exploitation, and ecological destruction that does not allow psychological freedom to women. The unhealthy patriarchal social system tends to be rigid and closed. Roles and rules are non-negotiable and determined by those at the top of the hierarchy. High value is placed on control and the exaggerated concept of rationality, even though, paradoxically, 'the system can only survive on irrational ideologies.' Militarism and welfare are constant features of a patriarchal society as they reflect and influence the patriarchal values of control and competition. The elite exercise 'illegitimate, inappropriate and inequitable power' over the subordinate groups leaving them with limited access to achieve self-determined ends and meet their basic needs. It results in overriding the concerns of the 'groups of women, children, people of color, poor people, non-human animals, and nature,' leading to racism, sexism, class exploitation, and ecological destruction as important and deadly. As mentioned earlier, patriarchy is not only an individual way of thinking, speaking, and behaving. Rather it is a closed circle of institutional setup rooted in a patriarchal conceptual framework with an erroneous belief system that oppresses women's psyche. These patriarchal concepts lead to impaired thinking and language of domination—sexist and naturist, which further leads to behaviors of domination, control, exploitation, violence, rape, and murder, making life unmanageable for marginalized groups. Ecofeminism blends feminist, anti-racist, and environmental movements focusing on all forms of oppression based on the dualistic construction of the powerful and the powerless. It offers numerous ways of exposing and ending domination in society, describing ways in which it can reach its potentialities. Ecofeminism draws on feminism, ecology, environmentalism, and philosophy to analyze the systems of unjustified domination. As feminism, it provides sex/gender analysis as the starting point for critiquing 'isms of domination.'

Atwood's preoccupation with examining the impact of gender politics on women's psychology remains constant, as does her concern with deconstructing the processes of the feminine search for a distinctive female identity in her second novel, *Surfacing*. Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing*, can be called a precious gem in the genre of ecofeminist literature. It can be seen as a "feminist/ecological treatise," which exposes the existing dualism in the phallogocentric society. George Woodcock observes,

"After the publication of *Surfacing*, an ecological direction began to emerge in comments on her writing, recognizing her concern over the discordance between modern materially oriented civilization and the natural world.

Surfacing, by Margaret Atwood, is a dense, multilayered narrative. It has been called a companion novel to Atwood's collection of poems, *Power Politics*. The novel garnered the most critical attention and has become a feminist classic. Published in the same year as her study of Canadian literature, *Survival*, *Surfacing* also investigates what Atwood calls 'the great Canadian victim complex.' The novel merges Atwood's celebrated nationalism with her insights into heterosexual politics, and with this novel, she contributes to the ongoing social debate on such issues as gender conflict, ecological catastrophe, and American cultural imperialism.

Surfacing, Atwood's earliest work of fiction is probed into the matter of the artistic death of women and abortion. It was published in 1972 when the legal sanction for abortion was still debated in Canada. At that time, the second wave of feminism was affecting the lives of women at the grass root level. With the publication of this novel, Margaret Atwood was regarded as a woman novelist who speaks especially for and to women. In it, she shows how gender politics has relegated women artists to a lower order and how their history is subsumed into the dominant patriarchal discourse, leaving them alone as the protagonist of this novel experiences. Well, there are many reasons behind the protagonist's alienation, as I mentioned above, but the most disturbing experience that makes her alienated is the betrayal of her former lover. She illuminates that "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 title of the novel is better than accurate, "It is a well-developed metaphor." As the title implies, the novel is not about surfaces but about depths and the process of rising from those depths. Searching in the Canadian woods for her lost father, the protagonist makes the journey to find herself a physical as well as psychological journey. It is not a realistic search for a missing person but the multileveled quest of a contemporary Persephone for a particular type of freedom. On the immediate narrative level of the search for her missing father, the narrator must acknowledge her ties to family and readjust her concept of that thrust for freedom from a family that we all experience.

In a nutshell, the story is that the protagonist's father is indeed missing, so she begins to search for clues as to his whereabouts; he may be in the woods,

he may have gone mad, or he may be dead. Her friends decide to stay longer than had been planned, and this gives the woman time to discover her father's archeological activities and his drowned body. After a few days of wandering, the truth about her own life is revealed to her. Upset by her loss, she refuses to leave with her friends at the end of the week. She spends a few more days alone on the island, during which time she undergoes some terrifying experiences that bring remarkable changes in her way of thinking. In fact, she emerges as a new version of herself. In the end, she is about to answer her lover, who has come back to look for her, because now she understands the actual meaning of life.

However, the theme in *Surfacing* deals with the association of women's victimization and nature's violation in a Canadian literary and cultural context, specifically adding to it the notion of the nation's imperial victim position. In *Surfacing*, issues of gender domination that is sexism, and environmental degradation that is naturism, are bound up with aspects of psychological, socio-political, economic, and cultural imperialism, and the narrative structure of the novel reveals a 'matrix of oppressions' in which dichotomies such as self or other, mind or body, male or female, American or Canadian are correlated with the culture or nature paradigm. In the narrative, ecofeminism examines the symbolic, psychological, and ethical patterns of the destructive relationship between nature and human society—and calls for a replacement of life-affirming culture founded on mutual respect, trust, and dependency.

To conclude, it can be said that we find it important to comprehend oppressive conceptual frameworks, not only as sexism and naturism but also as present in various forms in the dualized systems of society. Feminism is committed to critiquing male bias and developing a theory and practice that is not male-biased. As environmentalism, it is committed to critiquing policies and decision-making structures that exploit women's natural feelings. It is therefore committed to developing the theory and practice that do not perpetrate any form of domination. Any feminism or environmentalism that fails to take women-others-nature interconnections seriously is seen as inadequate. Thus, we see how throughout the novel, the narrator constantly struggles to get mental peace and strives to survive in the male-dominated society; she feels psychologically sick and devoid of emotions and yearns to speak and listen to the language which does not smell of masculinity only. The repeated reference to language and speech reveals the protagonist's initial anxieties and apprehensions about her feminine side. Atwood has appropriately

said, "Now we're on home ground, foreign territory. My throat constricted, as it learned to do when I discovered people could say words that would go into my ears, meaning nothing. To be deaf and dumb would be easier" (Atwood 85)

However, the psychological impact, a kind of protagonist's madness in *Surfacing*, is used as a metaphor for shedding light on the fact that the patriarch society produces insane women. But once women are determined to gain their power, a "movement from disorder to order" (Wolfe and Wolfe 899), from insanity to sanity, and from primitiveness to civilization can be seen. The protagonist is not a mad woman who needs therapy and treatment in order to regain her mental peace. Rather, she has to go through a psychological journey where "a spiritual death and rebirth" (Showalter 230) are achieved. The journey is like the voyage of an epic hero who sails to the underworld of the inner psychic. At the end of her journey, she reaches self-knowledge and wholeness, where the self is no longer spilled.

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