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Female Quest for Self-Identity and Women Subjections in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

This Research paper is to elucidate the quest for self-identity and women subjections in Canadian society. Even the characters of Atwood especially in her famous novel *Surfacing*, Which speaks about of how the women are losing their identity and how they are treated and how they are sufferings, how they are searching for their one's identity among the society. The novel *Surfacing*, which is also deals and grappling with notions of national and gendered identity, anticipated rising concerns about conservation and preservation and the emergence of Canadian nationalism.

Key words: Colonialism; Nationalism; Conservation; Preservation; Identity

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As the post-colonial criticism developed, the theorists have agreed upon the fact that the role of feminism in the post-colonial practice is crucial. Moreover, these two theories clearly have the same goals. On the one hand, the main objective of both of them is to disclose the traditional power structures, both patriarchal and imperial. On the other hand, both feminism and post-colonial criticism aim to show the way the writers challenge the respective forms of authority. The main concerns of the post-colonial criticism are the formation of canon, the

phases through which imperialism and decolonization have gone, as well as how these processes are expressed in literature. What is more, the criticism is also concerned with the ways of resistance within literary pieces, such as rewritings of traditional concepts and creating voices that stand in opposition. All these issues become the matrix and concern of feminist criticism. Not the least, crucial to feminism is also pointing at the notion of diversity. For many women, the process of writing is an expression of themselves, it allows them to "throw off their chains" and to struggle for more autonomy.

The twentieth century has given rise to women's efforts to fight for their rights in the Western world. In the forties, they were relatively emancipated, since they perceived the encouragements to enter the workplace. There, they could enjoy a relative independence and they felt responsible. They proved that they can be "effectual workers", but when the World War II was over, they had to face new requirements: They had to give up the jobs to the males coming back from the war ("Feminism"). They were and felt misplaced, everyone expected them to take care of their home place instead. What is more, they had to fulfill the role of a perfect mother and wife. The fact that earlier they were able to taste independence, career and pay reminded women that there was still much work to be done.

This paper is an attempt to have a closer look at the famous novel *Surfacing* of the Canadian women writer Margaret Atwood. *Surfacing* is the work of a Canadian Ecofeminist a novelist who played a crucial role in forming the Canadian literary canon. Atwood's novel *Surfacing* was published in 1972. The paper mainly focuses on how the women characters are suffering and how they are able to find their female identity in a patriarchal society.

There are several ways through which an identity is formed; having self-knowledge which has been created through one's personal history, experience of childhood and one's membership to a certain society thus defines the

person's concept of himself according to the set of norms of the given culture. These characteristics are essential to develop a stable personal identity and when these are complex or problematic the individual has to face struggle in the process of identity construction, so to speak, the person needs to find his place in society, resolve the problems of existing personality discrepancies, feelings of displacement and alienation from his culture.

The unnamed narrator in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* embarks on a journey of self-discovery during which she has to come to terms with her confusion of choices, uncertainties of her past, personal life incongruity and her defected interpersonal relationships with the people surrounding her. Erik Erikson formed his theory about "identity crisis" which provides explanations for the conflicts that a person has to struggle with. Although, Erikson based his theory on adolescents, he also states that every human being has to face temporary instability during different stages of life which needs constant redefinition of the self. "Today when the term identity refers, more often than not, to something noisily demonstrative, to a more or less desperate 'quest,' or to an almost deliberately confused 'search...'" The nameless narrator in Margaret Atwood's novel is on the pathway of unresolved crisis, she stands at the crossroads between different values, and her insecurity of her self-certainty limits her presenting her self-image to others. The novel reflects her journey of finding a resolution for her identity crisis, her struggle to conquer one of the most difficult issues in the lives

The female narrator of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is often seen as a representative of Canada. The international reputation of Canadian literature is to a large extent ascribed to Atwood whose literary activity finds its roots in two factors: she belongs to the category of writers who "are daughters of an empire in a settler and invader colony" and, secondly as inheritors of a history which was patriarchal in Canada. Both the facts contribute to the protagonist finding herself lost in the myths imposed on her during her life. She realizes the fact she wants to get rid of the false images in her mind, such as those of language, of relationships with other people, of spirituality and so on. Even though she longs for finding her own vision of the world around her, she seeks the natural world to find the answers.

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* opens with the depiction of generalized myths that the narrator lives with first of all, it elaborates on the myth of language, which the protagonist perceives as "the inadequacy of spoken words". Some myths of Canadian culture and history are treated, among others. That shows Canada as a peaceful space in the middle of nature. However, Atwood observes the falseness of this generalization and points at issues that prove the opposite. What is more, the narrator also elaborates on false images about her family and friends as well as those of Christianity and spirituality in general.

Surfacing is a novel about a young woman who is an artist going in search of her father on a deserted island in

northern Quebec. She takes a couple of companions with her – her lover Joe, friend Anna and Anna's partner David. While attempting to find the father, she recalls feelings and events that have to do with her past. The main issue of the novel is that of searching for identity. The unnamed protagonist perceives herself as a victim; on the one hand, as a member of patriarchal society, she is a victim of men: not only, in the protagonist's view, do they make use of women's bodies for their own satisfaction, but also have more rights. They are those who have the main voice in creating history and think they are responsible for "saving the world, men think they can do it with guns" (*Surfacing*, p.176).

On the other hand, as a Canadian she feels oppressed by the cultural imperialism of Americans who regards the Canadians as the other. The young woman is shifting between her memories of her childhood and the experiences she goes through at present. Not only is she questing to understand and find her position in her family, but also in the Canadian society. As a victim she feels disconnected from her language, culture and history, and, not least, from members of her family, especially from her missing father; in fact, she perceives herself as a displaced person. These feelings evoke her an urgent need of recreation: the heroine of *Surfacing* wants to seek her lost identity, to find and reconstruct it again.

In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood uses a wide range of symbols: among others she implies the imagery of water in the lake and she credits the central symbol of a father with a great importance. What is more, to accentuate the existence of the major Canadian myth, that of victimization, she operates with the notion of a victim and even depicts a certain narrative position to do it. Likewise, Atwood creates heroine of *Surfacing* as a woman struggling with her body.

The main objective of the paper was to elucidate the quest for self-identity of the Canadians especially in the Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*. In spite of how they are treated and how they are sufferings, how they are searching for their one's identity among the society. The novel *Surfacing*, which deals and grappling with notions of national and gendered identity, anticipated rising concerns about conservation and preservation and the emergence of Canadian nationalism.

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