

Touching the Tip of Iceberg in *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is a great Canadian writer, who started to write stories during her college days. She taught in many Universities of Canada. The novel Surfacing was published in 1972, a great feministic text, and an object of literary acclaim. The story of the novel shows the flow of ideas of the unnamed protagonist. This novel depicts the ruinous state of Canadian nature. There is an explicit feminist message and also show Atwood's concern for economic oppression and exploitation of Canada by America. Surfacing shows how women are exploited after being psychologically conditioned. In men-women relationships men always get the upper hand. Woman is always enforced rigid gender definitions and rules. The narrator-protagonist undergoes experiences of discrimination and gender bias since her childhood. A middle-aged art professor exploits her sexually, and she has to bear the pain of aborting her child consequently. She has to bear the pain of her father's death; and as such, she becomes mad and behaves unusually, however, re-emerges as a realized being ready to face the challenges of the world.

Key Words: *Feministic, Male Chauvinism, Exploitation, Gender-conditioning, Victimization, Discrimination, Depression, and Stereotyped-perception.*

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A great Canadian writer, referred to as a 'prophet' in Canada, and who calls herself a 'literary freak', Margaret Atwood, who calls her work rather 'quirky and eccentric'. Daughter of an entomologist, Atwood spent first five year of her life in Northern Quebec Bush, then the family moved to Toronto, where she spent her teenage years in a middle class suburb. Worked as a camp counselor and as a resort waitress, Atwood had started to write short stories and poems during her college days. She did teach at the University of British Columbia, and then she became writer-in-residence at the university of Toronto. Travelled for and wide to France, England and Italy. She has written poetry, novels short stories and screenplays; and she has been active in the Writer Union of Canada.

Surfacing, her second novel was published in 1972, was an object of great deal of critical response, and is also regarded as one of the most important novels of the 20th century. Majority of the criticism was positive, however, feminists took special interest in this novel, especially in the heroine, who survives in greatest psychological perils. *Surfacing* is still an object of literary acclaim as it is rooted in 'timeless region' of the human psyche. Structurally an unusual novel, which basically shows the flow of ideas of one character that remains unnamed throughout the sequence of the novel. There is no chronological sequence in the novel as her memory takes her back and forth. *Surfacing* is also read as a lament over the exploitation of Canada as a colony by America. This novel highlights how Canada has lost its culture, myths, tradition, folklore, even kitchen recipes, food, delicacies and manners under the American wave, which has overtaken the mental, as well as the external landscape. *Surfacing* has a very explicit and emphasize feminist manage, and, it also voices its ecological concern. The novel also has a story anti-colonial sentiment highly critical of America as a colonizer. It is a true Canadian novel in quintessence. Canadian literature is conditioned by the fact that Canada has been a colony and has, therefore, suffered economic oppression and exploitation. Atwood believes that the primary duty of the writer is to the society and the nation. She believes that art is dependent on as well as indispensable to its culture. Literature is only a mirror to all aspects of society, nation and culture.

Surfacing is clearly a feminist text. It is about man-woman relationship as power-based, colonizer-colonized relationships. In marital bondage men always seek the exploitation of women. Atwood, being a woman, instinctively captures the psychological ambience of sexual politics, which always makes women go mad. She does not simply present women centered black-and-white perspectives, but also holds women guilty for quite a few things. Atwood also knows that there are quite a big number of women, who are mechanically conditioned to accept exploitation as a

fact of life. And, similarly, men do not invariably turn out to be bloodsuckers or exploiters in her fictional universe. She pleads for a balanced, harmonious interaction between men and women in spirit of equality and mutual respect.

In *Surfacing*, Atwood focuses on the psychological dimension of sexual politics, which can lead a woman to insecurity, as is the case with the unnamed protagonist. This novel is concerned with certain key issues regarding the relationship between the two sexes. Atwood voices in the novel the crippling effects on women of a social system, which enforces strict gender definitions. Issues such as marriage, divorce and abortion emerge as integral to women's struggle and painful survival.

Men always gets the upper hand in man-woman relationship, believes Atwood and in the subjugation, she shows that women are not less guilty. They are victimized by men, yet they do not stand against this sexual colonization. They consider themselves weak, and hence cannot stand against exploitation and victimization. The heroine of *Surfacing* has grown up in a society where it was worse for a girl to ask questions or research for the missing father. The social system enforces rigid gender definitions and roles. This has been her process of social conditioning, which is true of women everywhere. They are taught to remain reconciled to their inferiority and men's superiority.

The narrator-protagonist recalls her own experiences as a woman in a society, which believes in and enforces discrimination on grounds of gender. During her school days, boys were dominant and adults did not give girls equal attention. During her quarrels with her brother she was forbidden to ask questions. Her relationship with her art professor makes her believe that love is only a part of men's life, while it is the whole existence of a woman, and it was only later that she realizes the typical male attitude of her middle-aged married lover. While she was undergoing the agonizing experience of abortion of her child, her lover was celebrating birthday of one of his children. After this experience, she does not want to believe in magic word love; and her exasperation and depression grow when her lover expected her to thank him for arranging the abortion. How atrocious! Now she becomes wiser and turns down proposal of marriage of her subsequent boyfriend Joe.

Anna, another character, contents to be known as 'David's wife', in constantly humiliated and insulted by David. She does not show any willingness to remove herself from the position of the dominated. She is continually made fun by Daniel and his chauvinistic attitude. He forces her to strip herself and takes pictures of her naked body to showcase them in his projected movie. She herself is also responsible because she neither resists nor revolts, however, she feels insecure and helpless in male-dominated world, where she does not find any ray of hope for herself. Love,

for men is a cover for all-round exploitation of women, and Anna-David relationship is an example par-excellence here.

In *Surfacing*, the protagonist appears to be split between her 'feminine self' and 'feminist self'. Her feminine self represents place and understanding in married life, but the feminist self is not ready to accept humiliation at the hands of her husband. She prefers to walk out of marriage, as a consequence, and so, who divorces her husband. This, though, her adverse effect on her psyche, as she could never forget the betrayal.

Surfacing is a great feminist text as it brings out how the protagonist evolves from the stage of weakness to the later stage of maturity and self-dependence. The evolution of her character is the principal reason for the fame and success of the novel. When undergoing personal painful ordeal of betrayal, abortion, humiliation and insult, the narrator-protagonist chooses a voluntary seclusion from the society. She gets rid of anything human about herself, becoming more and more like an animal. She now loves a non-verbal level of life and explores other means of communication. However, with the end of her visionary experience, she realizes that she is no longer an animal and she has become a human again. She realizes that she must rejoin society with the return to society. She was also return to language since it is needed for communication and development of human relationships between people.

Surfacing can very well be taken as a novel of consciousness raising. It represents the triumph of a women's struggle to free herself. Here Atwood has shown not only the stereotypical perception of a woman and the traditional society's expectation from her but she has also shown the changing man-woman relationship. *Surfacing* shows 'New Hope' with 'New Courage' for 'New Women' to emerge and lead an authentic life.

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