

# MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING : FEMINISM AND SEXUAL POLITICS.

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## ABSTRACT:

Feminism and Sexual politics are not inherent but embedded. They mainly presented Women who were trapped in the traditional roles set by the patriarchal society. The social conditioning of girl-child, gender discrimination, and self-abnegation abet stereotyped roles. Feminism and Sexual Politics, in general, used to describe political, social and economic movements. It aims at establishing more rights and proper protection for women. It does not have a single key definition as the American radical feminist and writer Gloria Steinem's view, the emphasis is on the intellectual background. "The purpose of feminism is to free the uniqueness of the individual and to understand that inside each of us is a unique human being who is a combination of heredity and environment."

Margaret Atwood presents the wicked warp of patriarchy which does not give women any status in Canadian society. This paper interrogates the factors responsible for the subjugation and perversion of women.

Index Terms: girl-child, predicament, patriarchy, chauvinism, sexuality, Feminism, consciousness.

## INTRODUCTION

There had always been a difference between men and women in all societies and so in Canadian Society. Canadian literature mainly focused on the suppression of Canadian women and the exploitation to which they were subjected to. There were certain social, economic and political issues, which banish women's rights and led to the corruption of their identity, have been critically represented in their works. The works mainly portrayed issues like Patriarchy, Misogyny, Gender discrimination, Sexual exploitation and the right to education.

Margaret Atwood has surfaced as a major figure in contemporary feminist writing. Atwood often creates the female protagonists and narrators as the one who often goes through oppression and suppression. Atwood' surfacing strongly discusses some core concerns related to the females in the world, the condition of women who lead an isolated life due to the chauvinistic male society.

Sexual politics, the imbalance of power between the sexes is one of Atwood primary concerns depicted in the novel Surfacing. She ponders over the effects on women of a social system which solely focuses on the rigid gender definitions. In the novel Atwood light up the existential and psychological dimensions built by the society that led to the chief source of women's oppression and psychological dilemma. Atwood has realistically illustrated the conventional as well as social and sexual roles assigned to women by patriarchal Society. Fractured marriage, gender roles, self-abnegation and male dominance in husband-wife relationships are poignantly exhibited by the novelist. The protagonist of Surfacing is the narrator who has no name and hence it becomes easy for a reader to identify with it.

Atwood's protagonist in Surfacing nameless; she is kept isolated. She is socially abandoned and has no desire to interact. The exploitation of her identity starts from her own home. Her father was a botanist who doesn't want her to interact with the society, so he chooses the northern Quebec Island to live. He builds a house and settles his family.

He provides her a deprived childhood without the warmth of relationship, social life, and values. Atwood says in *Surfacing*; "her family lived between two anonymities, the city and the bush" (S63). For her father:

The restrictions are very destructive that it has affected her childhood psyche itself. She was not allowed to meet her family members or neighbours; she lived like a caged bird. Through this Atwood asserts the need for Communication between people and the sharing of ideas and experiences develops the personality of a human being. Here in this novel, the protagonist's father denies the interaction with the outer world to her. It is revealed when the protagonist says, "Although we played during the visits with the solemn, slightly hostile children of Paul and Madame, the games were brief and wordless" (S 58).

Atwood reveals the need for communication between parents and children. She finds herself confined in the narrow world made by her father. Life becomes ruthless as it does not provide her a space to develop and bloom. She becomes acquainted with gender roles at a very young age.

Growing up as a female in a masculine world, Atwood's Protagonist had an encounter with gender discrimination when she was just a Child. She clearly remembers how; "the boys chased and captured the girls after schools and tied them up with their own skipping ropes. I was the one they forget on purpose to untie. I sent many afternoons looped to fences and gates and convenient trees, waiting for a benevolent adult to pass and free me; later I became an escape artist of sorts, expert at undoing knots." (S 80)

This clearly shows how the females were oppressed under the set rules of society. They were convinced from the childhood that they are oppressed and they would be treated as a non-entity in the society, who has no opinions and voice. In essence, Margaret Atwood here tries to give the voice to the voiceless.

Thus growing up in a culture based on male prejudice, the women never had a chance to find their true identity. The social conditioning that the male chauvinist society subjected the girls made them feel; "men ought to be superior." They consider themselves as inferior to men.

Atwood tries to catch the reader's attention to the fact that "the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it ruled it, and still dominate it today are men." (Beauvoir, p298) In this type of world, femininity is often considered as inferior and submissive. Atwood's protagonist is nameless. She is not only the one who is portrayed without a name and without an identity. The truth is that "None of the women had names than" (S 29)

The deprived childhood teaches her to adapt to the standards of society. At the beginning of the novel, Atwood portrays the protagonist as a shy and submissive woman who suffers every humiliation silently. There are certain factors to which she shut her eyes. She never responded to them other than enduring them. She accepted the restricted life imposed by her father in her childhood, she was failed to obtain education like other children but never opposes to this injustice, and she is exploited in her adolescence by a middle-aged man and has a forced abortion. Even then she does not disclose the cruelty inflicted on her. A sexually abused woman often observed with contempt by society. Maybe it is because of the set stigmas against women she endures all these things. Because she doesn't want to hurt her family and ruin the reputation of the family, she continues to play a passive role even in her marital life. Atwood exposes marriage which does not allow women to identify their true-selves, rather they are assured that their role is to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers and it is futile them to seek anything greater than this, it just nullifies their existence.

The protagonist has too after been in a relationship is forced to endure the exploitation by her husband and continues to self-abnegate her desires. His torture makes her more frustrated. She concludes: "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again" (S 51).

Men always like women to remain oppressed and suppressed. The idea of a woman a free and independent existence is quite intolerable to them. Even it is professional or personal. A woman is often regarded as; "A deficient male and second class citizen, lacking in muscular powers, emotionally unstable and devoid of creative potentialities except in the limited areas." (Salzman, 1949 p203)

Atwood like Bronte and Woolf denounces the gender divisions and role prescriptions which often ends women's freedom. Here in the novel, Atwood is really concerned for the women's future in the male-dominated society. The novels main concern is on the relation between the two genders one is often considered as domineering and the other one as the passive. Nearly all Atwood's protagonists are spelled by the enchanting word, love. At first, she has been portrayed as abused by her lover whom ones told her that he loved her. But in the end, he proved wrong. In the end, the narrator assures that she will not trust the word again. Because she was well aware that love for men is an only physical pleasure.

Atwood shows the position of male domination through the protagonist's friend Anna, who is also subjugated physically and emotionally by her husband, David. She narrates her state and reveals her conflict with her status, "I forgot my makeup, and he'll kill me"... "He wants me to look like a young chick all the time. If I don't he gets mad" (S 131). David symbolizes a mirror of male domination. Anna is not allowed to be in her natural self rather she is supposed to groom as per the wish of her husband, who abuses her. In the protagonist's view, he doesn't know how to love. He thinks that his wife Anna is his slave. He wishes to be loved and blames Anna. He believes that he had been trapped into marriage by Anna. David like any other man is possessive and dismal. He always tortures Anna to expose her body not only to him alone but to Joe and his camera too. David wanted to take a photograph of her body. Even though Anna denies it's visible that in a male-dominated society the opinions of women are insignificant.

Failure and torture of Marriage the major key concerns of Margaret Atwood. Even if it is the marriage of Anna and David or the protagonist. The protagonist often refers to her failed marriage. She often regards herself as a fool who accidentally enters into the marriage commitment. In reality, she never got married. Her lover who was a middle-aged denied to marry her after impregnating the protagonist. The protagonist was even broken by knowing the fact that he was a family man and had a wife and children. She says; "they had names, he said I should be mature."(S170)

Atwood was successful in portraying the protagonist's split self. There was a split between the protagonist's feminine self and the feminist self. Her feminine self was occupied with her dream about peace, harmony, and love in marriage and on the other hand, her feminist self advises Anna to get out of the suffocating and humiliating matrimonial bond. She even asks Anna to revolt against the torment that David did to her. The protagonist's feminist self wishes Anna to reject passively even if it leads to divorce. But the feminine self of the protagonist considers that; "A divorce is like an amputation, you survive but there are less of you."(S47)

She wants to repent for her dead child, which haunts her with the guilt of committing a sin. Northrop Frye opines in his *The Bush Garden*, "The heroine is isolated from her small group and finds something very archaic, both inside and outside her, taking over her identity. The word survival implies living through a series of crises, each one implicated and different from the others, each due to be met on its own terms, failure to meet the crisis means that some death principle moves in" (1995). The protagonist understands her dilemma and comes out of her chrysalis of silence. She decides, "The things to be discarded drop it into the fire, it may not melt, let it be purified" (S 192). She returns to nature and illustrates the situation, "Around me, space rustles; owls sound across the lake or inside me, distance contracts" (S 192). She explains that "That is the way they are, they will not let you have peace, they don't want you to have anything they don't have themselves" (S 200).

In *Surfacing* Atwood tries to challenge the existing power politics, the conventional notions of patriarchy and misogyny. Atwood tries to cite the fact that there is a possibility for women to refuse victimization and stand out from the male-dominated society and can hope to breathe freely in a world defined by them. To achieve this hazy dream one must rapture from the past. According to Atwood; "Everything from history must be eliminated." (S 205)

Because history always considered the female less than male. At the end of the novel, the protagonist comes to realize that she has to resist being a victim. She has to; "give up the old belief that I'm powerless and because of it nothing I can do will hurt anyone. A lie which has always more disastrous than the truth would have been."(S 222)

The nameless narrator of the novel *surfacing* thus signifies the feminine struggle to free herself from the clutches of the Male chauvinist society. Through the protagonist, Atwood not only described the conventional perception of

women and the traditional society's expectation but she also illustrates the changing man-women relationships. Atwood portrays an emerging new woman who knows that; "They would never believe it's a natural woman, state of nature." (S 220) Because natural women in a male-dominated society are always powerless and exploitable.

Surfacing performs a major role in building cognizance in women. It raises the consciousness that even though the male world rules them they can still accomplish their worth and strive to become who they are. They can withstand and discover the world through their own powers. Atwood confirms the notion that women are not just materials to be possessed. They are as much as human like the men. The novel makes it clear that the death of the women is the death of mankind; "if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me..... it must be born, allowed." (S 222)

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