

# MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING* AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER ROLES AS VICTIMS

Dr. Sanjeev Tayal\*

*M.A. English, PhD, NTA UGC NET (English), India*

*Email ID: tayalsanjeev43@gmail.com*

Accepted: 06.02.2023

Published: 01.03.2023

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, Feminism, Victimization, Gender, Patriarchy, Hypersexualization.

## Abstract

*The 1972 novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood is now considered a modern classic and has garnered attention from reviewers of various stripes. The Canadian author's staunch feminism is reflected in the novel's most memorable aspects. In light of the aforementioned analytical perspective, this study will focus on two aspects of Atwood's work: gender and victimisation. So, a close reading of the work is conducted in order to identify and analyse the narrative's primary examples of both elements. The story focuses mostly on the female characters (Anna and the protagonist, who remains nameless), who are both hypersexualized and victimised in the story's patriarchal microcosms.*

## Paper Identification



\*Corresponding Author

© IJRTS Takshila Foundation, Dr. Sanjeev Tayal, All Rights Reserved.

## Introduction

Originally published in 1972, *Surfacing* is Margaret Atwood's second novel. It tells the tale of an anonymous woman who travels to her native Canada (Northern Quebec) with her boyfriend Joe and another couple (David and Anna) to learn the truth about her father's disappearance after receiving news of it in a letter from her friend Paul, who lives there. The story then follows the

unidentified protagonist (UP from here on out for the sake of communication simplicity) as she embarks on a process of remembering in which her past and present get entangled.

While Atwood explores a wide range of themes throughout the novel (including identity, language, memory, imagination, hallucination, and the relationship between human and nonhuman life), this thesis will concentrate solely on gender issues because they are so central to the novel's structure.

This analysis will focus on the victim mentality shared by the story's two female protagonists, UP and Anna, two very different women who are linked in the plot by their shared gender.

Since a thorough reading of the book was required in order to compose this essay, many direct quotes from the text will be used to illustrate the points made and serve as the basis for the development of the concepts presented. On occasion, we will also provide a select number of scholarly references that either directly support our thesis or provide additional, pertinent background material. The primary sources are from the field of gender studies and provide a feminist interpretation of Atwood's novel, focusing on the concept of victimisation and its relationship to nature (ecofeminism) as manifested in the central figures and themes of the text.

This article seeks to update and expand upon these claims by doing a careful reading of the text, as advocated by New Criticism. Our paper's potential novelty may lie mostly in this area. It will be sufficient to provide within brackets the page number(s) from which each quotation is taken when it is determined that the quoted passages are indeed taken from Atwood's book.

### **The novel's gender dynamics: some preliminary thoughts**

Margaret Atwood skillfully develops the plot of *Surfacing* so that the feeling of female subalternity (using Antonio Gramsci's (2005) broader term) becomes increasingly apparent. The first time we see UP, she's riding in David's automobile ("a lumbering monster," [4] as she calls it) on the way to Quebec. I know he's a terrific driver, but I still keep my palm on the door's exterior just in case (4). At this point in the story, the reader may be unsure whether or not they are reading the words of an unduly doubtful narrator or those of a mistreated lady in a vulnerable position; throughout the novel, we notice that it is the latter.

It goes without saying that we must rely on the hallucinatory perceptions of an anonymous narrator in order to arrive at such a judgement. The novel is written in first-person, which necessarily includes a number of specificities and narrative limits, but we consider her voice to be entirely reliable in describing true occurrences (past and present) and will construct our thesis appropriately. Ignoring the synopsis on the back cover, the reader is never told explicitly that UP is a woman; instead, we must infer it from the way she interacts with the other characters and

from some particularly clarifying reflections on marriage, school life, or men's tastes, such as "My status is a problem, they obviously think I'm married. But I'm safe, I'm wearing my ring, I never threw it out, it's useful for landladies" (143). Thus, it makes perfect sense that Margaret Atwood is a woman who wrote this book; could a guy have done justice to the protagonist's emotions? 1

The fact that the novel's protagonist is a woman has a significant impact on the tone and later feminist readings of the work because the entire plot is seen through the lens of her gendered perspective. If David were to tell the narrative, for instance, the portion when Anna is made to take off her clothes would still be a kind of abuse, but the reader or listener would interpret it as "simple fun" or something like. In other words, the story's facts stay the same regardless of the narrator's gender, but the process of sifting and evaluating them for a feminist research like this is different and, possibly, shorter when we are told the story by a female character. The book's female perspective is strengthened and made more manageable by the first-person narrator's voice and Margaret Atwood's own.

Although a biographical interpretation of the book is not our primary focus, we feel it is important to point out that the author's and the protagonist's perspectives may overlap on more than one occasion.

*Surfacing* was published in 1972, the same year that Margaret Atwood's first marriage ended in divorce; the novel -perhaps as a correlative fiction- is full of musings on the protagonist's marriage and subsequent divorce, two aspects of her past that continue to shape her present and make her feel like a victim (which we will explore more deeply in the next section). For the first time in the novel, UP discusses her marriage and divorce in chapter 3 with reference to her parents: "they never forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce; I don't think they even understood the marriage, which wasn't surprising given I didn't understand it either" (32). Later, she reflects on her failed marriage to her ex-husband with regret: "It was lovely at first, but he changed when I married him, he married me, we performed that paper act" (46). At the same time, she seems to be hinting at the fact that she was pressured into getting pregnant: "That was my husband's [kid], he imposed it on me, all the time it was developing in me I felt like an incubator" (38-39). (56). In some examples, the wedding band is used to represent a partner's control over their spouse: "I wore his ring, too huge for any of my fingers, around my neck on a chain, like a crucifix or a military award" (62). This character's hesitation to be engaged again is the root of all her suppressed emotions, and it is this reluctance that causes tension between her

and Joe in the novel's second half. The following sentence exemplifies the lasting psychological effects of her previous marriage on her:

'Look', I said, '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 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. I would always be able to say what I'd just finished saying: I've tried and failed, I'm inoculated, exempt, classified as wounded. It wasn't that I didn't suffer, I was conscientious about that, that's what qualified me. But marriage was like playing Monopoly or doing crossword puzzles, either your mind worked that way, like Anna's, or it didn't; and I'd proved mine didn't. A small neutral country. (110-11)

The themes of marriage and motherhood permeate the entire book, but they really come to the fore in the first section, when one of Atwood's most famous quotes can be found: "A divorce is like an amputation, you survive but there's less of you" (49). Given Atwood's emotional state at the time of writing, it's not surprising that she channels some of her own thoughts into UP, even though the character isn't meant to be an alter ego. Surfacing, as Fiona Tolan (35) has out, "is the book that most directly ties Atwood's novel writing to her poetry," and as a result, it has been much praised by critics. The author's gender is a crucial factor to consider when evaluating the novel's feminist underpinnings, especially if the author is a woman.

### **The victimisation of women in fiction**

As has been noted, there is more than one aspect of Surfacing that conveys a sense of victimisation. These include the domination of a deeply patriarchal culture and the pervasiveness of American politics and way of life (especially as they influence nature and Canadian identity). In this context, Emily Denommé (2) points to a double sense of victimisation: "The journey of Atwood's narrator exposes the problematic classifications that her society expects in terms of nationality and gender. The narrator suffers double discrimination since she is a woman and a Canadian. While the former is useful to keep in mind, we will focus primarily on the latter from here on out: women being harmed as a direct result of men's patriarchal power structures.

In turn, the novel's sense of gender victimisation is shared between its two primary female characters, Anna and UP (the novel's other two female characters are Madame, Paul's wife, and a random store clerk, both of whom appear only in the novel's opening chapters). Interestingly, despite the fact that they are both arguably victims of patriarchal society and their respective relationships with males, their attitudes towards the situation differ significantly: while Anna

seems to accept her position willingly and gives a rather submissive image of herself in certain moments, UP is distressed by gender problems since her childhood (at school and even with family) and is unable to engage with Joe because of their differences. For this reason, we have chosen to conduct a separate analysis of the function of each of them.

### **Anna**

Anna's true victim status in her marriage to David is also revealed in bits and pieces as the novel progresses. Again, this is a testament to Margaret Atwood's mastery of subtlety in her reveal. Anna's spouse may seem like a nice guy at first, but the reader soon learns that this is far from the truth. Anna is subjected to severe abuse at his hands. An early example occurs in Chapter 4 when David orders a drink and "Anna delivers him one and he pats her on the behind and says 'That's what I want, service'" (41). Abuse continues to rise in intensity, and at this point it's remarkable that she continues to submit to it so robotically.

The second chapter begins with UP witnessing Anna applying cosmetics, at which point she realises that she had never seen her without it. To the narrator's question as to why, "Anna adds in a hushed voice, 'He doesn't like to see me without it,'" before contradicting herself and saying, "He doesn't know I wear it" (52). Anna forgets to put on makeup and has the following exchange with the main character:

“God,” she said, “what’m I going to do? I forgot my makeup, he’ll kill me.” I studied her: in the twilight her face was grey. “Maybe he won’t notice,” I said. “He’ll notice, don’t you worry. Not now maybe, it hasn’t all rubbed off, but in the morning. He wants me to look like a young chick all the time, if I don’t he gets mad.” ... “He watches me all the time, he waits for excuses. Then either he won’t screw at all or he slams it in so hard it hurts. I guess it’s awful of me to say that” ... “But if you said any of this to him he’d just make funny cracks about it, he says I have a mind like a soap opera, he says I invent it. But I really don’t you know” (156)

Anna's fear of David runs so deep that she is paralysed by the thought that Somebody "would talk to him about it behind her back" after hearing these comments (157). David's constant disrespect for her wife and sexism are on full display in his comments, such as "'It turns me on when she bends over,'... 'She's got a neat ass,'" which leave no room for debate. The whole ass culture fascinates me. She's got a really clean behind, don't you think?" (114).

At one of the most unsettling parts of the story, David urges Anna to strip naked so that he and Joe, who are also on the trip to record a video, can make a sexually suggestive film. She has

good reason to decline, but David persists even after Joe's dissuasive attitude ("I won't take her if she doesn't want to,' Joe remarked" [172]):

"It's token resistance," David said, "she wants to, she's an exhibitionist at heart. She likes her lush bod, don't you? Even if she is getting too fat" "Don't think I don't know what you're trying to do," Anna said, as though she'd guessed a riddle. "You're trying to humiliate me." "What's humiliating about your body, darling?" David said caressingly. "We all love it, you ashamed of it? That's pretty stingy of you, you should share the wealth; not that you don't." Anna was furious now, goaded, her voice rose. "Fuck off, you want bloody everything don't you, you can't use that stuff on me." "Why not," David said evenly "it works. Now just take it off like a good girl or I'll have to take it off for you." (172-73)

After Joe tries to intervene, David exclaims, "Shut up, she's my wife" (173) and continues the argument. Finally, Anna is shown crying while naked on the sand. Because of her permissive and submissive demeanour, David's chauvinist outlook has further hardened. Denommé (2016: 6-7) correctly explains why Anna is so tolerant by paraphrasing Atwood's most famous work of literary critique, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*.

Anna herself, though clearly a victim of sexist ideology, willingly chooses to back her abuser when she must choose where to position herself. This follows Atwood's logic of the first victim position of denied victimhood, where the victim is "afraid to recognize they are victims for fear of losing the privileges that they possess" and often direct their anger "against one's fellow-victims, particularly those who try to talk about their victimization ["]". (Atwood, *Survival* 36)

This permissiveness on the part of Anna (in the sense of sexual freedom, as David exemplifies when trying to have intercourse with UP in chapter 18, towards the end of part two) is unmistakably obvious in a conversation between the two female characters, narrated this way by the protagonist: "She gives me an odd glance, as though I've violated a propriety, and I'm puzzled, she told me once you shouldn't define yourself by your job but by who you are. If she likes you, she'll explain that she's David's wife, but if she doesn't, she'll talk about fluidity and Being rather than Doing. (70). For many who believe that *Surfacing* is a kind of indirect theorization on Margaret Atwood's part, in which she combines her own ideas on feminism with those of UP, this passage is illustrative. Suman Makhaik mentions this in the following way in her dissertation:

The character of Anna stands for women who, against all odds, wish to continue their victim roles even if it demands their total effacement as individuals. Such characters comply with binary masculine hegemony and help in its firm establishment. Ecofeminists raise a voice against doing so, and Atwood establishes the same by defining the negatives.

One may also argue that ecofeminism, a school of feminist thought that emphasises environmental concerns, is lurking behind the scenes of Atwood's novel. In the next section, we'll offer some brief observations on this issue.

### **The protagonist**

The protagonist of this novel, who remains nameless, undergoes a journey of self-discovery as she investigates her father's disappearance. She is a castaway in both patriarchal society and her own sea of shattered memories and experiences. The natural setting, especially the water, serves as a metaphor for the hero's internal journey throughout most of the novel. After being on the island alone for a while longer, UP strips down to her underwear and floats around in the ocean with her clothing still on in chapter 23. Air-filled sleeves sway beside me (230). When the speaker finally emerges from the lake, the metaphor reaches its climax: "When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body afloat on the surface, a fabric decoy; it jiggles in the waves I produce, nudges softly against the dock" (231). It is necessary to explain UP's victim status before we can fully grasp this dual process of emerging. In fact, G. Sankar and R. Soundararajan (41) have noticed that the protagonist has a significant gender victim complex:

The main issue of the novel is that of searching for identity. The unnamed protagonist perceives herself as a victim; ... as a member of patriarchal society, she is a victim of men: not only, in the protagonist's view, do they make use of women's bodies for their own satisfaction, but also have more rights. They are those who have the main voice in creating history and think they are responsible for "saving the world, men think they can do it with guns. (*Surfacing* 176)

The protagonist's victimhood is rooted in the larger social context of the novel, but it takes concrete form in her relationships with Joe, David, and even Anna. The novel's microcosmic manifestation of gender discrimination mirrors the larger macrocosmic context in which the protagonist feels trapped. Like Anna, the reader may at first assume that UP is embarking on this adventure for no other reason than to have fun with her pals and beau. But it becomes clear that she is trapped; she needs David's automobile and she hasn't been honest about why she wants to go to the island (looking into the disappearance of her father). Even if she wants to leave, her friends can make her stay:

I sit down on the bed. They might have asked me first, it's my house. Though maybe they're waiting till I come out, they'll ask then. If I say I don't want to they can't very well stay; but what reason can I give? I can't tell them about my father, betray him; anyway they might think I was making it up. There's my work, but they know I have it with me. I could leave by myself with Evans but I'd only get as far as the village: it's David's car, I'd have to steal the keys, and also, I remind myself, I never learned to drive. (86)

The more time she spends in the house, the more the memories associated with the various items she handles begin to creep into her consciousness. After that, she starts thinking back on the times in her life when machismo and men's impositions have made her feel like a victim. As a woman, her ex-husband stifled her artistic ambitions by telling her she should study something more practical because "there have never been any important woman artists" (63). When the lads would hunt and capture the girls after school and tie them up with their own skipping ropes, she was the one they would neglect to untie on purpose. Many an afternoon saw me tethered to a fence, gate, or tree until some kind grownup came along and let me go (88). Her father's masculine ways influenced her even at home: "There's more than one way to skin a cat," she once said. "That disturbed me, I didn't see why they would want to skin a cat even one way" (117).

The loss of her kid, who was likely aborted against her consent, stands out among all the other memories she has. At the conclusion of our character analysis, we shall return to this idea.

Critics have pointed out the ecofeminist message in Atwood's work because of the abuse of animals (exemplified by the skinned cat) and the desecration of nature by Americans in the novel. According to Ambika Bhalla (1), "the protagonist discovers the gap between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she confronts nature," highlighting the link between the protagonist's victim status and nature as a revealing force in her process of self-awareness. The novel's ecofeminist influence is implied by the main character's turn towards nature. Her time spent outdoors has increased her awareness of the ways in which women are treated unfairly. The culmination of the merging occurs in the story's last chapter 24: "A frog is there, leopard frog with green spots and gold-rimmed eyes, ancestor. It's all-encompassing, it's bright, and there's no action other than the sound of my throat breathing (233). Atwood deliberately breaks up a pivotal section about the relationship between UP and nature into paragraphs later in the chapter, and the result is an effective literary device that emphasises the chapter's theme.



The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground

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 (236)

While the protagonist finds solace in the island's natural surroundings, he feels at odds with Joe, the novel's masculine archetype: "Everything I respect about him seems to be physical: the rest is either unknown, disagreeable, or absurd" (68). UP's disinterest for him likewise grows as the novel progresses; the tedium is already apparent from the opening of chapter 8:

In the early morning Joe wakes me; his hands at any rate are intelligent, they move over me delicately as a blind man's reading Braille, skilled, moulding me like a vase, they're learning me; ... A phrase comes to me, a joke then but mournful now, someone in a parked car after a highschool dance who said *With a paper bag over their head they're all the same*. At the time I didn't understand what he meant, but since then I've pondered it. (83)

The protagonist's feelings for Joe will be dominated by a sense of sexual objectification: "Joe stayed on the wall bench, arms wrapped around his knees in lawn-dwarf pose, watching me. I felt his x-ray vision burrowing beneath my skin, a faint prickling feeling as if he was tracing me even though my head was turned away. His eyes were as blue as ball point pens or Superman (106). Joe's attempts at having sex with Anna will be rejected due to Anna's fears of becoming pregnant, and eventually their relationship will degrade to the point that Anna notices it:

"Don't, I said, he was lowering himself down on me, "I don't want you to." "What's wrong with you?" he said, angry; then he was pinning me, hands manacles, teeth against my lips, censoring me, he was shoving against me, his body insistent as one side of an argument. I slid my arm between us, against his throat, windpipe, and pried his head away. "I'll get pregnant," I said, "it's the right time." It was the truth, it stopped him: flesh making more flesh, miracle, that frightens all of them. (188)

They agree to have sexual relations despite their differences and the lack of a deep, consistent affective bond between them: he can satisfy his carnal desires, and she can make amends for the loss of her former child. I won't give in to them this time (210). UP's decision to give birth to her kid (the "goldfish" [249] in her belly) alone in nature, without the involvement of a society that has proven patriarchal to her, is an act of both redemption and self-assertion as a woman: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim" [209]. (249). In other words, she has reemerged.

The final dilemma arises when Joe returns to the island in search of her after she has been there alone for some time; she must choose between going back to civilization with Joe, for whom her love is "useless as a third eye or a possibility" (250), or staying in the place and risking isolation in a wild atmosphere. The ending is again intelligently open to ambivalence by Atwood, so it's possible she doesn't choose Joe, but it seems likely: "To trust is to let go. Though my feet haven't moved yet, I tense up and brace myself to face the inquiries and pressures (251). If this were the case, we imagine that the focus would be on staying alive; she has no expectations for Joe or men in general, but she also knows that, while it's not absolutely necessary, her chances of survival will improve dramatically if she returns to mainstream society, despite the challenges she'll face there. It's the logical thing to do.

### **Conclusion**

According to the results of this analysis, it is clear that Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* contains a deep sense of victimisation in regards to imperialism and gender. In particular, the two female characters—Anna and the protagonist who remains nameless—reflect the story's central theme of female victimhood. Although the former seems unconcerned with her status, which leads to David's abuse, the latter — a victim of masculine dominance since childhood — undergoes a journey of self-discovery that ultimately leads her to have a baby and live in isolation in the wilderness, forming what can be seen as an ecofeminist worldview. Yet, it is hinted in the conclusion that she and her lover will return and once again participate in social life.

Since women rely on men for their species' continued existence, the story could be read as a call for gender parity, with the implication that modern society is too patriarchal to allow women to flourish on an equal footing with men. It is true that Atwood's work becomes significant from a (eco)feminist perspective because most of the characters are fit inside stereotypes — the controlling cynical male, the abused subservient woman, the ruthless US imperialist. This perspective leaves out a number of important details, including the narrator's deep introspection into her own life, the way she describes her family, the unreliability of her account, her journey of self-discovery, her role in her own victimisation, and the use of symbolic language. *Surfacing*, by Margaret Atwood, has all these qualities, making it a modern masterpiece in which feminism unquestionably plays a very big role.

This article has made a few small attempts to compile some particularly relevant scholarly contributions to the topic and to examine how the novel *Surfacing* reflects such ideas through the use of language and the unfolding of events in an effort to allow the text breathe and speak (nearly) for itself. Focusing on the novel and employing academia as a supplement, rather than

the other way around, was a priority for us. So, the importance of this study may lie in its focus on Atwood's writing as such, which is overlooked in favour of other labels that, while undeniably interesting, may overshadow the text itself, the true topic of examination.

## WORKS CITED

Atwood, Margaret. *Surfacing*. London: Virago, 2014.

---. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1972.

Bhalla, Ambika. "Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 2, 2012. <<http://www.ijsrp.org/research-paper-1012/ijsrp-p1006.pdf>> (last time consulted: 16/04/18)

Denommé, Emily. "Beyond Borders: Nature, Revelation, and Identity in Atwood's *Surfacing*." *Undergraduate Awards*, 2016. <[https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=ungradawards\\_2016](https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=ungradawards_2016)> (last time consulted: 24/11/18)

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd, 2005.

Greimas, Algirdas Julius. "Actants, Actors, and Figures." *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*. Trans. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins. *Theory and History of Literature*, 38. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987. 106-120.

Makhaik, Suman. "Surfacing." *Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood a study of selected novels and short stories*. Doctoral thesis from Himachal Pradesh University, 2011. 127-167. <[http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/121172/8/08\\_chapter%203.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/121172/8/08_chapter%203.pdf)> (last time consulted: 15/04/18)

McWilliams, Ellen. *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*. Abingdon-Thames: Routledge, 2017. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315249735>

Nicolaescu, Cristina. "The Voice of Subaltern in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*: an Anticolonialist Approach to the Novel." *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 5. New York: Addleton Academic Publishers, 2015.

350-355.

Niranjani, Ramya. "Self-Discovery Through Nature in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*." *Language in India*, 12, 2012. 196-203.

Reshmi, Krishnan. "Ecofeminist Vision: A Study of Margaret's Atwood's *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Critical Essays on Canadian Literature* (ed. K. Balachandran). New Delhi: Sarup, 2002. 61-66.

Sankar & Soundararajan. "Female Quest for Self-Identity and Women Subjections in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*." *CSCanada: Studies in Literature and Language*, 13, 2016. 40-41.

<<http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8892>> (last time consulted: 24/11/18)

Tolan, Fiona. "Surfacing: Origins and Identity." *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 35-58. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204545\\_004](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204545_004)

Willens, Michele. "The Mixed Results of Male Authors Writing Female Characters." *The Atlantic*, 2013. The Atlantic Monthly Group.

<<https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/03/the-mixed-resultsof-male-authors-writing-female-characters/273641/>> (last time consulted: 16/04/18)