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Victimisation and Survival as a Journey from 'Wilderness' to 'Cultured' in Margaret
Atwood's Surfacing

Abstract: In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood points out how Canadian culture, unlike the American is really a collection of regional, aboriginal and ethnic subcultures: its emphasis is on equality and inclusiveness. She propounds that what is 'natural' is not 'wilderness' as labeled by the colonial masters. Rather, they have their own culture. *Surfacing* is a novel rich in interpretation as it depicts the binary quality of existential experience in Canada where land undermines man, wilderness contends with civilization, and isolation and alienation compel a search for identity. She believes that women will have to come forward to transcend their social conditions and emerge strong in order to endure and retain a sense of the self even if she is entrapped in the Patriarchal clutches of the society.

Keywords: Victimisation, alienation, survival, wilderness, guilt, cultured

Surfacing is the story of a commercial artist who has been summoned from the city to search for her father on a remote lake in Quebec. The unnamed narrator who adopts the persona of an anti-heroine of contemporary Canadian urban culture returns to Quebec after years of absence to search for her missing father and brings along her boyfriend, Joe, and a married

couple, Anna and David. Young and attractive, she is ruthless in her observations. On the way to a village near her father's island, the narrator visits her father's friend Paul who is unable to provide any new new information to locate him. Evans who becomes their guide and takes the narrator and her companions to her father's island, where the narrator searches for clues and finally becomes convinced that he is alive though mentally demented. Though in *Surfacing*, the narrator remains unnamed till the end, the novel brings out an individual Canadian identity. In David and Anna, there is a search for the Canadian identity which reflects the plight of the people of Canada who still suffer from a kind of split consciousness.

The narrator works in spurts on her freelance job illustrating a book of fairy tales, but her worries prevent her from accomplishing any real work. David proposes staying on the island for a week. The narrator agrees, though she secretly fears her crazed father's re-emergence. During their stay, David launches constant insults at Anna. The narrator asks David why he tortures Anna, and David claims he does so because Anna cheats on him. The narrator canoes to a site from her father's map. She dives repeatedly and on a particularly deep dive, she sees a disturbing object and screams and swims for the surface. Joe has followed her onto the lake and demands to know what she's doing. She ignores Joe and realizes that what she saw was a dead child. She believes it to be her aborted baby. She changes her story from leaving her husband and child to having an affair with her art professor and being forced to abort their baby.

The narrator's vision throws her into a psychosis. She believes that her father had found sacred Indian sites and resolves to thank the gods for granting her "the power." Joe tries to speak to the narrator, but she remains impenetrable. He tries to rape her, but he leaves her alone once she warns him that she will get pregnant. Later, David tries to seduce the narrator, telling her that Joe and Anna are having sex.

Her wishing that they weren't there with her, stems not only from an innate desire to be alone with her roots and her past, but also because they can never understand why she had to come. This journey becomes the means for Atwood to show that what is 'natural' is not always 'wilderness' as described by 'cultured' people. Nor does it mean that those dwelling in natural surroundings are devoid of culture.

Throughout *Surfacing*, it seems that the protagonist is haunted by memories of her childhood and the culture she imbibed then, is in conflict with her more 'modern' values and cultures that she has imbibed in the city. Her attempts at denying her earlier culture lead to feelings of guilt inside her, as she becomes acutely aware of the difference between her and her friends. Back in the Village, memories come flooding in. Signs of change in the village are evident in small ways, like the cow and horse sheds have been replaced with a garage, a couple of cars are seen and electric stoves are used instead of the old wood range.

The protagonist, who is a deserted and alienated individual, breaks away from the family ties and traditions. The influence of American culture is manifested in the persistent imagery of death and destruction. After the tragic episode of divorce and separation from her husband, the narrator returns home from the city only to find her own place mutilated. She keeps her divorce and abortion a secret but wears the ring in security. Madame and Paul are kept in the dark about her divorce. The very idea of divorce in rural Quebec is still an amputation. Being a commercial artist, the narrator breaks away from tradition and custom. Divorce and abortion are words belonging to a different culture, and back in her childhood surroundings the give rise to feelings of guilt that threaten to engulf or totally submerge her. The guilt is overwhelming as she recounts the different ways in which she has let her parents down.

The guilt and evil in *Surfacing* are closely related to the conflict of two different cultures, one in which she was brought up and one which she had to adopt to survive. This

constant conflict between the two cultures emerges at every step in the novel. The narrator clings to the old culture and rues the fact that her country is being sold or drowned along with the people and animals. The protagonist is convinced that sadism is a part of the new culture which was beginning to raise its head in Canada.

Surfacing brought into sharp focus, the problem of the country's cultural identity. It presents the colonial repercussions of patriarchy, cultural imperialism, and geographic colonization and how they all combine to lead to displacement with their culture.

A young girl brought up without much exposure to society and men, she is an easy prey to married man's lust, who, when she becomes pregnant wants her to abort the baby. This is the loss of her innocence along with her exposure to the evil and suffering that she finds in the new culture. It becomes the turning point as after the abortion, she does not return home and is set to brave the bad world on her own. The abortion lies at the root of her guilt as she vies herself as a murderer. Her guilt is compounded as the cultural divide between them was too wide to be bridge. Her unusual childhood of isolation and deprivation strikes her friends when they reach the cabin where her father lived. *Surfacing* has been interpreted variously: as a novel. It emphasizes that women need to recognize the inner potential and empower themselves. It suggests that women artist can create the new myths necessary to depict the integrity of female who is both courageous and womanly. 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. Male for Atwood is not a gender specific category. It stands for all forms of hegemonic structures of imperialism and dominion which marginalize an individual or a group. Thus Canada is the victimized female in relation to United States of America which becomes a metaphor for the 'Male'.

In the mental geography of the heroine of *Surfacing*, Quebec is simultaneously the home and not home: because it is where her parents had built the house on the wilderness island

which is the locus of her true sense of self, but not her home because the province really belongs to mysterious alien people. From the time of her childhood, the narrator suspects that Quebec enjoys a kind of cultural authenticity that has been forfeited by English, “American” Canada. As an adult, she retains much of her childhood vision of French Canada. In *Surfacing*, Quebec’s uniqueness means that, unlike the rest of North America, its mythic identity has some counterpart in the real world. The narrator’s severance from the community is emphasized most dramatically by her inability to speak its language. The ways in which Quebec is “not home” for the heroine, emphasize the extent of her alienation from her past, her present life and her emotion. But the fact that Quebec is still very much her home means that in Lower Canada, she can recover her buried life. During her days of isolation, she turns her back on rational civilization in order to probe the levels of her own psyche. She penetrates beyond her personal past and encounters the ghosts of the land and its original inhabitants who left the rock paintings. Just as the Quebec wilderness is the place where the narrator strips away her friends and the culture they represent. The heroine discovers that not even the protection of language, religion and tradition can save Quebec from the Americans. Since Quebec used to be very distinct, the marks of Americanization appear more visible in English Canada. The narrator finds that her childhood version of Quebec is being violated by Americans and Canadians who have assimilated the “American” values of material progress and self-centered ecological destruction.

Most of the novels of Margaret Atwood are replete with themes of victimization and survival, the part of cultural life of a Canada and actively engage with problems that are not just national concerns but are also the social, political and traditional issues that will determine the survival of their country. As a novelist, Atwood discovers the anomalies of Canadian civilization in which women are not allowed to make any strategy of grabbing the male space. Her novels represent and reflect an important development in the post-sixties Canadian writing.

In her fiction, she attempts to fictionalize the process of the women protagonist's quest for distinctive feminine identity. Atwood attempts to instill pride, confidence and dignity in women through her novels. She pleads for the need to create a conducive atmosphere for the development of the personality of a woman corresponding to her tastes, interest and sensibility. She also castigates the social system that assigns roles to women.

The narrator of *Surfacing* experience transcendence in a nature, which heals the split between the conscious and the unconscious parts of her psyche. Finally, she decides to refuse to be a victim. She returns to society determined to stop being a fake artist and there is tremendous transformation in her personality for the better. The novel shows a new hope that woman can emerge as a new woman with a new courage to lead an authentic life. The narrator has been able to revive and recover the parts of herself she had lost and is returning as a wise saner being. Her journey has been a journey from death to life, from withdrawal to reintegration with society, from illusion to reality. She has learnt that survival is tough, yet she is prepared to survive not by an escape from reality but by a bold conformation of it.

According to Atwood, society limits the choice of women, and she prefers to portray women who make clear-cut dramatic choices. Her protagonists are constantly engaged in the dialectics of survival. It is essential for them to redefine the term 'survival' which is not a mere continuation of life in the old traditional fashion. It is for them a challenge to better their own personal existence. This gives birth to the concept of 'New Women' who is not the ideal or best woman, but a rebel against the general happenings of the patriarchal society. She involves in exploring her true potential along with the struggle to fulfill her urges and needs. The novels of Atwood provide us with a map of the spiritual condition of modern Canadian fiction with specific reference to their physical and cultural milieu. Though she is certainly supportive of feminist issues like women's dilemmas and alienation cause by the marginal position in patriarchy, she refuse to go to war against men; instead she believes in equality of both sexes.

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