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Surfacing: The Recovery of a Displaced Identity

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The quest for identity whether on an individual or collective level is always an important aspect of a meaningful existence. A person's physical environment is as crucial as the mental environment because the rapport between them leads to the construction of a 'complete self' or 'whole being'. This projection becomes problematic for people whose experience of the past and present is shaped by the legacy of some power politics. The adverse effects of oppression and domination cause a schism between the inner and outer realities of a person. At such circumstances, a person does not feel at 'home' where s/he lives because it ceases to be "the peaceable kingdom."¹ And words become inadequate to express ideas and emotions as language ceases to be the mental environment. Even the memories of the past become unbearable which otherwise help an individual to have an adequate self-perception. The present study attempts a reading of Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*² (1972) based on the hypothesis that in order to have a meaningful existence, a person needs to develop or recover an effective identifying relationship with his/her place, past and language.

The novel is a first-person account of an unnamed and unreliable narrator's life and journey into her past. The young, English-speaking protagonist is a commercial artist in "the city" (most probably Toronto) who leaves her isolated, rural home-stead at Quebec to pursue a life of her own. Thereafter she enters into an empty relationship with her art instructor, has an unwanted abortion and subsequent separation from him. She has insulated herself from the past through numbing her emotions and rearranging her memories. Now she returns to her ancestral home with three companions — Anna and David, a superficially happy married couple; and Joe, the narrator's current lover who is a potter and a quiet person. She comes to find her botanist father, "a voluntary recluse" who is reported missing by Paul, a French gentleman and a friend of her father. The discovery of her father's corpse inside a lake brings out discoveries about herself. Appropriately M. F. Salat opines that the protagonist's physical/geographical journey triggers off a parallel psychological/spiritual journey.³ And she surfaces from the depth of the lake with a new assessment of her life in relation to the world. In this regard *Surfacing* becomes a "poet's novel" as Diane E. Bessai opines, with "the romance pattern of quest: separation, descent and return."⁴

The novel covers the period of the narrator's growing-up years "during the war" in the 1940s until she comes back to her childhood place when she is in her late twenties. Hence, *Surfacing* covers a pivotal phase for Canada and the Canadians' past. During this phase 'colonialism' becomes an umbrella term for the native people, ethnic minorities, regional territories as well as women and Quebeckers and stands behind many resistance movements coinciding the Centennial of the Confederation of Canada in 1967. Atwood's fellow-writers such as Rudy Wiebe, Mordecai Richler, Margaret Laurence, Robertson Davies, Robert Kroetsch, etc.

have been in the throes of 'self-discovery'. The prevailing Canadian sensibility is summed-up well in the words of Kroetsch: "tension between this appearance of being just like someone else and the demands of authenticity has become intolerable — both to the individuals and the society."⁵ What *Surfacing* tries to synthesize with 'the demands of authenticity' is a number of ideas, concerns, images and motifs which have occupied Atwood's creative oeuvre — not only her poetry, fictions and short stories but also her critical study *Survival* published in the same year as *Surfacing*. These multiple issues, in the words of Roberta Rubenstein, are —

the elusiveness and variety of 'language' in its several senses; the continuum between human and animal, human being and nature; the significance of one's heritage, including not only personal ancestors but gods and totemic figures of primitive cultures; the search for a location (in both time and place); the brutalizations and victimizations of love; drowning and surviving.⁶

Atwood incorporates various ideas on place, past and language and their complex interaction into *Surfacing*. The sense of being cut-off from the past coincides with a dislocation between place and language early in the novel as our narrator reveals: "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (5). A little later she asserts that "if you live in a place you should speak the language. But this isn't where I lived" (20). As she comes back to her ancestral home, she feels: "the feeling I expected before but failed to have comes now, homesickness, for a place where I never lived" (24). She is not the only one alienated from her roots but so are her friends as she says, "My friends' pasts are vague to me and to each other also, any one of us could have amnesia for years and the others wouldn't notice" (24). This sense of disconnection, according to Bill Ashcroft and other critics, produces "the alienation of vision and the crisis in self-image."⁷ The crisis of identity of the protagonist can be regarded representative of the Canadians whose country, a settler colony, erstwhile a colony of England and France, is seen facing cultural imperialism "from the south". Eadaoin Agnew has opined that *Surfacing* does not deal with the physical act of colonizing a country, but focuses on the aftermath and the mental colonizing which is an insidious form of domination and control.⁸ This experience leaves people with words that do not express their ideas, a displacement from the country or cultural group to which they belong and a past they feel disconnected from. These are dimensions of cultural colonialism which go deeper than specific abuses and can affect an individual's projection of identity.

The narrator states that "a language is everything you do" (123) but fails to answer Joe when he asks her if she loves him. Rather she feels: "It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine" (100). She knows that language is crucial in maintaining a sense of mutuality between the self and the world. Iqbal Kaur has the view that it is words that help an individual realize that s/he is a part of the world, a world which s/he shapes and is shaped by.⁹ Language — the medium of expressing our inner reality and understanding the outside world — is a potent instrument of cultural control for it provides names and terms by which the world is known and reality, constituted. Dennis Lee describes the deeper significance of this phenomenon in Canadian context:

. . . if we live in a space which is radically in question for us, that makes our barest speaking problematic to itself. For voice does issue in part from civil space. And alienation in that space will enter and undercut our writing, make it recoil upon itself, become a problem to itself.¹⁰

The issue of language for the Canadians is presented to all who travel from English to French Canada, or vice versa, by the sign that reads "Bienvenue on one side and Welcome on the other" (5). It reflects on a significant cultural aspect of the Canadians who because of their colonial

history share a country but not a native tongue. The novel offers a more personal demonstration of this issue through the narrator's mother (English) and Paul's wife (French) — two neighbours sitting together in awkward silence because they do not speak each other's language.

The narrator's flat, emotionless narrative is symbolic of her spiritual numbness. Images of death and disease punctuate the early part of her journey — “White birches are dying, the disease spreading from the south” (1). But the most malignant disease is that of becoming an “imposter American” or a “machine”. As the narrator comments: “they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside . . .” (123). In fact, the narrator and her companions are also infected. Even the bond they share is merely superficial. David reveals that he and Anna who are married for years “don't talk much any more except with other people around” (132). Anna says that David can't stand having her love him and likes to make her cry as he can't do it himself. Anna's real self is but — “a seamed and folded imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere” (159). The narrator too shares a mechanical relation with Joe. What she cares for him “seems to be physical: the rest is either unknown, disagreeable or ridiculous” (51). She can't accept when he talks of love or suggests marriage. For her ‘love’ is “the magic word but it couldn't work because I had no faith” (131). She thinks that emotions are amiss in both her and David: “there is something essential missing in us . . . atrophy of the heart. Joe and Anna are lucky, they do it badly and suffer because of it . . . or perhaps we are normal and the ones who can love are freaks” (131).

The reason behind this ‘atrophy’ or apathy is the narrator's physical and emotional mutilation. Images of amputation, frigidity and paralysis are persistent in her consciousness. She is a fragmented entity: “I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time . . . at some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head” (99). The past experiences make her feel like a “woman sawn apart in a wooden crate . . . the other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal” (102). She reveals some selected information of her past like her marriage with the former husband, the forced pregnancy, the divorce and the husband's custody of the child. However, all these serve as a ‘decoy’ and it gradually crumbles when she is in search of her father. In fact, the fake husband is her middle-aged, married art instructor who does not want their relationship “to influence anything” and persuades her to abort when she conceives a baby: “as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal” (138). Since her abortion, the guilt-consciousness has never left her as she confesses poignantly: “it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn't; that made me one of them too, a killer . . . since then I'd carried that death around inside me” (139). The experience has left her feeling “emptied, amputated”. She cannot acknowledge at that time her own potential for death so she creates a different version of the incident: “I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made. I needed a different version, I pieced it together the best way I could” (137). Her self-alienation from her past grants her a ‘comfortable inauthenticity’.

There is a constant reference in *Surfacing* to “the Americans” and denunciation of what they have come to symbolize. According to Jaidev, the novel projects the Americans “as people against innocence, nature and life-giving gods; they are also against all cultures or peoples that happen to be relatively weak or vulnerable.”¹¹ It is best described through an ironic

demonstration of people like David and Anna. Their relation is like a power play, constantly maneuvering and manipulating. David is seen denouncing “the Americans”, but the narrator finds out that “Second-hand American was spreading over him in patches, like mange or lichen. He was infested, garbled, and I couldn’t help him: it would take such time to heal, unearth him, scrape down to where he was true” (146). The ‘imposter Americans’ prefer “everything collapsible” and “catch more than they can eat and they’d do it with dynamite if they could get away with it” (60). When people get carried away by the aggressive and materialistic fervor of modern civilization (which the negative aspect of ‘the American culture’ symbolizes here), little they care about ‘life’ and start treating everything as commodity. Diane E. Bessai also notes that the novel attacks “the destructiveness of technologically oriented materialism in the context of its protagonist’s struggle to make the necessary accommodation to the era of ‘Americanism’ through retracing of her past.”¹²

The narrator makes the discovery that the fishermen suspected to be Americans are in reality Canadians. Their senseless killing of a heron like a ‘lynch victim’ signifies nature’s violation. They kill it to prove that they have the power to do so. Their attitude towards nature is that of the colonizers’ to a colony. They are exploitative to their fellow-humans as well: “they will not let you have peace, they don’t want you to have anything they don’t have themselves” (180). According to Roberta Rubenstein, the novel is an indictment “against a plastic, consumption-oriented contemporary reality which threatens to overwhelm Canadian life.”¹³ The narrator, however, chooses side with humanity making her choice to become a ‘natural woman’. Joe too is away from danger as he doesn’t speak the language of the ‘imposter Americans’: “for him truth might still be possible, what will preserve him is the absence of words; but the others are already turning to metal, skins galvanizing, heads congealing to brass knobs, components and intricate wires ripening inside” (153). Danger is with them who blindly imitate without realizing what they are becoming. Dennis Lee too criticizes the suicidal doctrine held by the modern technological civilization that looks at —

. . . everything but our naked wills — the new continent, native peoples, other nations, outer space, even our own bodies — as raw material, to be manipulated according to the urges of our desires and the dictates of our technology. But not only did this view of an unlimited freedom seem arrogant and suicidal; it also seemed wrong . . .¹⁴

The evaluation of her lived experience finally leads the narrator to a positive self-image. In order to have it, first she has to find the message or ‘token’ left by her parents. She discovers her father’s pictographs in the cabin which are sketches of primitive animals and figures. At first she concludes that he went mad in isolation, but the papers she subsequently finds out reveal that the sketches are notations of primitive rock painting located somewhere along the lake. When she plunges in the lake, she discovers not the pictographs but the body of her drowned father facing her underwater. Unable to accept the shock, her imagination collapses her father’s image with that of her aborted child. The confrontation shatters the barrier between her conscious self and the unconscious. After realizing her capacity for destruction, she is no more a fabricated self and prepares to encounter the present as well as the past and the future with renewed awareness. She becomes responsible for herself and her actions as she says: “I have to be more careful about my memories, 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: if the events are wrong the feelings I remember about them will be wrong too, I’ll start inventing them and there will be no way of correcting it” (67).

The narrator thinks of her parents “as living in some other time, going about their own concerns . . . mammoths frozen in a glacier” (3). She also reviews her ambivalent religious values and childhood experiences. She was like a “hermit-crab” who didn’t know “the local customs, like a person from another culture” and felt “socially retarded”. Her confused religious beliefs have roots in her father’s sayings: “He said Jesus was a historical figure and God was a superstition . . . If you tell your children God doesn’t exist they will be forced to believe you are the god, but what happens when they find out you are human after all, you have to grow old and die?” (98). Now she understands that her father’s rejection of Christianity was actually liberation from dogma and he escaped from Christianity to protect his kids from its “distortions”. In the lap of her childhood abode she finds a mysterious connection among nature, life, death and the sacred form. She recognizes a sacred presence in everything: “anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ . . . The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people . . . We are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life . . . But we refuse to worship; the body worships with blood and muscle but . . . the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks” (134). The schism between the head and the body is finally alleviated through an acknowledgment that the sacred approach to life and nature is one that sees the underlying unity of things.

In the process of finding the (Native) Indian rock paintings left by her father, the narrator realizes the affinity he tried to create with the place he lived in: “he needed an island, a place where he could recreate not the settled farm life of his own father but that of the earliest ones who arrived when there was nothing but forest and no ideologies but the ones they brought with them” (53). Her father’s legacy to her is the map to guide her to a genuine sacred place where she would find her own personal truth: “The Indians did not own salvation but they had once known where it lived and their signs marked the sacred places, the places where you could learn the truth” (139). She starts believing in religion as the medium for spiritual enlightenment. She acknowledges the benevolence of the life-saving gods: “These gods, here on the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten, were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed; and freely” (139). What seems to be highlighted is the regenerative quality of the indigenous culture.

When the narrator’s friends inform her about the discovery of her father’s body, she doesn’t mourn his death. She denies the limited reality of such fact and exults with her new-found perspective: “nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive” (153). She offers an item of cloth to propitiate the gods in gratitude for the revelation. She also starts to strip away the falsities of civilization and emotions begin to seep back into her numbed being. Now she is ready for her mother’s gift. She finds it in her parents’ cabin in the form of a drawing she made as a child of “a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail” (152). The subject of the picture is her own past: herself in the fetal state in her mother’s womb and collective representation of the feminine principle expressed through maternity. The male figure in the picture symbolizes complementary aspects: it is simultaneously her father, the masculine principle, a god (who, with horns and tail mends the Christian rift between God and Devil, good and evil) and specifically the nature deity of the rock paintings.

The journey to the narrator’s psychic and spiritual rebirth is completed towards the novel’s end. Having realized a source of life within, she initiates love-making with Joe. Their

intercourse is symbolic, not merely physical. She wants to generate life in celebration of the capacity for life she has recovered. Earlier she thought that Joe's sexual power represented the negative valency of death: "I didn't want him in me, sacrilege, he was one of the killers . . . he didn't know about himself, his own capacity for death" (141). It is altered now by her transformation and the climax of their sexual act makes her feel: "my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long . . ." (155-6). Her child is a symbol of the released guilt of her past and the potentiality of future. She vows to bear "the primeval one" by herself — animal like and alone. Analogous to deep penetration into her primitive self, the narrative style also becomes fragmented, mirroring her non-verbal and non-rational state. She also avoids human company and remains isolated. After her friends' departure, she returns to the cabin and starts crying in her mother's garden. Releasing the emotion frozen inside her, she mourns her parent's death and her past-self. Then she sets fire to her belongings: "the ring", her art briefcase and other accessories that represent her false past and need to be assimilated through purification.

The narrator exists in a state of primitive consciousness in which each object in Nature is invested with sacred and personal significance. Everything associated with human civilization seems forbidden, even food and shelter. She eats roots and builds animal-like layer. She says: "I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending" (162). She hopes to recover the archaic language to communicate with the spirits of her parents. She believes in their presence and guidance: "They were here though, I trust that. I saw them and they spoke to me, in the other language" (182). She learns from them that salvation and redemption are never complete, they must be constantly renewed. She tries to think what it was like to be them: "Our father, islanding his life, protecting both us and himself, in the midst of war and in a poor country, the effort it must have taken to sustain his illusions of reason and benevolent order . . . Our mother, collecting the seasons and the weather and her children's faces, the meticulous records that allowed her to omit the other things, the pain and isolation and whatever it was . . ." (184). They were people who always favoured 'survival'. Engraving their lessons in her heart she decides "to be a creative non-victim."¹⁵

The narrator realizes that to accept the imperfections and mortality in life is to accept life: "energy of decay turning to growth, green fire . . . My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply" (162). After recovering the capacity for love and faith she decides to go with Joe who comes back for her to the island. Joe is someone who represents a kind of animal purity and dogged devotion. Her decision to go with him to 'the city' and 'civilization' would mean 'to live in the usual way'. She is not yet sure if Joe is offering her 'captivity' or 'new freedom', but what matters is "he's here, a mediator, an ambassador" and what is more important is that she can trust him because "he isn't an American" (186). She also realizes that she can, in the individual level, refuse to be a 'victim': "I have to recant, give up the old believe that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been" (185). And her fellow Canadians too have to be aware of "the pervasive menace, the Americans. They exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (183).

The narrator comes alive in her 'home ground' and achieves a 'whole' identity through re-alignment with her past (which gives a new meaning to her present existence and the future), a

rapport with her physical environment (she sees it as an extension of herself) and a reclaiming of voice (her new sense of reality is communicated through it). The natural cycle of regeneration and redemption is made possible through a sense of complete affinity with the physical environment: “I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am place” (175). When a loon or a wolf sees her, it accepts her as a part of the landscape and she says, “I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock” (181). Her identification with the place is similar to the original inhabitants of Canada who do not envision themselves separate from their surroundings. As Rosemary Sullivan says, “It is natural that she (the narrator) should turn to North American Indian culture to contrast technological man’s alienation from nature with the Indian’s mystical participation in nature.”¹⁶

Words finally come back to the narrator as a medium between her and the surroundings. Her earlier reason for disowning language is that it represents people like David and the ‘American’ (Canadian) fishermen. They would not care to “another change of flag” in their country or if it gets “sold or drowned, a reservoir” (126). She also does not want a language bearing colonial reminiscence whether ‘French’ or ‘English’. She finds the English words inadequate to express her perceptions: “I had to concentrate in order to speak to him (Joe), the English words seemed imported, foreign” (144) and feels that language divides us into fragments. But immersion in the “multilingual water” of the lake helps her to claim a new voice. Now she can interact in “the other language” which is the domain of balance and harmony, of head and heart, of her parents and the life-giving gods. The whole gamut of new perspectives attained through the immersion prepares her for survival as she realizes: “withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death” (185). She decides to return to Joe for whom speech is “a task, a battle” as he is far away from the language of the mechanized world. She knows that they “can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other . . . For us it’s necessary, the intercession of words” (186). She also understands the significance of words for her child, as she says: “word furrows potential already in its proto-brain, untravelled paths . . . It might be the first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed” (185).

Her rejection to be a “victim” and the discovery of her new identity can be observed in the light of what Dennis Lee says:

. . . to name one’s condition is to recreate the halt and stammer, the wry self-deprecation, the rush of celebratory elan and the vastness of the still unspoken surround in which a colonial writer comes to know his house, his father, her city and land — encounters them in their own unuttered terms, and finds words being born to speak them.¹⁷

The novel also comments on patriarchal attitude towards women which itself is colonial in nature. Male chauvinism is exemplified by men like David who says of Anna: “I’m all for the equality of women; she just doesn’t happen to be equal and that’s not my fault” (132). He behaves as if he owns Anna’s body and soul. The narrator’s former lover too thought of her idea of becoming a “real artist” was “cute but misguided . . . because there have never been any important woman artist” (46). The idea of a loving and balanced man-woman relationship is symbolized by the narrator’s parents: “they had reached a balance almost like peace. Our mother and father at the sawhorse behind the cabin, mother holding the tree, white birch, father sawing, sun through the branches lighting their hair, grace” (132). To quote Margaret Atwood — “The men and women can take their turns at being human, with all the individuality and variety that the term implies.”¹⁸

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