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MARGARET ATWOOD, SURFACING: SEARCHING FOR ROOTS

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the main character's quest for identity as she returns both physically and mentally to the Bottle Villa, the place where she lived as a child, which is situated in between the English and French part of Canada. Here, she is appalled by the destruction brought about by the so-called American tourists who kill a heron in order to have fun and decides to undergo a thorough change of her own behaviour for having condoned their act. In complete isolation, away from the noise of the city and the disturbing influence of friends, surrounded only by nature and wilderness, she manages to find her balance and to discover the truth about her father's death. The protagonist cannot identify with her kind mother and seems to be following the rationalist thinking pattern drawn a long time ago by her father although this stunts her evolution. She feels the need for ritual in order to connect with the earth gods and find answers. The ritual the character undergoes involves the use of mushrooms that help her enter a trance during which she establishes connections with both her father and her ancestors. The female character surfaces a stronger person able to understand the decisions she has taken so far and to rediscover her balance and the unity of her body and mind. The analysis will take into account various types of identity: foreign (American), cultural, spiritual and narrative and also the focus on the opposition American – Canadian and French – English culture/ identity. The critics/ theorists consulted include: John Cottingham, Richard Culpeper, René Descartes, Mircea Eliade, Janice Fiamengo, John Rothfork, Madan Sarup, Benedict Spinoza, Hilde Staels, etc.*

Worldwide literature has gained a new pillar with the popularization of Margaret Atwood as an agent of Canadian creativity. Her insightful perspectives on cultural, psychological and social issues, to which one can add her complex personal experience laid the foundation of her imaginary microcosms. During the period when postmodernism began to develop, she started with *The Edible Woman* (1969), enriching literature with new narrative perspectives, in a similar manner with John Fowles who, in the same year, published his well-known *The French Lieutenant's Woman* that brought new postmodern elements to the limelight. Then, she carried on with her masterpiece *Surfacing*, followed by *Lady Oracle*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Alias Grace*, etc.

Notwithstanding the present success of Canadian literature, in the past, it was not much taken into consideration because of the lack of advertisement and of motivated writers who would plead its cause before the entire world. Atwood made a deliberate attempt at turning her native literature into a precious gem owned globally by first bringing it to the attention of the Canadian public. She fulfilled her task through the writing of *Survival*, in which "she excavated an important part of the culture", as Hilde Staels (2) emphasises it. Thus, Atwood put in very much effort in order to point out the paramount role of the Canadian literary bequest. She succeeded admirably due to her gift for detailed (post) modern stories, her original protagonists, although sometimes inspired from real life, and her taste in developing rich plots.

The space in which the action of her novels unfolds ranges from the bush to the fashionable urban environment, while the time sequence is constantly fragmented leaving place for unchronological jumbled pieces and also causing the fragmentation of the space as such. Playing with time and space, Atwood steers her novels towards the postmodern sea from which the only missing part seems to be the jocular mood that is replaced by a serious modern stream of consciousness.

In *Surfacing* (1972), the reader is directed to a return path from city to bush, on which the main nameless female character searches for her roots, i.e. she searches her identity. She goes back to the place of her childhood, a cabin in the middle of the woods (the Bottle Villa), accompanied by her lover Joe and

the couple Anna-David. In complete isolation, away from the noise of the city, after a while, having succeeded in leaving her friends behind, surrounded only by nature and wilderness, she manages to recover her balance and to discover the truth about the death of her father.

The explanation of the title can be found in the final act that the character decides to make – that of diving into the lake of the forest. There, under the surface of the water, she undergoes a process of transformation, having visions that connect her with her ancestors and with her father that passed away. She undergoes the rebirth of her self, as she rediscovers her piece of mind through this shamanistic experience (Staels 61). Consequently, the title *Surfacing*, refers to her surfacing in the water of the lake and to her understanding of her own real self.

The protagonist prepares the descent into the subterranean region by following a shamanistic ritual that takes several days. She deliberately goes in search of shamanistic powers and she deliberately invokes the guardian spirits of the earth. In order to enter into contact with the spirits, she first withdraws into solitude. She prepares her descent into the underground through the mediation of mushrooms that cause a state of trance. The imagery with which the narrator describes the mushrooms that cause her intoxicated mental state bear resemblance to the symptom signifiers that used to regularly erupt from her unconscious. The white, “fish-colour” mushrooms, with “chalk gills” and an “invisible part, threadlike underground network” call back to mind the deadened life force of the protagonist. Yet the mushrooms are associated both with death and life (Staels 61).

Janice Fiamengo, in her article ‘Postcolonial Guilt in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*’ notes that “the Canadian bush is a pristine space, the green world of escape and self-revelation” (3). Atwood mirrors this in opposition with the urban space left behind which has an overwhelming influence on the character, making her unable to hear her thoughts and to gain the balance she sought.

Once in the middle of nature, the fleeing character is disturbed by an incident that she witnesses together with her friends – some people whom she believed to be American, kill a heron for pure pleasure. She cannot disguise her rejection of such behavioural paradigms and is distressed to discover that her friends (especially David) enjoy having fun in the same manner, thus condoning their act.

This represents a decisive moment in the process of her recovery as she realises that she too has to change. She now becomes aware of the fact that she cannot become her old self again as long as her entourage is formed by such people as David and as long as she does not dare chastise such tourists in public.

That was their armour, bland ignorance, heads empty as weather balloons: with that they could defend themselves against anything. Straight power, they mainlined it; I imagined the surge of electricity, nerve juice, as they hit it, brought it down, flapping like a crippled plane. The innocents get slaughtered because they exist, I thought, there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience or piety; for them the only things worthy of life were human, their own kind of human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks, laminated. It would have been different in those countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor or the child of a god, at least they would have felt guilt (Atwood 121-122).

The long analysis with which she surrounds the killing of the bird suggests how much she is bothered by the incident, pointing to her sensitive nature and her incapacity of speaking her mind in order to ward off such unwanted events and those involved in them. On the one hand, she feels guilty for belonging to the reprehensible party by not saying anything against it; on the other hand, she would like to punish the perpetrator and his accomplices, but does not dare to do so. Thus, she, as well, becomes associated with the colonizer who has come to destroy nature, conquer the native people and steal their land. However, she detaches her character from such a description by rejecting and coming to abhor such gratuitously violent acts.

The Canadian postcolonial theme of guilt surfaces in this book as well. Being in search of her roots, the woman identifies first with the colonisers as she is under the modern Darwinian influence of ‘the survival of the fittest’ applied to the social jungle – which for her means that she has to adapt to her new circle of friends and their behaviour in order to ensure that she will have a group of people to talk to and enjoy the presence of. It is the wrong model of tolerance that she as well adopts, instead of trying to

warn the tourists and her friends of what effects their actions may have on the long run. Still, she wakes up from her daze to realise that she was wrong to act this way and starts the process of identity transformation by isolating herself.

As opposed to feeling inferior to the so-called Americans, she adopts an enlightened vision understanding that respecting the living beings that come our way, whether they are animals or men, results in our own selves being later respected. She also catches a glimpse of a natural balance of things echoing the principle of order that governed William Shakespeare's tragedies – in which bad deeds were always punished, good deeds rewarded and balance re-established.

The wrong behavioural models given by the false American tourists make her think of them as automated instruments acting without caring or thinking as opposed to the Canadians whom she thinks very highly of. Nevertheless, as Fiamengo (7) underlines, once she discovers that the tourists are Canadian, her dichotomical model collapses and she no longer has an obvious enemy to point a finger at. Her entire set of explanations turns up side down so as to discover that Canadians would sometimes set a bad example themselves without thinking of the consequences.

Rather than representing Canada as victim, then, *Surfacing* insists on the impossibility of maintaining the opposition between Canada and America; between an innocent narrator and a threatening outside world; between a green world where self-discovery is possible and corrupt alienating urban environment. American culture and economic domination is indeed a threat to Canadian autonomy, but Atwood makes it clear that 'America' is not a nation but a metaphor for a set of economic, environmental and political practices that belong to Canada too (Fiamengo 7).

The cultural battle envisaged by the narrator is reflected by the cultural identity mystery that the protagonist tries to solve. Besides discovering an American – Canadian pattern of behaviour in her nationals and herself too, she is concerned with the Anglo – French heritage that makes her more uncertain of who she really is. She has enjoyed the company of French people during her childhood, spoke French with them, but now she can no longer do that properly, as her British accent makes her be immediately spoken to in English or rejected by the locals.

This is but another reason of her disturbed personality. She has been brought up in a borderline environment, her parents' cabin being situated in between the French and the English part of the country. Not getting involved in any conflict, though favouring the British, she still feels the dislike of the French, as she has partially adopted the old English model of being self-restraint, calm and austere. Her dignity and loyalty towards those important to her are though debatable. Similar to Kazuo Ishiguro's Stevens, the butler of the novel *The Remains of the Day*, she understands that she has to adopt a Zen-Buddhist life pattern, thus re-gaining a harmonious relation between herself and the environment, whichever its type.

... Zen Buddhism hopes to liberate a person from all (Confucian) social situations, which are inherently worrisome. In Zen-Buddhism, writes T. P. Kasulis, one is enlightened 'when one lets go of pre-conceived notions of the self' (122). Such pre-conceptions are not Platonically innate but derived from memorable performances of behaviour evoked by specific social contexts or special occasions, which define tradition (li). In contrast, 'The Zen ideal is to act spontaneously in the situation without first objectifying it in order to define one's role' (Kasulis 132). (Rothfork 84-85)

Atwood's female protagonist has been following the modern patterns of behaviour that cause one to be considered 'cool' by a particular peer group. This, to a certain extent, can be compared to the Confucian code of behaviour, which provided one with a list of possible manners of acting that also blocked one's natural mental processes – one was no longer supposed to think just act according to what the code suggested that one do in those circumstances. "In Japanese culture, the whole point of Confucian ethics is security: to provide safety from embarrassment by meticulously following etiquette" (Rothfork 96).

On the one hand, following the examples of the 'cool' ones does not help the protagonist, on the other hand, it makes her realise that she acted against her deepest principles that seem to be so stifled that

she can no longer pinpoint them. The environment that she lived in and all the cultural influences make her be unable to recognise herself. This is the reason for her attempt at discovering her real identity, thus her roots – which she believes are represented by her ancestors who lived peacefully in the wild Canadian bush in communion with nature.

Her cultural identity appears to have been built starting with the layer of her native Canadian Indians, to which the English layer was added, the French one realised by the strong influence of her family friends, as a child, and the American one that has been acquired while living in the city. Troubled by the many unfortunate situations with which she had to cope – a broken marriage, an abortion, difficult relationship, unfit friends, she suffers all the more for not really knowing who she really is and what she wishes to do. The overwhelming influence of her father disturbs her even more as she cannot connect her spiritual and physical part.

The main character struggles to find a natural solution for this lack of balance and in order to do this she understands that she has to face her past. She needs to avoid thinking in the terms set by her father, an extreme rationalist who excluded the existence of an unknown and unpredictable inner force of the soul and who caused her to feel split into two: body and mind (Staels 38).

According to Descartes (63), man, by nature, is a methodical rational being (“*Cogito ergo sum*”) who cannot trust his or her corporeal senses, a theory which has been proved to be flouting the laws of reason. Furthermore, he supports the idea that one’s soul is, by nature, independent from one’s body – which the protagonist finds as a wrong view gullibly borrowed from her father. Her Cartesian split is solved by finding a stability link between the two parts. The sensitive, feeling and irrational part gains as much importance as the rational, scientific, logical one, after the transformation that the woman undergoes in the lake of the forest. Thus, the problematic Cartesian division is overcome and Spinoza’s monism takes its place to give rise to a unitary whole.

In a remark referring to *Proposition XIII, Part II* of his book *Ethics and De Intellectus Emendatione*, Spinoza (47) emphasised the wholeness formed by the human mind and body. Although an evolutionary theory as opposed to Descartes’, it has its flaws such as *Proposition XIX* according to which “the human mind has no knowledge of the human body, nor does it know it to exist save through ideas of modifications by which the body is affected” (Spinoza 56), which is of course false.

As with Descartes, Spinoza’s theory has its imperfections, such as *Proposition II of Part III*: “The body cannot determine the mind to think, nor the mind the body to remain in motion, or at rest, or in any other state (if there be any other)” (Spinoza 64). At the time it was hard to realise that body and mind can determine each other to act according to each one’s specific function(s). However, today there is widespread knowledge of their close relationship and of their mutual influence through nerves or senses.

Later, the empiricists (Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and also Mill, Russell, Ayer) finally acknowledged the importance of sense experience (Cottingham 14), thus making a break through in the philosophy of corporeality. Even though each of them has managed to improve his theory about mind/body matters as opposed to their predecessors, not one of them managed to come to the idea that relying on both mind and matter is the solution in order to achieve an overall psychological balance of the human being.

The protagonist of *Surfacing* aims at achieving this balance. We may trace her steps as she gradually gives up her dichotomical standpoint that separates her from the rest of the world. In Madan Sarup’s vision (9), people who favour dichotomies tend to believe that “the outside is negativity” and “the inside is positivity”, thus tend to think using rigid delimitations which make them unable to grasp the in-betweenness, which is exactly the psychological and geographical territory that the character finds herself in.

Dichotomies are exercises in power and at the same time their disguise. They split the human world into a group for whom the ideal order is to be erected, and another which is for the unfitting, the uncontrollable, the incongruous and the ambivalent (Sarup 9).

Consequently, she uses them in order to feel secure, to cling to some sort of splitting/ ordering mechanism that she can apply and can give her a false sense of stability in the rush of the modern world.

She aspires to the ideal, flawless and peaceful society, a sort of a paradise where she can feel safe and happy at the same time and put her conscience at rest.

The problems that the female character has are reflected by the narrator. This double status of the narrative identity is also an important aspect of the manner in which the identity of the character forms. The psychological-linguistic difficulties encountered by the protagonist become specularised by the linguistic difficulties that the narrator starts having once the process of identification with nature has begun.

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 upward, 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.

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning

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 (Atwood 175).

In order to be able to identify with nature she feels the need for ritual. This has been explained by Mircea Eliade (21) as surging from the feeling of having fallen, having committed a sin, having made a mistake. The soul that needs this spiritual peace is the one torn apart from the initial harmony between itself and creation. The protagonist uses a shamanistic ritual to both find answers for her father's death and find answers for her own disoriented life. She succeeds in doing both and leaves the water of the lake having symbolically washed her sins and discovered what she wants and why she previously lost her balance.

Rituals in *Surfacing* are used by the narrator to help her gain willpower, so she is able to push herself hard enough to try to find a way to survive. The narrator's will to survive drives her on a ritual vision quest. She is aided by the spirits of her father and mother and by 'magic mushrooms'. The result is that after searching the depths of her soul, she surfaces as a stronger person who has the strength to fight for survival. (Culpeper)

The antler fish of the underwater paintings are what his father was taking pictures of and what causes his death – supposedly having knocked his head against one of the rocks. Hence, they connect her to him and also establish a link with her ancestors, the Indians that painted the caves while they were at ground level. Trying to find her roots, she contacts the unseen world of the dead in order to receive the needed reassurance of her true identity. According to Fiamengo (9), "*Surfacing* consistently uses ideas associated with aboriginality to make its critique of white culture". She underlines the fact that the woman flees civilisation as she sees it because it would bring her to an early grave – which is what she really does.

From a narrative point of view, the references she makes to present and past realities result in a mixture of present, past and past perfect which, around the moment of revelation, lack any logic – the present being related in the past tense, as if the experience had already ended. The style used by Atwood also suggests that the novel was written from a feminist-romantic perspective and the apparently happy ending – the new baby she bears – does not contradict the postmodern open-ended story to which one can attach whichever conclusion one wishes.

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