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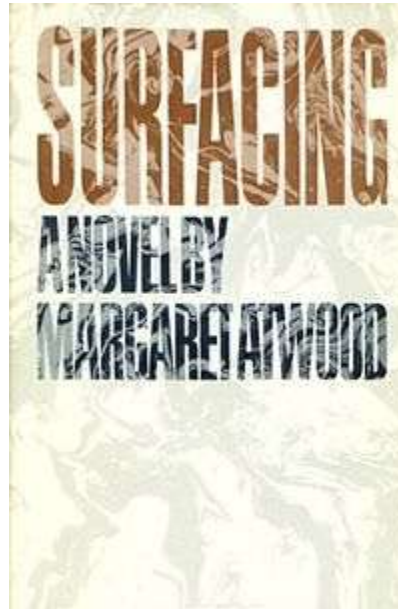
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## Atwood's Feminism in *Surfacing*

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### Abstract

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Atwood's Feminism in *Surfacing*

This is an attempt to analyze the suppression of women as portrayed in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. Atwood analyses the inner conflict of the protagonist and their quest for survival. Remarkably a good writer of Canada, Margaret Atwood is the most prominent figure in Canadian Literature. She not only reflects society but also aims to reform it.

Feminism, a theme in many of Atwood's novels, is explored through the perspective of the female narrative, exposing the ways women are marginalized in their professional and private lives. Margaret Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing* (1972) pursues and develops further the feminist themes of *The Edible Women*- the protest against the female sex role and the predatory and aggressive attitude and behaviour of men towards women anti-capitalist, anti-American and ecological concerns continue to be part of the author's radical, perhaps revolutionary message of these early novels. The theme of the heroine's dilemma as an artist/writer is also ever present. In Surfacing she involves herself in a search for, among other things the roots of her creativity, buried within her and relating to her past and childhood. *Surfacing* predates the environmentalist movement, but the narrator's reverence for the Canadian wilderness is a pro-environmentalist one. Thus these environmental concerns still resonate today given continuing trends toward over consumption and the prevalence of technology that relies upon natural resources.

### **Canadian Literature**

Canadian literature is an active field now. The word "Canada" is believed to have originated from two Spanish words "Aca and Nada", which means "nothing here". This notion of absence in the name has been a haunting presence in Canada throughout its socio-cultural history. Despite such an absence, Canada has bewildering variety of literatures. They do not follow the maxim that literature must reflect the social, political and historical reality of their age. On the other hand, the reality they created was more or less independent of the impersonal reality around. Their choice of characters from common folks and a less traditional aspect of mythology are clearly described in Canadian literature.

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Though Douglas Le Pan perceives that Canada is a country without any mythology, the Canadian writers have been attempting to discover its roots and to trace and interpret its growth. Thus by examining the history of its inhabitants, the achievements of its pioneers, and its society, they are creating a mythology. Among this mythmakers who seeks knowledge about the origins, Margaret Atwood establishes her own stand.

### **Margaret Atwood**



Margaret Eleanor Peggy Atwood is a novelist, poet, critic and a pioneer Canadian writer. She is noted for her feministic ideas and mythological themes. Atwood's work has been regarded as a barometer of feminist thought. She is acclaimed for her talent for portraying both personal and worldly problems of universal concern. Though widely accepted as a fiction writer Atwood has published poetry also. Her poems are often short and witty like epigrams. Novels of Atwood and short stories project her as a skilled and versatile stylist capable of working with success in a variety of genres. Critics appreciate her fiction as they found her poetic versatility and her venture into prose style to be a happy combination.

A weaver uses fragments of silk, wood, raw yarn and even feathers and twigs to make a tapestry of colours, shape and form. Atwood selects individuals, images and ideas to create new, fascinating, believable pictures from which stories can unfold and weaves stories from her own

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life in the bush and cities in Canada. In an attempt to focus on Canadian experiences, she populates her stories with Canadian cities and its people.

## **Humanism**

Atwood is known for her humanism and her insight into the landscape of the country as well as into the landscape of human mind. She focuses on feminist issues and concerns, problems of family, sexuality and political identity, and examines these through multiple branches such as science fiction, comedy, ghost stories. One of the recurring themes in Atwood's fiction is the search for the identity and survival of the self in a society whose public and personal relationships are characterized by alienation, exploitation and domination.

## **Female Protagonists**

Atwood's protagonists, usually female, are often a kind of every woman character, a weaker member of society. Atwood creates situations for these protagonists who, burdened by the rules and inequalities of their societies, realize that they must discover and reconstruct courage, self-reliant persons in order to survive; they struggle to overcome and change the systems that inhibit their security and survival. Through her novels, Atwood symbolizes her concern for the status of women in society and to assert a distinctive Canadian identity for them.

## **The Novel *Surfacing***

*Surfacing* created waves in Canadian literature. It is partly a psychological thriller and partly a deductive novel; it surveys human foibles; gives many glimpses of the urban and rural scenes in Canada. The novel's concern is with the psychic tension of the woman striving for a discovery of an identity and finally rediscovers herself during a mythic journey to a remote island in Northern Quebec in searching for her missing father. The protagonist's search for her father symbolizes the Canadian search for their roots and her rediscovery constitutes her search for human identity. The novel "records a woman stripping her of social mask, defences and ideas to discover her essential self" (Reddy 26). The feminists found the novel as Woman's

novel, while the nationalists found a Canadian classic. Atwood's feminist and nationalist concerns, her socio-political vision are all expressed in *Surfacing*.

*Surfacing* pursues and develops further the feminist themes of *The Edible Woman*, Atwood's first novel. The protest against the female sex role and the predatory and aggressive attitude and behavior of men towards women-anti-capitalist, anti-American and ecological concerns continue to be part of the author's radical, perhaps revolutionary message of these early novels. The theme of the heroine's dilemma as an artist/writer is also ever-present. In *Surfacing* she involves herself in a search for, among other things, the roots of her creativity, buried within her and relating to her past and childhood.

### **Portrayal of the Male, Economic/Technological Power Structure**

In this novel, the enemy is even more clearly outlined, the male, economic/technological power structure that dominates and exploits everyone and everything, women, people in general, nature and its resources. The heroine opposes this structure, or hierarchy, setting out on a search for the values inherent in unspoiled nature. She also explores her psychic depths with an intensity not seen in any other of Atwood's novels. But *Surfacing* is still similar to the other books in that it also constructs a set of opposites, or dichotomies, indicating a clash of values. On the one side are the forces of darkness, so to speak, the capitalist monster, the U.S.A., its technology, corruption, violence, war and death. On the other side we find the victims: women, nature, Canada, animals, peace and life.

### **The Meaning of the Title**

The title indicates the nature of the narrator's progress. She comes up, surfaces, at the end of the story after having dived into a lake, literally and symbolically. The pattern suggests a rebirth, or even baptism, from which she emerges as new woman, or potentially so. She goes in search of her father, who is missing, and ends up in a kind of visionary, trancelike state in which she communicates with the spirits of nature. On the way, she is guided by Indian myths, but goes

past even these, finding or envisaging her own spirits, or symbols, which is appropriate for a creative artist.

The narrator travels into the Canadian backwoods with her boyfriend Joe and another couple, David and Anna, sixties radicals who themselves suffer from the alienation from nature that they accuse Americans of having. On their expedition an ironic reversal of sex roles occurs immediately. The narrator is the only one who has any experience of the wilderness beforehand, and she teaches the men how to fish and how to cope in this new environment. Later, she begins to identify to her body with the wilderness, threatened by the encroachment of male technology. This thread is seen as a sort of disease that creeps up from the south, destroying everything in its path. But where the narrator and her party are going, there are still some unspoiled areas left. The lake where her parents' cabin stands is especially significant, "Blue and cool as redemption" (15). Salvation is somehow to be found in its murky depths, where the father seems to lie drowned. She follows his trail, which leads her to what can perhaps be called the mysteries of a religion of nature. Somehow, her father's spirit is there.

### **Sexism of the Traditional Religion**

As a contrast, the sexism of traditional religion is pointed out as the narrator recalls the old priest of her childhood who had seen to it that the women always wore clothes that covered their bodies. Many of them never learnt to swim because they have been ashamed to put on bathing suits, around naked in the bush, rejecting these anti-female attitudes according to which men give themselves the authority to decide what women can and can't do. Before she met Joe, her boyfriend, the heroine had had an affair with a married man and had become pregnant. He didn't want to live his family for her sake, urging her to get an abortion. This she did, leaving her hurt and despairing, feeling guilty towards the aborted fetus and betrayed by the man. She feels compelled to deal with the trauma of the abortion in some way and goes in search of a necessary process of healing and renewal. In the end she allows herself to be impregnated by Joe, and the growth of this new life within her becomes her compensation for the loss of the other child, indicating her saying yes to life again, on more than one level.

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## A Different Kind of Feminism

One might argue that this is not typically feminist line of thinking, but it may be that she has to have it both ways, in a sense, a baby and a new freedom and self-definition. Also, Atwood does not shy away from the reality of guilty feelings in a woman who, however justifiable her decision, chooses to abort a fetus. But the heroine's pregnancy is also symbolic of artistic creativity that is part of her development. She has been the failed commercial artist who returns to the wellspring of serious art, which is also a form of knowledge. In contrast, David and Joe are mere amateurs and observers, making a film about Canada, or so think. As so often in Atwood, cameras symbolize a hostile detachment, and the narrator eventually throws both the camera and film into the lake in a symbolic act indicating her rejection of the men's attitude.

Diving into the lake, she is re-enacting her childhood, even going back to the womb to be reborn herself. At the same time she is beginning to create a new life within herself. Thus, both rebirth and atonement occur. Life struggles against death, everywhere. The novel contains chains of image of the many victims of modern society and its rapacious mentality. There are frogs and other small creatures, imprisoned in jars, then killed, worms for bait, fish caught, herons crucified, landscapes ravaged, a brother nearly drowned, the fetus imprisoned in the womb, then killed at the abortion. All are victims of the same inhuman forces, but at the end, the protagonist takes a firm stand against it all: "This, above all, to refuse to be a victim" (191).

Her quest is originally for the father, but the mother is also important and may have bequeathed something to her daughter in the cabin: "There might be something for me, a note, a message, a will. I kept expecting that after my mother died word of some kind, not money but an object, a token" (36). Eventually she does discover and receive the legacies from her parents and uses them for the purposes of her own regeneration. This is achieved in her final regression into what can be called a sort of constructive or healing madness where she communes with the sprits. A frog, for example, she can now see as one of her "ancestors". In Indian fashion, the border between humans and animals is open, so to speak. This "broke down" is also her final, real act of mourning the loss of her parents, and the lost child, by giving expression to her grief.

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## **Essentials of the Narrator's Quest**

What are the essentials of the narrator's quest? It is a search for identity, the influences of the deceased parents, the forces that have shaped her, the influences of the deceased parents, the forces that have shaped her. The father represents nature, Indian myth, the simple, pure life. The mother stands for love, nurturing, as in the vision of her feeding the birds outside the cabin. The descent into the lake is symbolic of the breakdown, the penetration into the deepest layers of the psyche. Emerging, surfacing into sanity, the heroine has achieved redemption, transformation. There is a pattern of dissolution followed by reintegration on another level. The protagonist finally emerges as a kind of shaman, arriving with new knowledge. The rediscovery of the deities of nature indicates a movement away from the existing, patriarchal religious terms and mythologies. The father-son image is replaced by earth, water, animal life. The narrator imagines herself as an earth-goddess, feels united with the land. She also struggles against the old sex role, the expectations of men. She rejects David's chauvinism, as well as Anna's compliance with it, and Joe's conservatism. She demands respect and equality, and real change from her partner. Joe is seen as being redeemable, and her relationship with him may become successful. At least, such a possibility is hinted at the end.

## **Equality in Relationship**

There are no superiors or inferiors in the relationship. There is only a mutual corporation for the only universe. That is what Atwood wants to talk about in the book when she mentions it in her conversation.

There is an objective world out there; I'm far from being a solipsist. There are a lot of things out there, but toward any object in the world you can take a positive or negative attitude or, let us say, you can turn it into a positive or a negative symbol, and that goes for everything. You can see a tree as the embodiment of natural beauty or you can see it as something menacing that's going to get you, and that depends partly on your realistic position toward it; what you are doing with the tree, admiring it or cutting it down; but it's also a matter of your symbolic orientation toward everything. Now I'm not denying the reality, the existence of evil; some

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things are very hard to see in a positive light. Evil obviously exists in the world, right? But you have a choice of how you can see yourself in relation to that. And if you define yourself always as a harmless victim, there's nothing you can ever do about it. You can simply suffer.

Looking from a different angle, everything will be different. The borders between women and men and nature and civilization are not that hard to cross.

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