Labyrinths of Mind: A Study of Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing

Dr. Vani Khurana
Assistant Professor
Centre of Professional Enhancement
School of Humanities
Lovely Professional University Phagwara, Punjab (India)

Abstract: Present paper analyses the labyrinths of psyche and subtle tools of psychology to un-riddle theses absurdities. The paper studies the Self-actualization, individualization, autonomy, integration, self-relaxation with reference to Atwood’s novel The Surfacing. The novel is an epitome of psychological reality and presents psychological reality at its best which otherwise stays hidden to the outer world. Characters in the novels have a significant mind story to tell which run parallel and mostly in contrast to their physical existence. In the novel nameless protagonist suffers from the issues of identity crisis and thus runs from post to pillar to search for actualization. The paper tracks her journey of self-recovery and self-authenticity.

Key words: Psychological reality, labyrinth, Self-actualization, individualization, autonomy, integration, self-relaxation

Karen Horney’s theory presents us with suitable tools to understand these characters. According to third force Psychologist, man is not a tension reducing machine, nor is he a conditional animal, man has in him a third forces, an “evolutionary construction force which inspires him to strive for self-realization.” Man has the intrinsic potential to reach the goal of self-fulfillment but unfortunately, his efforts are forestalled in like by unhealthy or injurious influences. All third force psychologists see self-realization as the highest value for a human being. It means that he has the potential to be ‘fully human’ Different psychologists give it different names: Self-actualization, individualization, autonomy, integration, and self-relaxation. Whatever be the name, the goal is the same; realization of the highest potential. The field of third force is vast and the psychologists comprising this branch are numerous.
Karen Horney, like other third force psychologists, insists on the need to realize the real self. Real self for her is the foundation of personality. It is the control inner force which is common to all human beings but is unique in each. As she observes these are “The unique alive forces of his real self; the clarity and depth of his feelings, thoughts, wishes, interests, the ability to tap his own resources, the strengths of his will powers, the special capacities or gifts he may have, the faculty to express himself to others with his spontaneous feeling.” (Neurosis and Human Growth 116) All this will in time enable him to find his set of values and his aims in life. Horney has “the belief in the inherent urge to grow “for her, the real self we are looking for” when we say that we want to find ourselves” (Horney 118). Given a favorable environment, warmth of affection, inner security and inner freedom, the child learns to live according to his real self. As Horney see it, an unfavorable or adverse condition in his environment produces in a child a feeling of “basic anxiety” (Horney 88). Horney describes basic anxiety as the “feeling of being isolated and helpless in a world conceived as potentially hostile. (Neurosis and Human Growth 87). These feelings arise in childhood when one does not get favorable conditions to grow according to individual needs. Children whose parent don’t give them genuine love, lose the sense of belonging, the “we” feeling. They develop “profound insecurity and vague apprehensions.” (Neurosis and Human Growth 98).

According to Horney, when a child sees a potentially hostile environment, he feels threatens and does not relate himself to others with his real self but with his compulsive drives. “He cannot simply like or dislike, trust or distrust, express his wishes or protest against those of others, but has automatically to devise ways to cope with people and to manipulate them with minimum damage to himself” (Neurosis and Human Growth 67). This process weakens the real self and he reacts to his environment with facts. It produces in his dread of himself and others. He feels angry and hostile but helpless to express his danger in this threatening environment. When he represses his hostility, he feels unworthy, unlovable, weak and important. To compensate for his feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, he lifts himself above others by seeking self–glorifications. This he does by adopting interpersonal strategies of defense. He gave three solution to this problem.
These three solutions are- a) his move towards people, b) move away from people and c) move against people. The selection of these strategies of defense depends upon his individual temperament, his social of familial conditions. A person is driven by the compulsion nature of his inner necessities. A child who moves towards people adopts complaint or self-effacing characteristics. In this move against people, he adopts an aggressive trend. These who move away from people become detached. The above three solutions are not mutually exclusive strategies. The individual may move from one solution to another to gain some sense of wholeness and ability to function but he will not be able to resolve his basic conflict. The three interpersonal moves give us a picture of character “types” but in life, ‘people tending towards the same main solution may differ in their human qualities, gifts and achievements as Horney puts it.

Under the complaint solution, Horney list two types, (i) Self-effacing and (ii) Morbidly dependent. For both types, salvation lies in others (Neurosis and Human Growth 226). The self-effacing person in his move to others, “trends to subordinate himself, takes second place leaving the limelight to others ” (Horney 52). He shuns “everything that is presumptuous, selfish and aggressive” (Horney 76). He cultivates all qualities of happiness and martyrdom and expects protection and love in return. He value attributes of goodness, loving and noble, he will be treated well by fate and other people. But when he is not valued for the “lovable” qualities and his virtues are not rewarded, he retaliates. Since he is a self-effacing person he cannot be violent. Therefore he turns his anger inward and feels weak to fight in self-interest. This initiates his shrinking process. So he despairs divine justice, indulges in self-pity, quality feelings and personal inadequacy. When he cannot live up to the dictates of this solution, his inner rage threatens his self-image. Self-hate is generated. His should and neurotic claims give rise to tensions. He is torn by inner conflicts. It results, in extreme cases, in vindictiveness. It may take any form depending upon individual temperament and how much he is damaged.

Erotic love fascinates a markedly dependent individual. For him love in ‘the ticket to paradise, where all woes end; no more feeling loss quality and unworthy; no more responsibility for self, no more struggle with a harsh world for which he feels helplessly unequipped” (Neurosis and Human Growth 239) He is attracted to a masterful, expansive and proud and safe expression of this aggressive tendencies but he also derives vicarious strength. Being an epitome of all lovable qualities, he feels hurt and
disillusioned if his qualities are not recognizes. It means total rejection of him and like the self-effacing type; he also reacts in a self-destructive way.

In order to master life and to become successful, an aggressive type makes a move against people and cultivates efficiency and resourcefulness. He becomes aggressive and self-organized. There are three sub types of this expansive solution. “The narcissistic, the perfectionist; and the arrogant indicative. They all aim at mastering life. This is their way of conquering fears and anxieties; this gives meaning to their lives and gives them a certain. Just for living.” (Neurosis and Human Growth.212). The narcissist seeks to master life by self-admiration and the exercise of charm. He believes he is the “anointed, the man of destiny, the prophet the great give, the benefactor of mankind” (Neurosis and Human Growth 197). An arrogant vindictive person has a compulsive need for vindictive triumph. These aggressive types are proud of their self-sufficiency. They deny all softer feelings, compassion, consideration, loyalty and self-sacrifice. They do not depend on the world to reward them. They seek “Callous pursuit of self-interest” and that is “the paramount law” (Our Inner conflicts 64) for them. They are too certain if achieving their aspirations if they remain true to their vision of life.

In this search for glory, the individual feels “he is entitled to be treated by others, or by fate in accord with his grandiose notions about himself” (Neurosis and Human Growth 41). He is not only no wishes grandiose notions about himself but makes neurotic claims on others too. As Horney says, “the function of neurotic claims is to perpetuate the individual’s illusions about himself and to shift responsibility to tasters outside himself” “(Neurosis and Human Growth.63) Though these are illusions he is harboring about himself, He is unaware of it. The result is that they increase his vulnerability and prevent him from savoring himself with his difficulties. They perpetuate rather than alleviate the individual’s difficulties. Side by side his ‘should’ make a claim on him. He ‘should’ be as he visualizes himself to be. These inner (conflicts dictates) set standard for him. All his energy, which should take a normal person towards self-actualization drag him to actualize the idealized self.

The “should” and the neurotic claims are very damaging. They shatter in the face of the realities of life. When they are shattered the neurotic pride suffers a blow and tension mounts. In order to restore
his pride, the neurotic takes recourse to various methods, depending upon his temperament. Sometimes he hits character or sometimes he tries to forget the incident. It is clear that both ways his idealized self creates an impossible situation for him. To live up to his registered image he makes tremendous efforts but when he falls he feels the onslaught of self-hate. Healthy pride is important for the self but neurotic pride is “the climax and consolidation of the process initiated with the search for glory.” (Neurosis and Human Growth. 109). It is not only based on illusions and self-deception but also on his imagined attributes. This pride system is in fact, his defense against self-hate. He indulges in self-hate. Self-hate is essentially the rage that the idealized self feels towards the actual self for not being what is should. Horney contends that the neurotic has to counter four selves; the real self who is already banished; the idealized self whom is impossible to attain; the despised self and the actual self that he is, at a given moment. According to Horney, when the real self is forsaken, alienation takes hold of a person.

Discussing the problem of Atwood’s heroine from a feminist angle, one which refer to that psychological dimensions of sexual politics which can lead a woman interpreted from the Horney angle it is different. Horney contends that a neurotic makes secret claim towards life and expects his life to be as he/she visualizes it. He cannot face facts because his claims glamour “I am something extra special “and hence entitled to be treated. In accord with his grandiose nations about me.” (Our Inner conflicts 41) this includes demands made on fate also. The protagonist of Surfacing demands preferential treatment from her ex-lover but finds herself alone in the hospital for abortion which given a blow to her “should” she broad. “He hadn’t gone with me to the place where they did it; his own children, the real ones, were having a birthday party.” (Atwood Surfacing 138). She cannot escape the pains and sufferings of a hard harsh, protean reality. Her lover’s attitude means that she is ordinary, which is beyond the scope of her neurotic claims. In these circumstances, the only significant thing is to cling to life. To come back to the everyday world means a return to knowledge. She dreads this knowledge that he is a married man. She wants to keep it locked, to forget it. Forgetting is her road to sanity and health. “A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh canceled. Lapse, relapse. I have to forget.” (Atwood Surfacing 42). In her effort to forget it she becomes an “escape artist” The protagonist’s difficulties start with abortion and the revelation of her ex-lover. His harsh word shatters her self-image. Her self-pride
forbids her to do anything wish a man who is another woman’s husband and had children. She cannot accept all these and hence, cannot get over her anxiety. She feels uncomfortable with her anxieties and to cope with this she now create fantasies in order to present an ideal image of herself. In this realm of fantasy, she is away from pain because she is innocent and it is all the fault of her husband. In the same way she feels her parents are responsible for abandoning her. Her refrain is; “I am innocent” she build this image by fabricating lies and by twisting her memories. She remarks, “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; I said It the events were wrong, the feelings I remain her about them will be wrong too, I’ll start inventing them and these will be no way of correcting it, the ones who could help are gen. I run quickly over my version of it, my life, checking it like an alibi, it its, its all these till the time left I left. Then static, life a jumped track, for a moment’s his lost it, wiped clean my exact age even” (Atwood 67).

These lies are her neurotic needs. The need of lies this. There are no lies but the lies that are stuffed in the mouth by the hard knocked hand of need, the cold, iron first of necessity” when the protagonist it trying to established her innocence, she is showing her desperate compulsive drive. She suffers from a Typical female delusion of innocence; however the fact is that the narrator project herself as powerless and innocent; a victim of her husband’s cruelties because by denying the child and withdrawing herself from all responsibility, the heroine survives the crisis and saves herself from psychological disintegration. Not only does this protect her against self-hate, it also feeds her pride. She blames her non husband as she holds him responsible her non husband as she holds him responsible for her calamities. She does not feel the need to explain to them why it wasn’t really mine; she refuses to identify her child as her own.

“It was my husband he imposed it on me, all the time, it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use. I couldn’t prove it though; she was clever he kept saying he loved me” (Atwood 28).
It is clear that her identity crisis starts with the lack of self-actualization. Once she comes in contact with nature she realizes herself. She feel oneness and belonging and her psychic reality changes.

Works Cited


