

## **BREAKING THROUGH INTO THE FEMININE SIDE:**

### **MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING***

by

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Being a woman these days is clearly much more a feeling than an issue to talk about expressing dissatisfaction or demands of any kind. The importance of putting forward the feminine side of things was often talked about or mythologized with the contribution of previous generations of women, such as those who participated in the movement of the 1960s and 1970s and who showed the motivation to stand up for political rights as well as against harassment and discrimination. As far as feminine matters are concerned, however, it can be said that attention has shifted to other directions. The decision to take a look at the feminine particularities of experience may nowadays be more of an individual choice and inner search than a matter of determining one's identity, as it was widely believed to be in the past. In search of the elements that bring me closer to being a woman, I discovered that Margaret Atwood's novel which is entitled *Surfacing* offered me the opportunity to consider the requirements that the fulfillment of the role of being a woman entails as well as the multiplicity of possibilities it opens up. After I came to this realization, I decided to look into the specific ways in which the novel made me think about feminine experience and female self-expression.

Despite the fact that Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* seems to recover a voice of the past as far as women's issues are concerned, since it was published in 1972, it also depicts the writer's elaborate efforts to trace femininity in its more tangible forms, which can effectively be applied to feminine concerns nowadays. The way women are socially defined with respect to their physical appearance, as well as their potential to become mothers appear in *Surfacing*, as in societies today, which confine them to fulfilling a set of social expectations within the complexity of human relationships. The fact that a woman's looks are always at stake can be proven in that in many cases she will or will not be accepted by one or many groups of people on the basis of her physical appearance. The role that motherhood or the lack of it can play in the decision to adopt a feminine point of view is also important to consider. The familiarity of a multitude of female experiences is reflected through Atwood's novel; her examples and way of writing pave the path for both a common level of women's experience and the illustration of the multiplicity of possibilities that femininity can be comprised of.

*Surfacing* is a novel that had an illuminating effect on me. I feel that the novel is an effort to connect parts of feminine experience that have intentionally or unconsciously been discarded, especially since its plot involves a woman's determination to go back to the home where she lived as a child, in order to assist the discovery of her lost father, which is clearly an action that involves her return to her own past that has penetrated her adult life and affected her as a woman in many different ways. While she attempts to shed some light on her childhood and some of her mature years, parts of her past that have decidedly shaped her feminine side over the years, which she had ignored for a long time, come back to her one after the other and assist her in changing the course of her present. As she is coming to terms with these hidden aspects of her femininity and drawing closer to herself, the female protagonist of Atwood's

novel gradually finds herself shying away from the company of her boyfriend and friends who have escorted her in her search of her own father.

The efforts of the female protagonist in *Surfacing* to revive her own past in search of an understanding of her own femininity runs through recognizable moments in the heart of every woman's life. I have often had the feeling of being manipulated or treated in a certain way, in some cases as a result of my physical appearance. A few pages into the novel, the heroine traces in herself the familiar sense of vulnerability that she has recurrently experienced, when several men stare at her buttocks the moment she turns to exit from a shop. Her dissatisfaction with the feeling that some part of her is being scrutinized by strangers is evident in her thoughts: "I would like to back out the door, I don't want them staring at me from behind; but I force myself to walk slowly frontwards" (29). The incident, which can be referred to as a common occurrence in any woman's life, can be clearly said, at least temporarily, to leave the impression on the protagonist's mind of her body as an object to be available in the hands of male strangers. To take this point further, this incident reveals that the sexual appeal that a woman may have on strangers plays a significant part in her everyday interactions; the fact that the image of her body may create conflicting reactions creates a sense of frustration and prompts any woman to view her own body as a consumable object.

The penetrating and demanding look of strangers often causes a great sense of insecurity to women and requests their immediate reaction which often comes down to making themselves look beautiful in order to be admired and, therefore, become accepted. I myself have experienced moments of great insecurity, especially when I have been found in the position of not having properly prepared for a special occasion; after such an incident, I have felt the need of protecting myself against conspicuous scrutiny by being suitably attire and using the amount of make-up that can render my appearance acceptable to the people involved. Expensive clothes, accessories and cosmetics are tools that come to the service of women to provide them with a sense of reassurance. This tendency of contemporary women to adorn themselves in order to gain male attention is evident in *Surfacing* through the character of Anna who directs her frequent use of make-up to stimulating her husband's sexual interest. In light of the fact that she has not carried her make-up case with her on a trip, Anna panics. She confesses that her husband is not used to seeing her without wearing it: "He doesn't like to see me without it," and then, contradicting herself, "He doesn't know I wear it" (52). In this example, cosmetics seem to be a feminine way to achieve an effect of desirability, and being desirable can lead to becoming wanted or needed by someone. This is meant to establish and satisfy the feeling of belonging somewhere. The contradiction between the two sentences that Anna uses also points to the dead end she has pushed herself into, which is a common situation where women of today can find themselves in: while she would like to be appreciated precisely for who she is, she has labored to project an image of herself that mainly aims to ensure male physical attraction.

The degree to which the female body is exposed in this way creates the feeling that women do not act in full control of themselves. The fact that certain bodily female features are made visible and salient either through the women's own efforts or through the intent gaze of male strangers renders them prey to male domination. This has often made me think that, in a way, women set up their own trap by letting their lives be directed by others instead of defining themselves. This notion can be used to explain the trap into which Anna falls towards the end of the novel, when she finds herself unable to escape her husband's insistence to videotape her naked body for a film he is making for his own personal pleasure. While she initially refuses to do as David says, Anna ends up being bullied to put her own body forward, and the

end of the whole incident comes with her disappointment about the realization that she has become nothing else but an instrument of male sexual entertainment. The protagonist of the novel herself realizes that the only way out of the plague she considers Anna to have found herself in is “flight, invisibility” (173), which is in itself an impossibility, as it implies that a woman may exist in a different sphere or not exist at all.

Through *Surfacing*, Atwood also brings forward the experience of giving birth to a child, a part of a woman’s life that today still remains a central feminine concern. The experience of labor for the heroine of the novel has typically been a painful one; however, the protagonist, here, focuses on making a statement about the medical procedure involved in the case of a woman’s labor as a means of manipulation. The intensity of a woman’s suffering during her labor is met with complete disregard for her emotional attachment to the embryo before her child is born, since through the whole procedure of giving birth, she is treated predominantly inhumanely, as some kind of material from which a living thing is extracted. The protagonist of *Surfacing* supports her opinion by presenting her emotions about the whole procedure of giving birth to her child: “It’s their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won’t hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar” (101). These lines had a great impact on me, since it was the first time I came close to understanding the brutality of the procedure involved in bringing another human life into being. The violence employed in this act that is described with these terms obviously highlights the way in which the models of motherhood are shaped by the force of social expectations. The instant severing of the bond between mother and child in spite and irrespective of the feelings and intentions of the mother may leave women with the impression of having a baby or raising it for the sake of making it available to others and not for oneself. All tenderness and affection as well as other feelings and thoughts that mothers can have about their newborn babies tends to be mitigated or even circumscribed by social demands and leaves no room for an unheeded development of a unique mutual bond between the two.

The severity of this impression, however, is not only seen in the instance of giving birth, but also in light of reversing this instance. Aborting one’s child is often a decision that is made by men instead of the women themselves for a variety of reasons. The heroine of *Surfacing* is, in fact, towards the end of the novel proved to have undergone an abortion under the influence of a married man who at the time was her boyfriend; this operation had been masked in the protagonist’s mind as the unpleasant experience of the birth of a child that she herself did not want to raise. As she confesses in relation to the experience of her pregnancy and the abortion, after the realization that she has been hiding the event and its consequences even from herself, “whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn’t a child but it could have been one, I didn’t allow it” (183). As she floats into her memories of the event, the protagonist of the novel regrets not having made a different choice with respect to the child. She considers herself a victim of social circumstances, as just like many women who have found and continue to find themselves in her position, she has had to sacrifice her personal wish and natural inclination to be a mother because she could not officially have obtained support by the father of her expected child.

In *Surfacing*, Atwood points to the dissatisfaction caused by being a woman as well as the impossibilities it entails. As she shows throughout her novel, in certain cases women both lead themselves and are led to dead ends as far as their needs of being accepted and becoming desirable as well as becoming mothers are concerned. Using the characters of both the

protagonist of *Surfacing* and her friend Anna, Atwood shows women's physical exposure to male power as well as their socially conditioned efforts to adjust their physical appearance to beauty standards. The example of the novel's protagonist also stands to illustrate the extent to which a woman participates in the decision of becoming a mother or not and the crisis she customarily has to undergo during childbirth. The severity of social conventions mostly shaped by a society that has for a long time been male-oriented obviously penetrates women's actions, intentions and even affects their personal decisions.

Atwood's efforts to familiarize the readers of *Surfacing* with the experience of being a woman and especially with tackling a variety of problems under different circumstances can be said to continue to the present day, due to the pervasive power of her writing with respect to feminine matters. Women of any generation or ethnicity today continue to think about their embarrassment when their body is in some way exposed to strangers to stare at as well as their wish for personal reasons to look beautiful for the male members of society who are close to them. When I read the novel, I was surprised at the variety of ways in which the female body is subjected to close inspection or control in everyday life. The intent male gaze, which appears to affect the heroine's reactions and state of mind on the incident when strangers stare at her in the shop, has recurrently made its presence felt in my life as in that of most women. As far as motherhood is concerned, giving birth to a child and having an abortion continue to constitute two of the most vital feminine concerns. One of the primary reasons why I was drawn to *Surfacing* is that it manages to depict the plurality of feminine attitudes that may potentially be encountered in contemporary life. What Atwood offers through her approach to these important issues, which is also evident in the stance of the two totally different points of view of the two female characters in the novel, is not any sort of remedy or general solution, but an attempt to persuade women to view the world through their unique individualities and to make their own choices. Through the problematic situation faced by the two central female characters of *Surfacing*, women of today are still challenged to put their dilemmas into perspective, look into different sides of them and lead themselves to a new understanding of their own lives.

### Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret E. *Surfacing*. London: Virago, 1979.