

Canadian Multicultural Mosaic: Cultural And Self Identity In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Margaret Atwood, a remarkable and perhaps the most contemporary figure in contemporary Canadian literature. Her writing was influenced by specific events and ideologies such as the World War II, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movements, the Feminist Movement, the resurgence of Canadian national identity, contemporary literary and cultural theories about Deconstruction, Post-coloniality and Post-modernity. This political milieu is deeply reflected directly or indirectly in her writing.

The notions of Canada and Canadians are highly questionable more so in the light of multiculturalism. Canada as a nation, historically and geographically, had to fight its own battle to constitute its identity. Northrop Frye opined that somewhere if Canada has to have an identity, it must accept the identities of all the groups with their differences. Out of the processes of colonization and decolonization, it maneuvered its status as a bilingual multicultural nation a mosaic that accepts ethnicity of every citizen, assimilating it into its character. Canadian multiculturalism is a product of its history, geography and political system. Canadian multiculturalism has given rise to various questions and also offers a ground to negotiate the problematic of identity.

Canadian culture needed protection and nurturing. Henry Bousassa wrote that "If a race ceases to express its thoughts and sentiments through its language, in that language which has grown with it and which take form with its ethnic temperament, it is lost as a race. The preservation of its language is absolutely necessary to the preservation of the race, of its genius and its temperament." (Bousassa,1963:64)

Atwood is deeply concerned about Canada as a nation and its culture. She has become a cultural landmark. Culture holds a distinct identity for Atwood. She feels herself responsible for projection of Canadian culture in its true forms. The Canadian culture which has evolved through various stages of interaction with aboriginals, Britishers, French and other immigrants has become integral part of her creative work. She talks of the various facets of Canadian culture like its myths, bilingualism, multiculturalism and various dichotomies.

1970's was a decade of confrontation with a growing sense of ideological and philosophical crisis. The concept of culture has undergone a major transformation, which was significantly linked to the strong emergence of identity politics in the 1970's and consequent renewed academic interest in the questions of gender, ethnicity, nationalism and feminism. The years 1972 – 1978 represent a critical stage in Atwood's writing, which is aptly called a "mirror stage". *Surfacing* (1972) and *Lady Oracle* (1976) and her *Two – Headed Poems* (1978) contain mirror imagery so strategically used that the central speaker's very identities seem coded to it. Whereas in her earlier works her central speakers had remained caught in an estranged culture, one dominated by the imperial power. Her speakers undergo this mirror stage and emerge with identities that struggle to be particularly Canadian and feminist. (Davey, 1984:97)

The issue of power as a phenomenon defined by broader social structures runs throughout all of Atwood's writing, especially those written during and since the Canadian cultural awakening of the 1970's. She herself in her "Notes on Power Politics" concluded "the exercise of power is the opposite of the practice of love power signified negatively to her, and love positively" (Atwood,1971:07) Critics believed that in the course of her career she has tried to join the two, seeing the value of the inter connections, redefining and newly politicizing both terms. Power ("American", "male") without love becomes as harmful as love ("Canadian", "female") without power.

The four basic elements of Atwood's writing which are frequently emphasized by critics and readers are *duality*, *nature*, *self* and *language*. Atwood's system or "universe" as described by structuralists are a set of codes that structure her work. These codes are present in her work linguistically, or as configurations of

images, characters, actions and so on. Her system is not a static one but a dynamic process in which the works constitute a coherent argument, a dialectic, while each individual text functions dynamically or moving through a series of poetic or narrative strategies. Atwood identifies human failure as acquiescence in those western dichotomies which postulate the inescapable static division of the world into hostile opposites: Culture / nature, male / female, straight line and curved space, head / body, reason / instinct, victor / victim. The duality is more than thematic, she is not simply rejecting duality but working with it. She manipulates the inescapable tension between the artificial and natural, a tension not merely destructive but also dynamic, a tension which enlists language in the process of recognizing and healing the polarities and divisions of "Cartesian hell".

Her dualistic system functions to break down the boundaries separating the binaries merely to transform culture into nature, victor into victim, is to remain trapped within the pointless, static system of dichotomies. If we try to concentrate on the most significant dichotomies explored in *Surfacing*, her tendency seems to be on the side of nature, as well as her increasingly apparent reverence for the earth and biological processes has been the focal point of feminist debate about her work. The identification of the female with nature can become a trap that limits and defines women in terms of what Simone de Beauvoir terms the "other", the exploited, excluded, isolated and devalued force in the culture / nature dichotomy. Culture then tends to become the presence of the male, an arena that excludes female power. Carol P. Christ in her theological feminist reading of *Surfacing* argues that her perceptions of the intimate sense of identification with natural powers reflect a uniquely female response, not only to nature, but to life and human relationship. Christ concludes that *Surfacing* "Suggests that the opposition of spirit and body, nature and person, which is endemic in Western culture, is neither necessary nor salutary. Her novel suggests that spiritual insight surfaces through attention to the body, and that the achievement of authentic selfhood and power depends on understanding one's grounding in nature and natural energies" (330)

Surfacing is the second novel by Margaret Atwood. It was published in 1972, the time Canadian national identity was evolving. Its original title was "Where is Here? a question which is borrowed from Northrop Frye's formulation of Canadian search for identity. *Surfacing* is structured around the point of view of a young woman who travels to a remote island on a lake in Northern Quebec, where she spent much of her childhood, to search for her missing father accompanied by her lover and another young couple, she is caught up in her past and is questioning her future. The narrator constantly inter-twines the past and present. As is evident from the opening sentence "I can't believe I'm on the road again". This psychological mystery tale presents a compelling study of a woman who is searching for herself. *Surfacing* demonstrates the complex question of identity for an English – Speaking Canadian female. Identity, for the protagonist has become problematic because of her role as a victim of colonial forces. She has been colonized by men in the patriarchal society in which she grew up, and as a citizen by Americans and their cultural imperialism, as the legacy remains in her country.

Surfacing conceptualizes the self as multiple and dynamic. Mythopoesis functions as an alternative mode of apprehending reality and articulating the self. It is an attempt to go beyond the linear logic of scientific thought which sees human life in reductionist terms. In *Surfacing* the forest and the lake provide the archetypal setting for exploration of relation between human beings and environment. This elemental space does not distinguish between life and death. It is this freedom from preconceived notions that slowly act upon the characters, rendering them more fluid and expressive.

As the narrative progresses we discover their capacity for self – deception. "Random samples" the imagistic sequence being shot by David and Joe epitomizes their wish to reduce the plurality of the world to a linear sequence of accessible frames. But these characters are oblivious of their own past. The protagonist observes: "My friend's 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" (*Surfacing*, 1972:23) "Random Samples" is a modernist creation that seeks to raise amnesia to the level of art by perpetrating fragmentation. The childhood memories of the protagonist prepare her to come to terms with her own past. She has preserved her mother's legacy through volumes of scrapbooks. She writes that through her own drawings she recovers a part of her childhood self: "Page after page of eggs and rabbits, grass and trees, normal and green,

surrounding the flowers blooming, sun in the upper right – hand corner of each picture, moon symmetrically in the ... left... No monsters, no wars, no explosions, no heroism... perhaps it was a vision of heaven.” (98)

It is this visionary mode of feeling that she finally tries to resurrect. To be a child again would mean to be a "Vandal" or a "barbarian". Both David and Anna, in their need to create a world of "alibis and monsters", point to the consequences of never growing up. Their world is cleanly and clearly divided between the dichotomies of good and evil, victim and victor, princesses and giants, and the protagonist comments: "There were only two things you could be winner or loser... they couldn't figure out what to do about me since I wouldn't play"(36)

Surfacing is about the need to recover one's memory and history in order to escape the urban distortions of selfhood. At the center of the novel is the image of the heron suggestive of a visionary reality. While moving along the lake shore the protagonist spots the bird: "A blue heron lifts from a bay where it's been fishing and flaps overhead, neck and beak craning forward and long legs stretched back, winged snake"(57) After a couple of days on the island, they once again spot the heron, this time dead and hanging from a tree : "I saw a beetle on it, blue-black and oval; when the camera whirled it burrowed in under the feathers. Carrion beetle, death beetle. Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or crooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. Food, slave or corpse, limited choices." (126)

As David and Joe prepare themselves to shoot the heron with their camera we learn that they are no different from the Americans who must have killed the bird. Their inability to relate themselves to other forms of life their environment also denies them the inner cultural space to experience love and friendship. David and Joe betray their lovers without any remorse.

The image of the dead heron also presents the dead body of the drowned father. Strangely enough, it is the map of ancient Indian paintings in her father's study room that gives her a clue about her father's possible whereabouts. The dead heron looking like a victim also points the colonial past and it excesses towards the defenseless Indians. The final encounter with her father's dead body once again underlines the element of mythopoesis in the narrative: "It was there but it wasn't a painting, it wasn't on the rock. It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead. (203) Her vision is influenced by the environment. The base elemental nature of this environment, from the very beginning, pointed towards this violent encounter. As is usually argued it is not a descent into hell but a conscious search for one's past.

The quest of selfhood tends to define the self as a product that is defined and preserved. For the narrator of *Surfacing* the lake and forest are not just a primeval setting, it is her childhood environment. The specific act of return is a recognition of the relevance of one's personal past. What she finally recovers is her own humanity. The protagonist is able to face the reality of her recent past and after abortion she recognizes the relevance of her own past to her present self. She destroys the film in the camera, she rejects the linear gaze of the urban present which reduces history to a museum experience to be viewed at leisure.

In her final transformation the protagonist of *Surfacing* renounces her acquired selves. She rejects even the garden because she feels that it is a stunt, a trick which could not exist without the fence. For the first time in the novel the protagonist feels relieved and refreshed and she declares: "When nothing is left intact and the fire is only smoldering i leave, carrying one of the wounded blankets with me, I will need it until the fur grows. The house shuts with a click behind me"(190) She further writes that the moment she decided to shed her weak and submissive self the "Earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon"(191) She felt relieved of the burden she was painfully carrying throughout her life "when I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently against the dock"(191) It was the nature finally which gave her shelter when she needed solace and comfort the most. The human relations failed to provide her what she deeply desired and longed for throughout her life. She finally asserts: "slowly i retrace the trail. Something has

happened to my eyes, my feet are released, they alternate, several inches from the ground. I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly, the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark. The forest leaps forward, enormous, the way it was before they cut it columns of sunlight frozen the boulders float, melt, everything is made of water, even the rocks. In one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs held for a longer moment" ((195)

She feels like an animal or a tree, and also like a place in which the trees move and grow. The protagonist says "I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground. I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place". (196) In the end the protagonist loses trust in human beings and relations, she says: "They can't be trusted. They'll mistake me for a human being, a naked woman wrapped in a blanket: possibly that's what they've come here for, if it's running around loose, ownerless, why not take it. They won't be able to tell what I really am?" (196). But if they guess my "true form, identify, they will shoot me, hang me up by the feet from a tree" (197). It is this visionary experience that prepares her to accept the death of her parents. Both the parents appear to her in separate visions, her mother as the life – giving woman and her father as a manifestation of her own destructive urge, she could accept it because stayed out there too long alone. Now she is prepared to recognize death and extricate herself from it by asserting her separateness from the childhood environment. She learns to trust herself. As she asserts towards the end, "To trust is to let go. I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though my feet do not move yet"(198). In that still and frozen posture of the protagonist, the self is a visionary realm of possibilities and mobility. She also lost faith and hope in religion which is supposed to offer comfort and solace. She writes "No gods to help me now, they are questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. They have receded, back to the past, inside the skill, is it the same place. They'll never appear to me again. I can't afford it; from now on I'll have to live in the usual way, defining them by their absence; and love by its failures, power by its loss, its renunciations. I regret them; but they give only one kind of truth, one hand" (204) She decides to move ahead leaving the burden of relations and introspect and admits that "I didn't love him, I was far away from him, it was as though I was seeing him through a smeared window or glossy paper; he didn't belong here. "But he existed, he deserved to be alive. I was wishing I could tell him how to change so he could get there, the place where I was" (Surfacing,1972:156)

One of the defining qualities of *Surfacing*, as Stratford explains, is Atwood's "rejection of states in favor of dynamic third way". "I remember people I once knew they live in the city now, in a different time. I can remember him, fake husband, more clearly though, and how I feel nothing for him but sorrow. He was neither of the things I believed, he was only a normal man, middle-aged, second rate, selfish and kind in the average proportions: but he was not prepared for the average, its needless cruelty and lies" (203) Now her intention was not to please him anymore and she decided to be her "self" an individual who no more deceives anyone and her own self. She has expressed "it's love, the ritual word, he wants to know again; but I can't give redemption, even as a lie, me both wait for my answer. The wind moves, rustling of trees lungs, water lapping all round us" (174)

She is not simply concerned with the process of overcoming the polarization of world and self, as were as the hierarchical power structures which such divisions produce. Judith Plaskow pursuing a rather different line of thought in her feminist essay goes further than Christ to suggest that by the time *Surfacing* was published she no longer anatomizes destructive dichotomies, what Christ calls "the opposition of spirit and body, nature and person", but instead celebrates "matriarchal guides". Atwood's position in *Surfacing* is uniquely female, her commitment to the principle of "one's grounding in nature and natural energies" as well as her celebration of "matriarchal guides", is quite emphatic. The other crucial dichotomy which she explores is that of self and other, she strives to break down the static condition of mutual exclusiveness separating these opposites. Her understanding of the self/other binary is from her concept of the "self", because from this concept grows her sense of the nature and purpose of the creative act.

Robert Kroetsch praises the novel for achieving what he describes as an "uninvention" necessary for colonized Canadians whose language is the same as its parent countries, a "process of rooting that borrowed word, that totally is exact homonym of their authentic Canadian experience". (Kroetsch,

1974:44) But Kroetsch neglects to indicate that the narrator in the novel finds language only after uniting with her abandoned parents, more significantly with her mother than her father. While Margaret Homans emphasizes narrator's return to her mother, she does not locate the mysterious "maternal silence" in the novel as characteristic of Canadian women's histories, and she does not analyze the ethos which, oddly but certainly, countervails "paternal language" and its American significations. (Homans, 1983:196)

Atwood has frequently expressed that the language is a male construct and women have to enter it from outside in order to have voice at all. The sense of non-belonging, of estrangement is particularly intense in Atwood's personas. If the female subject refers to use man's language it is to choose "incomprehension and silence" (Davey.1984). Women are always blamed for this silence. They have accused of being silent because "they would not speak in the received language" (Atwood,1984:49, She deeply distrusts the received language. Atwood in one of her famous poems "Disembarking at Quebec" she sees herself "I am a word in a foreign language" (JSM,80)

Surfacing presents a liberating experience for female protagonists, at the same time it "brings about the risk of plunging into the intransitive language of madness (Atwood,1972:89). The father is identified with intelligence and rationality, while the mother to be in unison with nature. The mother's diaries in which she merely records the changing of seasons, which indicates her distrust of the capacity of language to represent feelings. But Hutcheon remarks." As both Canadian and a woman, she protests any tendency towards easy passivity and naivety" she refuses to allow either Canadians or woman to deny their complicity in the "power structures that may subject them (Hutcheon,1988:12) She believed that passivity and naivety allow others to subjugate them. Finally, the narrator decides to take active position in her life. She started questioning the stereotypical role she was playing unthinking. But the moment she accepts that she was not happy at heart leading the kind of life she was offered by her society and culture life changed forever and she became a different person.

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