

MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING: A CONFRONTATION WITH THE REPRESSED

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood in her novel Surfacing has powerfully brought out the inner turmoil experienced by the nameless protagonist due to the various bitter experiences in life. Lacking the courage to face the bitter realities, the protagonist represses all her painful experiences in her mind and projects a false 'self' to the society. In the process of creating the false 'self', she fabricates tales about her life which would make her acceptable in the society. 'Repression' and 'Fabrication' proves only a temporary solution to the protagonist. The anxiety and restlessness in her mind demands a confrontation with the past and the repressed memories. It is only through this confrontation and acceptance of the realities of her life does she realize her 'self'. This study focuses on the process of confronting with the repressed memories and the eventual self realization that she attains.

Key Words: *Repression, Fabrication, Guilt, Irrational Fear, Self Actualization.*

Introduction

Margaret Atwood is one of the most prominent and honoured Canadian fiction writers who mainly focus on the complexities that women face in their lives, living in a male dominated society. *Surfacing*, the second novel of Margaret Atwood is structured as a journey of a nameless protagonist in search of her missing father. This journey simultaneously becomes an inward journey too, into her own subconscious mind. The predicament of Atwood's protagonists in most of her novels has a deep connection with their past experiences that get repressed in their minds. These memories play a dominant role in making their life a complicated web. Atwood firmly asserts the need to recover one's memory in order to come to terms with the past and discover the true self identity. The novel gives a hope to the readers that irrespective of the kind of experiences in life, every woman can emerge with a new courage to lead an authentic and renewed life.

Analysis

Repression is a mechanism that helps a person force painful experiences below the threshold of consciousness.

It is a forced forgetfulness of desires or experiences associated with feelings of shame, guilt or humiliation. The protagonist of the novel, for a very long time, tries to live a normal life by repressing all her painful experiences of her life deep down in her mind. She never wanted to share those experiences with others and also tried hard not to allow her mind to think about them. The more and more one represses the thoughts; it tries to surface in some suitable occasion. The narrator tries hard to suppress them but is successful only up to a certain stage of her life. When she comes back to the land of her past, her memories too tries to surface in her mind.

The protagonist's experiences in life have bruised her psyche so much that she experiences a state of psychic wreck. After reading the novel to an extent the readers realize that the narrator is unreliable. The trauma of her abortion had affected her mind so immensely that she indulges in fabrication. Due to her inability to accept her true past, she fabricates a series of false memories in her mind and reveals it to her parents too. These fictitious memories include her marriage, childbirth, divorce and about the custody of her child with her husband. All these fabricated memories help her to live in a 'false self'

repressing her pain and guilt. It would not be wrong to say that some of her memories were borrowed from others. She realizes the truth and says,

I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I'll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it, the ones who could help are gone. (90)

Apart from all these false memories, her 'real' memories were the reason for her sense of estrangement and isolation that she experienced. In reality she was a young unmarried woman whose love affair with a married man ended because he persuaded her to abort their child. Her lover was a married man with two children, whose words of love and promise seemed only a trap for her. He convinces her to abort their child saying that it was like removing a wart and nothing more.

He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn't; that made me one of them too, a killer. (185)

These 'true' experiences and her fabricated memories, emotionally shattered her life leading towards a lot of psychological disturbances or a psychic wreck. Her abortion had a very strong effect which is vividly seen in all aspects of her life. The guilt she experiences causes an emotional numbness in her life. The guilt is due to the fact that she could have avoided this and let the child live in spite of her lover's strong demands. Sushila Singh asserts, "She is not grieving and tormented simply because of the death of her foetus, but because she has gone against nature by attempting to thwart the natural cycle. Her abortion does not even have the saving grace of an attempt to co-operate with nature" (149).

Through this merciless act, she feels like a killer and experiences the seed of death planted in her

mind. "I was emptied, amputated; I stank of salt and antiseptic, they had planted death in me like a seed" (184). She feels as though a part of her was amputated through this abortion. Haunted by the guilt complex, she intentionally distanced herself from her parents for nine long years. At times the protagonist doubts her own existence and a sense of alienation grips her life. She tries hard to repress all these feelings and emotions that troubled her and was alienated from her own self. It was a death-in-life experience leaving a scar on her psyche. The novel thereby exhibits a penetrating awareness of the trauma of abortion in the lives of sensitive women like this nameless protagonist. Since the abortion, life had not been easy for her.

As an outcome of all these hurtful experiences, the narrator ends up losing her faith in 'love' and 'marriage'. 'Love' turns out to be meaningless to her. Coomi S. Vevaina rightly observes, "While her father destroys her faith in religion, her equally rational-minded lover destroys her faith in the spirituality inherent in the experience true love thereby forcing her to shy away from giving and receiving love" (268). When her boyfriend Joe expresses his love to her, she feels emotionally numb, even though she was fond of him. "I'm trying to decide whether or not I love him.... I'm fond of him, I'd rather have him around than not; though it would be nice if he meant something more to me. The fact that he doesn't make me sad: no one has since my husband" (49). She was unwilling to commit herself in any real sense. There was no emotional involvement in their relationship. She was not ready to have an imperfect relationship fearing failures. She defies the institution of marriage, for she found no sanctity in it but rather felt it was an oppressed institution where women were exploited

All these experiences and painful memories of the protagonist disturb her psyche leading to odd behaviour and strange feelings. A sense of restlessness and strangeness constantly lingers in her mind from the beginning of the novel. Though her friends accompany her as a favour, she sometimes wishes to be away from their company. On the way to the Quebec islands in search of her father, she experiences mixed emotions.

The nostalgic feelings and the anxiety for her father gives her a lot of emotional pain. She suppresses her tears for she did not want to expose her emotions in the company of her friends. She tries to evade the emotional pain through some physical pain.

I'll start crying, that would be horrible, none of them would know what to do and neither would I. I bite down into the cone and I can't feel anything for a minute but the knife-hard pain up the side of my face. Anaesthesia, that's one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain. I'm alright (10).

Though the protagonist appears calm from the outside, her inner self was fragmented. Her inner self was completely different from her social self. This dualism protected her from emotional harm to an extent and helped her repress her memories. This 'inner' self was repressed constantly whenever it tried to surface or rise up. This duality she experienced, caused her to lose herself identity and resulted in an emotional numbness. She does not cry, was unable to dream and was alienated both from the society as well as from her 'self'. "I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it" (142). A child is not born without emotions, but it is the experiences, situations and the society that makes one so. When the narrator talks about some of the instances of her childhood, it is clearly seen that she acts on emotions. Her bold acts of setting free the animals that were trapped by her brother prove it. She lost her ability to feel mainly after the two mishaps of her life: her failed relationship and her abortion, which made a wreck of her life.

Fears are a definite part of people who have a disturbed psyche. These fears are to a large extent irrational. All the protective defence strategies employed are frail and temporarily defends the ego but gradually brings back the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty, leading to irrational fears. Throughout the novel *Surfacing*, at various instances, the protagonist, due to her painful past experiences irrational fear. During their stay at the cottage, she confesses, "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" (97).

Moreover, when the protagonist experienced emotional numbness, the only thing she could feel was the fear that she wasn't alive. She recalls that while at school, in order to assure herself that she was alive, she used to poke herself with pen nibs and compass points. Similarly the flush toilets and vacuum cleaners used in the cities created in her the fear that there could be a machine that could make people vanish. When she was alone at the cottage after the departure of her friends, all sorts of fears like, her childhood fear of going alone to the outhouse, the fear that her parents' spirits would enter into the house, the fear of looking into the mirror, etc... crowd her mind indicating the emotional or psychological insecurity she experienced. Throughout the novel we also find that she was frightened of her past which kept haunting her.

The protagonist's diving into the water has a great symbolic significance in the novel. When she dives into the water, her past memories start surfacing and bring forth a transformation in her life. It is a crucial event, for she descends into her subconscious mind, where a conflict occurs between her two 'selves', one that exists in the visible world and her other self that is buried under the surface. Her past that are buried within, surfaces when she dives into her inner subconscious. Her direct encounter of her father's dead body leads to a surfacing from death to a 'new' life. By plunging into the waters, she identifies her 'self' and this gives her many new realizations. The father's body, the memories of her aborted foetus, her unhappy past and all her painful experiences suffocates her mind. Her disturbed mind finds a release in this psychic quest, giving her a healing of her mind. She surfaces from the dive with a new acceptance of herself and the power of nature. Her dive into the waters to explore her father's rock paintings turns out to be a dive into her subconscious mind, allowing her to emerge as a transformed being.

Another positive force behind her transformation is the bond she shares with her parents

though they were physically not present with her. The albums, photographs and the things in the cabin enable the protagonist to recover and re-live her past, which she had repressed or forgotten. Her father, a rationalist, botanist and a tree scientist, believed that one had to struggle to survive and had chosen a voluntary recluse in Quebec. He made his family live between anonymities, the city and the bush.

They must find it strange, a man his age staying alone the whole winter in a cabin ten miles from nowhere; I never questioned it, to me it was logical. They always intended to move here permanently as soon as they could, when he retired: isolation was to him desirable. He didn't dislike people, he merely found them irrational; animals, he said, were more consistent, their behaviour at least was predictable (71).

His disappearance had brought strange confusions in her mind. The strange drawings among his papers makes her doubt his sanity but later realizes that he had been describing ancient rock paintings. In order to find out her father's inspirations of the drawings, she dives into the water and ultimately encounters his dead body. From her father drawings, trying to reason them out, she gains the gift of knowledge.

In the process of rediscovering her 'self', like most Atwood's protagonists, the narrator of *Surfacing* too goes to the verge of madness. But ultimately, her solitude or her isolation helps her break all barriers and emerge as a new creation.. She enters into a period of crazy behaviour. When all social standards seem meaningless to her, she wants to live in the most elemental nature and so retreats to an animal like state of living. She discards her former self, and in doing so, discards or destroys everything that was in the cabin.

When the paper things are burned I smash the glasses and plates and the chimney of the lamp. Everything I can't break, frying pan, enamel bowl, spoons and forks, I throw on the floor.... I take off my clothes, peeling them away from my flesh like wallpaper. They sway beside me, inflated, the sleeves bladders of air (230). This tearing, breaking and burning of everything, including her wedding ring, and then washing

herself in the lake symbolize an act of purification.

K. Ponni rightly remarks:

Her impossible mental countenance is cognisant along the flux and the pursuit of 'self' amidst her agony. Since man is a social animal he accommodates with the ever-changing society accepting the loss or gain, pain or pleasure, subjugation or subjection.... Her incompatibility stimulates the notes of dissonance, she protests her parents passively, her husband actively and the society vehemently. She dissociates herself from the society and moves towards desolation. (91)

Nature proves to be a cure for the madness she exhibits in her behaviour. It turns out to be a 'meaningful madness' to resolve her problems and helps her face life boldly. She negates all human connections and sheds all the things she had acquired from the civilized society. She experiences a mystical participation or union with nature. After this brief spell of being a part of nature, she was ready to face the world. This madness gives birth to something new in her life. She comes to a realization that she was neither an animal nor a primitive God to live alone in the wilderness. She realizes that escapism is not a solution, and though survival is tough, with lots of threatening elements, one must struggle with reality by confronting life boldly. She emerges as a 'new' woman ready to face the challenges of life. She reconciles herself to the human society after the slow metamorphosis from an animal being to a human being. Like all Atwood's protagonists, the nameless narrator of *Surfacing* too decides to live her life by boldly confronting it. She evolves as a new being free from the feeling of guilt and shame, the feelings that had engulfed her in the past.

Surfacing is a novel that asserts the impossibility of complete withdrawal from society and civilization. Knowing the shortcomings of the society and understanding the fact that life has its own challenges, she displays courage and determination to live her life at the end of the novel. As in many of Atwood's novels, self actualization, the understanding of one's worth and potential begins in the end of the novel. The beginning of

this process of self actualization itself is a positive sign in Atwood's protagonists. The determination of a woman to refuse being a victim and the decision to go back to the society itself is her first step towards emancipation or self actualization. Having faced her guilt and being relieved of the burdens of repression, she is ready to live her life being true to her 'real' self. A. Vijayalakshmi remarks:

Meaningful survival would become possible only when he [man] establishes harmonious relationship with fellow beings and the universe. The quest for knowledge and truth gives direction and dignity to the lives of the individuals. Atwood's art attempts to regard quest as an integral part of the progress towards self-knowledge which is the ultimate goal of life (105)

The novel ends in a note of optimism where she is no longer willing to have imperfect relationships and failures due to them. Her identity is realized in her rebel role and she decides to go back to the city empowered. She also learns to trust herself and becomes an insightful woman who finds her personal as well as social identity. She feels confident about her own self and this awakening makes her realize her power and her potential. Isolation gives her the realization that she could meet life's challenges as a 'new woman'

Surfacing is a novel where the protagonist reconnects with her own self and with the society. The positive element of the novel is that though she had gone through many sufferings in life and had repressed many bitter memories within herself, she was able to resurface from them with a belief that she could face the world as a mature person with a clear sensibility. This trust is an optimistic note that the protagonist would

decide to live life in its real sense without losing her self esteem and dignity. P.S. Ramana observes:

Surfacing is also an endeavour to create a positive female archetype: a woman capable of and determined to live a self-respecting and independent life having proper opportunities for female creativity and love for life while consciously rejecting domineering and patriarchal western culture and civilization (8-9).

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