

Surfacing by Margaret Atwood: Fragmentation, Violation and Objectification of the Female Body

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Abstract

Atwood's novel titled *Surfacing* has not received much recognition and critical acclaim as her other works but it is very much layered and contains ample plurality of meanings that need to be researched. I have tried to look at the novel from a feminist perspective focusing on the female body. Laden with symbolism and imagery of different kinds, the novel stirs our consciousness and raises questions in our minds regarding the status of women in an ever growing industrialised and globalised world and in turn the novel has successfully provided me with enough material to analyse. By focusing on the protagonist's dilemma and discovery of her identity in her home town, Atwood shatters known stereotypes and celebrates liberation of the female body in a unique way. The aim of this paper is to explain the fragmentation of the female body through the symbolisms and imagery in the novel, shape multiple meanings and evolve a new way of looking at the novel and Atwood herself. The power of men in an educated and advanced society and their role in the re-emergence of the protagonist has also been looked at.

Keywords: female body, fragmentation, gender, power

The female body has been subject to various forms of dissection both physically and mentally through thousands of years. History bears testimony to many incidents that have reflected how a woman is subjugated not only by men but by women equally. Feminism as a movement has had four waves till now. The first wave began in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially, its focus was homogenous in nature as it concentrated on the issues faced only by women. Now, it has widened its grasp to address all forms of inequality across all

genders. But the focus area of this paper is limited to the unequal treatment rendered to women only. A major form of practising indirect control over a female is by shaping up a definition of who she should be not only in her physical appearance but in every aspect of her life starting from her habits to her clothing to her manner of speaking. “There is no such thing as a woman as such, there are only walking embodiments of men’s projected needs” (MacKinnon, p 534). Epistemology and everything that had been passed down as generations of discourse have been constructed by men’s perceptions of what a woman’s experiences are. It is a man’s perspective and is unfairly biased towards women, as is everything else. For example, several religious texts have defined notions of how a woman is inferior to the man. The writers and interpreters of these texts were men for centuries. A woman’s own sexuality is socially constructed by these narratives dominated by men. Since the day a woman is born she is socially trained to follow the definition already set up by men to remain “good and attractive”. A female body begins to exist for men in order to fulfil their desires. “One is not born, one rather becomes a woman” (De Beauvoir, p 249).

This paper seeks to explore some core issues that a woman’s body undergoes by analysing the novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood, when the woman is the victim of such a society where she cannot assert her right over her own body. In this novel Atwood has powerfully narrated the story of an unnamed young woman, the protagonist of her own story, who after being “fragmented” in her life redeems her identity after taking a trip to her home in Quebec’s northern wilderness in order to supposedly search for her missing father. As the story unfolds we come face to face with many layers of truth which at first were not exposed. It traces her dilemmas, her inner conflicts, her past regrets, her present relationships and the realisation of her true self after psychological breakdown. The enemies of the narrator are men, technological advancement, industrialisation and capitalisation which are destroying, dominating and exploiting women and nature. The narrator becomes one with nature and ultimately re-emerges ready to fight back with the society that once severed her off from everything. By giving complete power of narration to a female Atwood has sketched a brilliant picture of a woman’s struggle with herself and the society in 1960s when the second wave of feminism had just begun. The novel is filled with various images that identify with the concept of fragmentation. Fragmentation of the female body as a concept holds the meaning of how a woman is isolated, muted, disjointed not only from the world but from her own self, lacking any sense of identity after being inflicted with some form of wound that gives way to oppression. She remains an incomplete figure visualised, constructed and then ultimately destroyed by men. According to Pamela B. June the word fragmentation is a broad term that not only refers to a “disjointed form of writing but also the state of women’s bodies, identities, memories, and relationships in a patriarchal era” (Pamela B. June, p.4). Denial of complete control over reproduction and the need to seek male approval are some strong examples.

The novel *Surfacing* doesn’t only highlight the issue of fragmentation but we find several incidents that shed light on male domination over women. Be it objectification of their

bodies, forceful sex or “thingifying” them; this novel successfully brings out the problems of women to the forefront. Also, Atwood has juxtaposed the destruction of nature with the destruction of the narrator’s mind and body. The protagonist attains redemption by becoming one with nature, understanding her “raw” origin. There exist two realities: one is the victim and the other is the oppressor. The victims are women, Quebec’s identity and the oppressing powers are men, and America’s infiltrating culture, violence, corruption and unnecessary interference.

After the protagonist returns to her childhood home along with Joe, her boyfriend and another couple David and Anna who have been married for nine years she reminisces about her past life in bits and pieces. She reveals the way she feels about herself about her failure in marriage, how everything changed for her after she married and fell apart suddenly, her husband and child left behind somewhere. She keeps on referring to images of her being a “wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb” (Atwood, p.138). Gradually the truth unfolds as she finally comes to accept the fact that she was never married, never bore a child, all was just an illusion she had in mind to escape the reality of her affair with a married man and her forced abortion. The impact of her decision to have allowed herself to get aborted because of such a man was so adverse that she became estranged, emotionless, and passive towards everything in life; she had just stopped feeling anything, it was as if she was a dead corpse, segmented, painless, walking around in a human body. “I was emptied, I stank of salt and antiseptic, they had planted death in me like a seed” (Atwood, p.184). Being a woman she had become powerless in front of the man she supposedly loved, for him the unborn child was an obstacle which needed to be killed; “He said it wasn’t a person, only an animal”. (Atwood, p.185) She was reduced to nothing but an object required for satisfying him: “fixed me so I was as good as new; others, he said, wouldn’t have bothered.” (Atwood, p.185)

The men David and Joe were filming an amateur movie called *Random Samples* with videos of incongruous things which did not correlate with each other in any manner. They were trying to capture fragments which they liked including cleaning of a dead fish, dead heron hung upside from a tree with nylon rope, Anna naked (forced into stripping). David’s commentary on Anna’s body is condemnable; “Come on, we need a naked lady with big tits and a big ass”; “Now just take it off like a good girl or I’ll have to take it off for you.” (Atwood p.172-173) By doing so they were asserting their power over things and people around them and feeding on them, fetish sing over objects even women. Reacting resiliently against them the narrator throws away their film into the water thereby releasing all the fragments trapped inside it: “the invisible captured images swimming away into the lake like tadpoles”. (Atwood, p.215)

David and Anna, a seemingly happy couple have a problematic relationship. Anna is oppressed by her husband in several ways. She lives in fear of David, trying hard to conform to his image of hers, applying makeup early in the morning so that he doesn’t discover her

without makeup which will result in her getting “punished”; “He’ll get me for it!” (Atwood p.151) He makes sexual commentary on her body parts, doesn’t want her to get pregnant thus imposing her to take oral pills which degrade her health and forces her to have sex with him whenever he chooses to; he even goes to the extent of making her strip for his movie in front of Joe shamelessly claiming his right on her body. Her sexuality doesn’t remain her own anymore: “What defines women as such is what turns men on” (MacKinnon, p. 531). Anna despite being aware of her husband’s philandering and dominating nature chooses to stay with him, abiding him, unable to break free because she “loves” him. The narrator finds Anna trapped in her own body, “nothing goes in, nothing comes out.” (Atwood p.214)

In the narrator’s memories about her childhood she recalls how she used to idolise female models wearing “exotic costumes” with heavy makeup and modern hairdos; how she used to play with paper dolls donned in two piece bathing suits. During high school there was distortion of reality about reproduction; “transparencies with labels and arrows, the ovaries purple sea creatures, the womb a pear” (Atwood, p.96).After school the boys used to tie girls up with “skipping ropes”; especially the narrator used to be socially ostracised because she didn’t play along with them. She also recalls how the old priest insisted and ensured that women always wore clothes that covered their bodies as a result of which women and girls could not learn how to swim despite living by the lake. From the day a woman is born, she is groomed according to her gender, always living under constraints; be it religious, social or political.

The relationship shared by that of the narrator and her boyfriend Joe was a sexual one where both were fulfilling each other’s sexual needs without getting emotionally involved. The narrator had lost the capability of handling any kind of emotions after her past experience which Joe was unaware of. For her the word love had lost all its charm, it had become devoid of any meaning. Despite having stayed together in the city we see Joe forcing himself sexually on the narrator when she denied his proposal for marriage. The question of consent fades away when a man is hungry sexually; “he was pinning me, hands manacles, teeth against my lips, censoring me, he was shoving against me, his body insistent as one side of an argument.” (Atwood p.188) The narrator struggled to free herself and managed to do so only after threatening him about her getting pregnant if they had sex then; “flesh making more flesh, miracle, which frightens them all.” (Atwood p.188) David, realising that something was wrong between the narrator and Joe decided to take advantage of the situation and approaches her demanding she sleep with him and forget about Joe. On being denied, David curses the narrator calling her a “tight-ass bitch”. Men do not care about women’s emotional and physical needs, they view her only as an object for sex; “softness means pregnability by something hard”. (MacKinnon p.530) Each of her body part is fragmented in their minds over which they fetishize.

Atwood brings coherence into the narrator's life by making her self-conscious about her problems. By becoming one with nature and identifying her roots she successfully re-emerges ready to assert her rights and fight her way forward. The incident of abortion which had crumbled her and drained her out ultimately becomes the source of power through which she pushes forward instead of retreating backwards. Her regret to have agreed to undergo abortion had made her hollow; empty from inside, "A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled." (Atwood, p.57) After a week's stay at the cabin in the woods she comes face to face with the realities of her life. She takes the rein of her life into her own hands and regains control after undergoing a psychological breakdown. She has gained consciousness as to what a woman suffers because of her gender. Her awareness level regarding all the dirt, all the evil surrounding her increases and she decides to go back to the city life which she earlier detested. Her biggest victory is reflected in the single most important decision to let Joe impregnate her according to her will. She wanted to get pregnant, this time of her own accord, without letting any man decide her future. She leads Joe outside the cabin, by the side of the lake, where they copulate; "I guide him into me, it's the right season, I hurry." (Atwood, p.209) Once the job is done she feels a relief gushing through her body, she has redeemed herself for her earlier sin of having killed her first child. "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me," (Atwood p.209). This time she won't commit the mistake of telling any man her secret, she is the fierce mother who will protect her child alone. The fear of losing her child again keeps her alert; "Nobody must find out or they will do that to me again" (Atwood p.210).

Despite having been reduced to mere bodily fragments, the narrator rediscovers her identity not only her sexual and mental identity but also her real roots in the lap of nature. She finds the violation of nature by Americans synonymous with the violation of women by men. Just as trees, animals, birds are ripped off their rights, muted, dismantled by human beings, their innocence crushed upon similarly women become silent in their endeavours to keep men happy, their suffering becomes their destiny. There are many victims of society: the dead heron killed for no apparent reason, insects imprisoned in jars then killed, fish killed for consumption, landscapes altered, foetus killed and thrown away. The protagonist raises above all forms of subjugation when she runs away from her friends and Joe into the forest, roams around naked for two days carrying the young foetus in her womb. That experience reunites her with her inner consciousness after which she decides to return to the city into her "own time" and fight her way out; "This above all, to refuse to be a victim" (Atwood p.249)

In this novel Atwood has raised the critical question of the importance of "feminist consciousness." MacKinnon has stressed the importance of this consciousness raising to build up a proper definition of feminism. "Through consciousness rising, women grasp the collectively reality of women's condition from within the perspective of that experience, not from outside it" (MacKinnon p.536). If the narrator could not have realised what was happening to her and around her she would never have been able to gather the strength to

surface back. On the other hand, we have another subjugated woman called Anna who could not break away from her imprisonment; she chooses to stay and endure everything. This brings to the forefront the requirement of women to be aware of their situation in respect to the society and hence act accordingly.

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