



Antagonism, disorder and escape: A psychological analysis of Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*

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Abstract:

Female, the half backed binary of the society, since times immorial till the present era have experienced nothing but only one thing i.e. the slavery. Even though, Mothers or women are considered as the prestigious representative of God in the earth but this is the folk who is bitterly tortured in this society. They become slave for being a mother, a wife, a sister and a lover. And this enslavement gradually not only affects their health but also destroys their inner peace. Similar conditions were also experienced by the unnamed narrator as well as protagonist in the novel Surfacing which forced her to leave the human world thus to live in an isolated way. The traumas encountered by the protagonist reached such a height she became the victim of neurosis as well as psychosis. The crude mechanism of the society changed the whole characteristic of the protagonist as well as forced her work like a selfish machine. Keeping in mind all these factors, this paper tries to have the analysis of her sufferings as well as mental traumas.

Key terms:

Psychosis, Neurosis, Repression, Imaginary stage, Rooster Coop, Fault line, Surfacing, Unconscious

Methodology: Analytical as well as conceptual methods are used over here. Analytical method is used to analyze facts or information already available and to make a critical evaluation of the material. Typing and formatting of the final draft will be done as per the latest *MLA Handbook 7th edition*.

Introduction:

“To live without collection is

To live without the self”

[Margaret Atwood]

Margaret Atwood is a prolific and versatile writer, who in 1972 with her astonishing creative style produces her second novel *Surfacing*, thus returns to the theme of identity, as the novel itself is a search for identity and self discovery. In the words of Wimsatt-----

“The beauty of the book is that it saves everything. All the themes Atwood has been brooding over for years are here tied together and made into a whole the title is better than accurate , it is a well –developed metaphor.” [12]

Atwood herself commented-----



“Infect, as I write along, I realize that there isn’t a plot. There’s lot of scenery but no action. Some very nice photographs are there, but there is nothing much in the way of events propelling them along.” [35]

The book depicted the story of a woman or an unnamed protagonist as well as narrator who comes from Toronto, northern Quebec, to look for her missing father, who has been informed about the incident by Paul, the friend of her father. Her visits to the place is after nine years as she had totally cut herself off from her parents and only once came to visit her mother in the hospital. One of the reasons behind this breakup is her involvement with a married man in the city, thus got pregnant but the person leaves her under the circumstances and much against her wishes she had to get the pregnancy terminate. Thus, unable to cop up with the painful reality, invented for herself a different reality thus up growth towards an animalistic stage. Here, gradually past overtakes the narrator and drives her to a total animalistic stage with the realization of some power which she considers as the gift of God; thus tries an attempt to create a fault line by revolting against the civilization of present day world.

Psychoanalytic criticism initiated by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) mainly refers to the study of one’s mental as well as psychological condition, thus, describing the idea of psychoanalytic we found that in this novel the concept of psychoanalytic flows like a flux. As the novel mainly talks about a woman which is beautifully depicted through the uses of narrative technique ‘streams of consciousness’. In depiction of this narrative

technique narrator hardly cares for demarcation of ‘time’ i.e. past, present and future. Containing the similarity in this novel Surfacing too we hardly found any kind of consideration of time. As in the words of author herself-----

“There is no action, no plot” [15]

Therefore, here we can only found the picturization of mental condition of the protagonist as well as its depiction with no certain boundaries of time which proves from the beginning of the story with its description about a journey with her friends.

“I can’t believe I’m in the road again; twisting along...that’s success.” [5]

Thus, the narration progress with the mingling of past, present and future as well as give us a fragmentary description about the life of the protagonist which had reached its surface level and clearly visible to us after the chapter sixteenth as soon as the narrator surfaced out from the lack. And it also gives us a symbolic meaning of the title itself which too contains the psychoanalytic idea while referring to the surfacing out which means the mental sufferings and agonies which narrator suffers from her childhood.

Freud, while discussing the concept of psychoanalysis also introduces the concept like *Pleasure Principle* i.e. our impulse to avoid all un pleasant things as well as the concept of *Conscious, Subconscious, Unconscious* and *ID, Ego* and *Super Ego*. Comparing the mind with an ice berg *Freud* added that all the conscious things are guided by morality, social circumstances i.e. *Super*



Ego whereas *Pre-conscious* is guided by *Ego* and *Unconscious* is guided by *Id*. According to Freud *Id* is the Source of all psychic energy driven by *Pleasure Principle*. It is the only component of personality that is present within human being from birth. These aspects of personality are entirely unconscious and include the instinctive and primitive behavior. *Ego*, this component of personality deals with reality. It develops from the *Id* and ensures that the impulses

of *Id* can be uttered in a manner adequate in real world. *Ego* is based on *Reality Principle*. The last component of personality development is the *Super Ego*. *Super Ego* according to Freud represents the ‘Conscience’, social morality (which is beyond *Id*). Kristen M. Beystehner in his research article *Psychoanalysis: Freud's Revolutionary Approach to Human Personality* describes the same concepts as-

The *id* has the quality of being unconscious and contains everything that is inherited, everything that is present at birth, and the instincts. The *ego* has the quality of being conscious and is responsible for controlling the demands of the *id* and of the instincts, becoming aware of stimuli, and serving as a link between the *id* and the external world. In addition, the *ego* responds to stimulation by either adaptation or flight, regulates activity, and strives to achieve pleasure and avoid unpleasant (Freud, 1949, 14-15). Finally, the *superego*, whose demands are managed by the *id*, is responsible for the limitation of satisfactions and represents the influence of others, such as parents, teachers, and role models, as well as the impact of racial, societal, and cultural traditions... (Personality research 1).

Freud again introduces the concept of *Neurosis*, *Psychosis* as well as *Repression*. To Freud *Neurosis* is the result of conflict between *Ego* and *Id*. It is the state of mind in which a person is

at war with himself or herself where as in *Psychosis* a person has the conflict between *Ego* and the outside world. Considering the *Repression* as a kind of store-house Freud added that all unfulfilled desires or traumatic past events which being suppressed under the influence of *Ego* and *Superego* finds its shelter in the *Unconscious* and place an important role on human activity.

Even though, Jacob and Wanda are under the command of *Super ego* as well as *Ego* but they failed to get rid of command of *Id* thus suffer from *Neurosis*, *Psychosis* as well as *repression*. Their relationship reflects the surrender towards *Id*.

Now, referring through the Freudian concept of psychoanalysis where he mainly talked about ‘*ID*, *Ego* and *Superego*’ as well as the complexities related to these which he termed as *neurosis*, *psychosis* and *repression*, here too we found that our narrator the protagonist suffers the complexities between *ego* and *id*, i.e. ‘*Neurosis*’, where person is at war with herself/himself. And our unnamed narrator was also in a mental war with herself, therefore, wanted to live an alienated life and the main cause behind this she suffers from the ‘guilty consciousness’ ‘because of the abortion of her first child.

“That was wrong, I never saw it. They scraped it into a bucket and threw it whenever they throw them.....” [55]

Psychosis, which is also an outcome of disturbance between *ego* and outside world,



in this novel we found that the unnamed narrator or protagonist is the worst sufferer of this conflict. Throughout her life she lived a very conservative life, moving around from one place to another with little kind of social attachment left about any friend circle, therefore, alienation can be considered as her best friend, thus upgrade less kind of knowledge about the society and the dualistic nature of its people and as a result, she has come under the trap of one married man who had not only dominated her but physically exploited her too and at last thrown her after aborting the child.

“It was my husband’s ,he imposed it on me ,all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator...after it was born I was no more use .”[38]

Again,

“I was never told about the body” [57]

Because of that relationship, the narrator got departed from her parents too who also during their childhood (narrators) gave hardly any proves to be the conscious parents.

“I could remember before that .when we lived intent. It was about here we found the lard pail ...our father had gone on a long trip...our mother was given a three week food of supply.” [155]

And because of all these sufferings the narrator grows as a person who hardly cares of any other, without any emotional intensity only concentrates on performing her duty which reflects from this stanza-----

“Their voices murmur, they can’t discuss me, they know I’m listening ...they thinks I

should be filled with death, I should be in mourning. But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive.”

The unstable relationship between Joe and narrator is also an outcome of such traumatic past history because of which she did not want to be united with Joe-----

“But marriage was like playing monopoly or doing cross word puzzle, either your mind worked that way, like Anna’s...”

The main conflict between ego and outside world bursted out when at the end of the novel narrator had a momentary transformation towards animalistic stage, thus revolted against fake picture of civilization with their little sense of care for human being as well as environment where everything is commodified according to the need of superior class and instead of having freedom compulses the inferior one to lead a suffocative colonized life. And this transformative stage can be related with Lacan concept of ‘Imaginary stage’ i.e. no difference between oneself and other. Again, the illusionary as well as fragmentary depiction of marriage can also be considered as her repressed desire of unconscious, because of which she created such fable and wanted to live in an imaginary land.

“But a paper house was better than none and I could almost live in it, I’d lived in it until now.”

Conclusion: Moreover, we can say that the projection of the novel which is centered around an unnamed narrator contains a clear picture of a lady as well as her trauma which



author tries to universalize without giving any specific identity, therefore, hardly gives any name to her. And the visualized picture of mental agonies of narrator or the women like her who only suffers in this revolutionary land of patriarchy without the utterance of single word tries to project the outburst of a rooster coop by creating a fault line with her transformation towards the animalistic world. Thus, the depiction of life of narrator as well as her surfacing out sufferings creates a vivid identification of being a psychoanalytic novel with the embellishment of fulfilling the same criteria.

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