



# Representation of Female Characters in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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**Abstract:** Margaret Atwood is a unique presence in recent literature. She made her reputation as a poet in 1960s and then she became a writer of fiction. Atwood is an international celebrity, especially among the female writers. A thorough professional, she continues to create works of high quality. She is a versatile writer but at the same time controversial too. *Surfacing* is Atwood's best novel and it was published in 1972 which is a brilliant achievement by Atwood. *Surfacing* has different layers describing different themes. It is a romantic novel, a book which is for those who love birds, animals and flora with a spiritual and sacred attitude. Present paper analyses representation of women characters in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* where she explains that feminism does not recommend a battle view of sexes but it aims at creating a consciousness both in men and women.

**Key Words:** Feminism , Consciousness , Female characters.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Margaret Atwood is a unique presence in recent literature. She made her reputation as a poet in 1960s and then she became a writer of fiction. Atwood is an international celebrity, especially among the female writers. A thorough professional, she continues to create works of high quality. She is a versatile writer but at the same time controversial too. As a poet she has produced more than ten volumes of verse. Since her early university days, she has published individual poems in Canadian, British and American journals and in other popular magazines. During the past quarter century, she has produced literary criticism, cartoons and children's books and has written numerous letters to the editor. *Surfacing* is Atwood's best novel and it was published in 1972 which is a brilliant achievement by Atwood. *Surfacing* has different layers describing different themes. It is a romantic novel, a book which is for those who love birds, animals and flora with a spiritual and sacred attitude. The unnamed heroine, her friend Anna, heroine's mother all of them represent different attitudes and images of women. Atwood portrays different kinds of women, traditional women with rural thinking and modern with American thinking. If for one, the heroine's marriage is something made in heaven, for Anna, it is a battle in which tit for tat phenomenon is followed. For the heroine, the parents are gods; for Anna they are nothing but the pigs. Atwood describes friendship between Anna and the protagonist. What emerges out from her friendship with the protagonist is that they are best friends because they have known each other for two months. It shows us a great deal about the notion of friendship that operates in the city. The heroine must be a lonely person and that is why she has made Anna her best friend. Anna is not an artist but an object of art, the product of artifice, she seems to have stepped out from the pages of the scrapbooks of protagonist's childhood picture of 'ladies'.

## 2. DISCUSSION:

Atwood describes Anna's love with David as superficial. Both Anna and David have been married for nine years. Perhaps she and the heroine would have been married at the same time but she is older than the heroine. H says that they must have some special method, formula, same knowledge marriage, for Anna is another name for "nightly sex." She treats her body as her ultimate weapon to keep her husband. "They know everything about each other, I thought, that is why they are so sad, but Anna was more than sad, she was desperate, her body, her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight : she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered, the balance of power would be broken and she would go elsewhere to continue the war." (Sheir)



Anna is an unhappy woman, though she pretends that she is happy. Atwood projects Anna and David as paper persons, an effigy. Love does not exist in their marriage at all. Her husband wants to make love to the heroine, not because he loves her but because he wants to teach his wife a lesson and to punish her for having dared. The more interesting phase comes when both Anna and David start feeling that one is planning to divorce the other. Her husband also fears the same as Anna.

'You don't know what she does to me', he said with a slight whine, 'she asks for it she makes me to do it.' HIS voice turned crafty. 'She goes with other men, she thinks, she can get away with it, but she's too dumb, every time, I find out. I can smell it on her. Not that I'd mind if she'd do it openly and be honest about it, God knows, it is not that I'm jealous.' He smiled broadmindedly. 'But she is devious, I can't stand that. (Atwood)

It is possible that their marriage works well for some time not because it has no illusions at its base but the couple has no love for each other. Such acts of betrayal may be common between them and their concept of marriage includes them. Anna belongs to the city; its values appear superficial to her. She is childless and she never tried for a baby. Moreover, she is happy about it. She is happy that she has nightly quota of sex and in this sex, it is probable that there is a little pleasure, only an abstract satisfaction that the balance of power is intact. She has the geometrical sex - sex sans feelings, emotion, love and even pleasure.

Atwood describes Anna's married life as a compromise. She is fully degraded by her husband. Marriage in the dictionary of her husband is a phrase that is only too often used in international diplomacy by Americans. He feels that the only way to show his superiority is to victimize his wife. He tells Anna *You'll go in beside the dead bird. It is your chance for star am. You have always wanted fame. You'll get to be on Educational TV ...* (Atwood) As long as Anna submits to his degrading demands, he is nice but even then, there is no guarantee that he will stay faithful to her. All in all, their marriage is not something made in heaven but it is a battle in which one is ready to beat the other to get victory. The image of Anna that emerges in the novel is that she is a self-made victim who imitates American way of life.

One thing that is common between Anna and David is that they disown their parents. David never mentions his mother and father. Anna says that her parents were nothing and she calls them 'The Pigs'. Thus, Anna appears to be an artificial woman who has no regards for her parents. In Atwood's portrayal of Anna of *Surfacing* and Ainsley of *The Edible Woman*, we see similarities and differences. Both appear to be modern women. Both are very close to the heroines of respective novels. Both are very modern in dress and fond of makeup and both are fond of cigarettes. Interestingly, the names of both start with the letter A. (Anna, Ainsley). But there are some differences also in their personalities. Ainsley is very outspoken and does not hide anything exposing the truth while Anna always puts a mask on her. Ainsley wants a child and does not want any husband at all. But Anna wants a husband and does not want any children at all. She is a slave to the technology of birth control pills and violation of both nature and art.

So, Atwood portrays Anna as a superficial and imitating woman. She is totally dissolved in the artificial city, she used to keep a record of weather. It was known to her whether the spring would be late or early or whether the summer would be wet or not.

On the bedside table with the flowers, chrysanthemums. I saw her diary. She kept one every year. All she put in it was a record of the weather and the work done on that day no reflections no emotions. She would refer to it when she wanted to compare the years, decide whether the spring had been late or early, whether it had been a wet summer. (Atwood)

The protagonist of *Surfacing* herself divides the world projecting "good and bad kind of everything." Perhaps in Atwood's opinion women are good, men are bad. In painting, little girls draw 'Easter bunnies' and boys draw torture scenes. She feels that women are innocent and men are rapists and exploiters. The sexes are divided and isolated from each other much as in the little wooden barometer which impressed the protagonist as a child. The women emerge from the little house on sunny day and the men on rainy days. So David and Anna, the protagonist thinks are divided and separated, he the criminal, she the victim. The heroine says that Anna hides herself behind her make-up and the screen from her cigarette smoke reading murder mysteries but never realizing that she herself in the victim of another kind of murder of the aborted baby.

Margaret Atwood in *Conversations* said to Graeme Gibson that if only two kinds of people are killers and victims, morally one may prefer to be a victim but on the other hand if he had to survive in this



world, he would have to be a killer. One can define oneself as an innocent and get killed or he can define himself as killer and kill others. The ideal would be somebody who will neither be a killer nor a victim who could hardly achieve some kind of harmony with the world. This harmony should be productive and creative rather than destructive. If one defines oneself as innocent, he refuses to accept power or he has to exercise it because power is evil and innocent people never take the side of evil. Atwood further says that existence of evil is true. It is very difficult to see some things in the positive light. Evil is there in the world. But it all depends how a person takes it positively or negatively. And if one defines oneself as harmless victim, one can do nothing about suffering. (Graeme)

### 3. CONCLUSION:

Atwood's feminism does not recommend a battle view of sexes but it aims at creating a consciousness both in men and women. In this battle men lose as much as women do because to be a victimizer is no less a disease than to be a victim. In fact, they are two side of the same coin. So, *Surfacing* is an exercise in consciousness - raising and it achieves this end by exposing the various tactics men adopt in exploiting women but also the tactics which women tend to use to escape the truth or the difficult root of self-realization.

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