Formation of Self and Personality Disorder: A Study of *Surfacing*

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Abstract: Present paper explores the process of personality formation by analyzing the Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing*. The Protagonist in the novel has familial issues as she has has a dysfunctional parental family and later on she also fails to establish a meaningful relationship with her boyfriend. Due to her past and troubling present she moves towards nature to find solace. She feels that she has more affinity with nature than humanity. Novel also explores utilitarian nature of human world order which brings destruction to natural world order and thus also endangers humanity. Her process of self-actualization was halt long time before due to the societal pressure to live a normal life as per their standards. She breaks the shackles at the end by establishing a bond with nature.

Key words: dysfunctional, personality formation, self-actualization, utilitarian, societal pressure

Margaret Atwood’s characters are complex. Her protagonists are always struggling to resolve their mental conflicts. All of them are self-alienated. It is felt that the motivational system of these characters can be understood if we study them in the light of Karen Horney’s theory of neurosis. After of all these characters are human beings placed in different situations. They move in their particulars social and cultural settings and react to them in peculiar manners according to their motivation systems. He basically detached person seeks neither love not mastery. He wants to do left alone. He expects nothing and wants to have nothing expected to him. He feels superior to others in his independence but his freedom is meaningless because he is alienated from his spontaneous desires. This involves not only living in imagination but shrinking his inner carvings. In order to resolve his basic conflict he draws magic circle so that no one can penetrate. He resorts to escape and hide. “His resignation from active living gives his an onlooker attitude but this is “no true solution because the compulsive
drawings for closeness as well as for aggressive domination, exploitation, and excelling remain, and they keep harassing if not paralyzing their carrier” (Our Inner Conflicts 95). Thus he develops a contradictory set of values and this is self-destructive. This intensifies his original feelings of worthlessness and self-alienation and creates a basic inner conflict which takes him away from his real self.

The narrator not only defines herself as innocent but she also think she is powerless by imaging herself as powerless, she feels that she is not will “I think, as I had no idea what I would do with the power once I got it, If I’d turned out like the others with power I would have been evil.” (Atwood 31) She considers the use of power as evil. Being an innocent, powerless and betrayed woman, she removes herself from the “inner battle field” and relieves herself of the tension by her withdrawal. Withdrawal is not new for the protagonist earlier in childhood she has learnt that she can escape from her inner turmoil if she freshly from all wishes, emotional ties and efforts for winning. She glorifies her aloofness and remains stoic she is cold, aloof and detached like a schizoid person but the posture of her septicity does conceal her repressed found in her family. According to Horney, “a child who groups up in a congenial atmosphere of confidence encouragement in his activities and constructive discipline develops self-confidence” (Neurosis and Human Growth 83) Lack of this atmosphere makes the narrator “socially retarded” which she confesses is worse than mentally retarded. The protagonist’s parents lacked the emotional involvement necessary for a child’s growth. The Protagonist’s father was a botanist, and the mother could enter no emotions in her diary. When the child is awe of his parents, he regards them as “God and develops’. Faith in their capacity to recover from anything. It is natural for a child to develop entological insecurity and put some emotional distance between him and others. The protagonist has spent her childhood in the Lake Forest before moving to the city life. She has always feel like a strange, a sort of alien in both environments. Being split between two anonyms, the city and the bush” (Atwood 532). She remains alienated in both she cannot relate to other children in the spirit of sportsman city because she is alien to their customs and religion. Her parents did not teach her. Religion so she learns it as other children learns about sex.

In reality, she values marriage based on love and commitment. She has respect for her parents and Paul’s marriage. “The barometer couple in their wooden house enshrined in their niche on Paul’s front porch, my ideal” (Atwood 132). Now we are in a position to understand why she says ‘No’ to marriage with Joe. Though her excuse is “I’ve tried and failed …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 proud mine didn’t” (Atwood 81). Actually she has to protect her image of a detached person and repress any desire for intimacy and commitment. However unfeeling, rule and done she may pretend to be, she is essentially highly strung. She cannot tolerate other people saying that her father is dead. She reacts with vengeance. She doubts even David and feels that he is telling lies. It may be argued that even a healthy person resents criticism and injury to his pride. But there is sharp difference between the two. Normal person’s pride is based and substantial attributed of his personality such as the feeling of duet dignity at having achieved something in life. Neurotic pride, on the contrary, stands on shaky grounds. It rests on the idealized image that she alone is capable of discovering her missing father. Therefore, the protagonist reactions to the ordinary suggestions given by Paul or David are violent and baffle the readers. Two causes work behind these reactions. Her friends hurt her neurotic pride by being with her in her search for her father. At the conscious level she knows that she is not self-sufficient as she glorifies her to be and that she has to depend on them. Secondly, she is discussed with her dependency which denotes her weakness. Thus she alternately glorifies and scorns her independence and continues.

Inside, she is afraid feels lonely and needs friends. She is happy when they are around but she shows is happy when they are around but she shows her disregard because it is against the taboos of her withdrawal. She is caught in the crossfire of her conflicting “should” She remarks; “still I’m glad they’re with me, I wouldn’t want to be here alone; at any moment the loss, vacancy, will overtake me, they weren’t here. Though they’re necessary.” (Atwood p.10) So long she has been successful in her self deceit, considering herself immune. Till the narrator reaches the lake, whatever pain is experienced remains at the superficial level of pseudo self. At the sight of the fish that she has killed, she discovers her vulnerability. She is not stoic, she has not done away with ties and deeper feelings and she can be touched by grief. As Marian’s crisis in the Edible woman reaches a critical point when she identifies with an edible commodity, the protagonist of surfacing faces crisis when she identifies with the heron. She sees her predicament in the death of heron that is killed by the Americans and string up like a lynch victim. Anything we coaled do to animals we could do to each other, we practiced on them first. It is very difficult for her to reconcile to the fact, it is a projection on other people of characteristics which in the course of the novel she is forced to acknowledge as her own. Incensed by the manner in which the Americans destroy the thing they have no use for, the protagonist realizes, the only relation they could have to a
thing like that was to destroy it. It is simply to prove that “they had the power to kill.” Belonging with the pain and anger she directs her self contempt towards the Canadians. It is a case of displaced emotions. She blames them to allow this to happen and shows a deep indignation when she perceives an irony that it is not the Americans but the Canadians who have killed the heron. They are also becoming like them, she bursts. At this revelation, her indignation alternates with self accusation.

I felt a sickening Complicity, sticky as give blood on my hands, as though I had been these and watershed without saying No or doing anything to stop it. One of the silent guarded faces in the crowd. The trouble seem people have being German, I thought, I have being human.” (Atwood p.124)

She admits her complicity in the killing of the heron; it brings her a deep sense of her own evil. And finally, she admits to the abortion and she quit. She confess, “I them caste it. I could have said no but I didn’t that made me one of them too, a killer.” (Atwood p.139) This heron incident is very vital because it initiatives the process of self analysis in the case of the protagonist. She not only discovers the reason for the prevailing evil but also the hierarchy of victimization in which the powerful gets the less powerful. She views this tendency to evil as innate. “To became like a little child again, a barbarian, a vandal; it was in us too, it was innate.” (Atwood p.126) we can discern a slow progress in the narrator from neurotic ego-centricity towards an all centric perception while analyzing her own emotional bankruptcy. She perceives similar photocopy of heart in David. “David is like me, I thought, we are the ones that don’t know how to love, there is something essential missing in us, we were born that way, Madame at the store with one hand, atrophy of the heart Joe and Anna are lucky, they do it badily and suffer because of it; but its better to see than to be blind, even though that way you had to let in the crimes and atrocities too. Or perhaps we are normal and the ones who can love are freaks” (Atwood 130-131).

Till now, the protagonist did not have “I” “thou” communication and hence, she could not develop personal empathy. Now psychologically she begins to create herself to other people. The relationship of Anna and David becomes worthy of her attention, which was so for outside the scope of her neurotic drives. Now she perceives Anna as a complaint character, whose marriage is not based on an emotional commitment but on a set of rules. It she breaks them, is upsets the balance. David has his own compulsions; a sadistic. He has pronounced
sadistic trends because of his futility. While discussing the problem of Atwood’s narrator, Abraham Maslow’s theory can be considered.

The protagonist of *Surfacing* is in her adulthood. She is not a self-actualized person. Adult development can be described in the context of three separate systems that focus on various aspect of the self. These involves the development of the personal self, the self as family member (adult, child, member of a couple and parent), and the self as worker. These systems are interconnected. According to Erikson (1968), “a primary task during adolescence and early adulthood is to establish on identity through intimate relationship and work”. The task of identity formation is a continuing process. Adults must structure and restructure their individual work and family identities as their identities as their internal and external worlds change. Without a from sense of being engaged in a suitable occupation and family situation, a young adult may feel void in his or her life- a sense that something is incomplete . The protagonist of *Surfacing* is in search of her identity. Closely connected to identity with friends and ultimately with a committed partner. Atwood’s narrator has no friend. The narrator father does not allow them to go out and visit church. Her father even doesn’t allow his children to interact much with village. She says “but the truth is that I don’t know what the villagers thought or talked about I was so shut off from them.” (Atwood p.58) During the age of young adulthood 18-35 person seeks one or more companion to love. As we try to find mutually satisfying relationship, primarily through marriage and friends. Individuals who are unable to form intimate relationship during this critical period may suffer problems and feelings of isolation, depression and mistrust. This is the case with Atwood’s protagonist. She forsakes her family and gets married to an already married man. When he deserted her she calls him non husband. Her relationship with him ended on sad note. Her abortion and ending of this relationship proves a traumatic experience for her boyfriend Joe. Even them she is not satisfied with her relationship. She is quite cold in her approach. She doesn’t believe in marriage. When Joe proposes her for marriage She said “We’re living together anyway, we don’t need any certificate for that.” (Atwood p.93) Her first marriage was unsuccessful and her present relationship is incomplete which leads to sense & isolation in her.

Family is an important context for adult development family roles and responsibilities were the most important components defining who they are. They talked about their roles as parents, spouse, siblings, and children within their families. They talked about family tasks and responsibilities, about classiness,
communication, companionship, and personal fulfillment. Even young unmarried adult have families. Psychologists identified four types of independence in this process. The first is emotional independence, attitudinal independence, functional independence and finally continual independence which involve separating from one’s parents without feelings of guilt and betrayal. Those who fail to negotiate the separation process especially in terms of independence are more likely to develop psychological adjustment problems. In Atwood’s protagonist case she always feels detached from her family. She does not able to understand family tasks and responsibilities because she abandons her family for a married man. She separates from her parents without feelings of guilt and betrayal. Instead she held responsible her parents for abandoning her. She lives in her own world where nobody is there to question her. Slowly, this isolation developed in psychological adjustment problem for her. She is not able to believe on her friends David and Anna even boyfriend Joe. This behavior is an outcome of her living alone and separate from her family.

Children are often asked,” What do you want to be when grow up? Many of our thoughts and fantasies are occupied by this question. In adulthood, how we answer that question contributes greatly to our identity – which we are, what we are, and what we are not. Whatever our occupation, we carry with us the attitudes, belief and experiences of our jobs. We are members of the corporation or the union or the profession. Work may define our daily schedule, our social contacts, and our opportunities of personal development. In Atwood’s narrator’s case she does not get any satisfaction from her work. She was working as a commercial artist. She wanted to portray her Quebec folk tales but her boss Mr. Percieval believes in American consumerism wants her to do portray things according to American culture. Work is an opportunity to gain self–esteem of respect. Narrator is denied from this which leads to her maladjusted behavior.

Works Cited


