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The Theme of Women's Alienation in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*.

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Abstract: The present study strives to scrutinize the theme of woman's alienation in Margaret Atwood's novel *surfacing*. In her novel, Margaret focuses light on the alienation that woman undergoes and particularly the narrator who lives in patriarchal society. The protagonist, an unnamed woman with exceptional artistic talent, returns to Canada in search of her father, so she starts feel like a secluded and alienated person. The narrator feels like a child who has been abandoned because of her father's disappearance and her mother's detachment. The narrator's sense of alienation stems from various factors, such as painful memories, negative experiences, the loss of her child through abortion, and a lack of trust in her closest friends. In fact, being alienated has a negative impact on the narrator's personality because it made her to withdraw from the society, become introverted, and more than that it will lead her to madness behave in a way that resembles an animal living in the forest. In *Surfacing*, the unnamed narrator learns the patriarchal influences contributing to her sense of alienation. As a result, she actively opposes and resists them.

Keywords: Women's Alienation, Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*.

Margaret Atwood is an internationally prominent Canadian, Postmodern and feminist writer and expert in women's literature. she has been actively involved in the Canadian feminist movement and taking an active role in promoting gender equality. In most of her works, Margaret Atwood tries to flash light on feminist and gender problems. She has also been exploring the challenges that women face in



finding and asserting their true identity in a society that is predominantly patriarchal. *Surfacing* is the second novel of Margaret Atwood it was published in 1972. *Surfacing* unfolds the story of unnamed narrator who returns to Canada to discover her disappeared father, accompanied with a couple that she recently met and her boyfriend Joe.

In *Surfacing*, alienation emerges as a prominent theme. This is evident from the outset of the story, where the narrator, as an English-speaker in Quebec, experiences political marginalization during a period when Quebec sought independence as a French-speaking nation. The narrator also experiences a sense of detachment from those around her, associating human interaction with that of animals.

The unnamed protagonist recollects her past and she recalls feelings and all the events in her family house, she tries to find hints that can assist her to find her father but without vain, her mind is immensely impacted by feelings of alienation and disconnection, which ultimately drive her towards a state of untamed behaviour and insanity. This paper attempts to uncover the underlying factors contributing to the narrator's sense of alienation on various levels; Personal level, psychological level and the social level. And also, it attempts to explore the strategies employed by the unnamed narrator to resist feelings of alienation.

The impulse of the novel is the narrator's quest for wholeness and connectedness. From the inception she feels secluded from other characters, both in her present and past life. She is with her lover and two other friends, but she has little knowledge about their lives. Although Joe growing more intensely in love with her, she is not sure she feels the same or even wants to be with him. Her childhood flashbacks focus on her sense of alienation from other kids and families in the small hometown where she grew up. While the majority of the other children speak French, she communicates in English. While most of the other children are churchgoing She is from a nonreligious family. She is the daughter of parents who chose to live on an island literally separated by water from the mainland of the town for their own private reasons. Those private reasons, along with other life circumstances, create a distance between her and her parents, which is further emphasized by their eventual passing. In addition, different aspects of her identity



are fragmented, causing her to feel a disconnect between her mind and body. Moreover, there is a sense of separation from her past self, due to gaps and disruptions in her memories.

In sociology, alienation may be defined as a feeling of loneliness, a separation, a dissociation and disconnection from others, from her family, her society and also from herself, it closely related to the state of being isolated. (Chapter 1 female alienation 13)

On a personal level, the narrator's sense of alienation can be attributed to three key factors: Her memories in the island, her violation of moral values of her parents and lack of true sense of identity and self. All of these elements profoundly impact the narrator's character and ultimately drive her towards madness. The narrator's sense of alienation is greatly influenced by the significant role of her memories. When the narrator goes back to the secluded island in search of her father, her past memories resurface, overwhelming her mind and pushing her into a state of isolation and alienation from others, particularly the three individuals who accompany her. These memories make her unaware of the people around her and cause her to exist in a superficial world. The narrator becomes deeply entangled in her past memories, including those of her mother's illness, her brother's passing, and the negative experiences she endured with the person she refers to as 'my husband'. These painful memories and negative experiences greatly disturb the narrator's mind, causing her to exhibit peculiar behaviours and eventually descend into madness. Yeah, you're right! The narrator starts acting like an animal when she's in the forest, and she chooses to stay quiet instead of talking. She says "the animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word" (195). These memories created a barrier around the narrator personality and making her feel distant from others. Since the remote island is already isolated, she ends up feeling isolated within herself too, living in her own world without much contact with other people.

The narrator's memories, the feeling of not having a clear sense of who she is, and the betrayal of her parents' moral values all combine to make her feel completely powerless and alienated from others. It's like she's trapped in her own little world, unable to connect with anyone else. These factors not only impact her personal life, but they also have a big impact on her psychological well-being. At a psychological level, there are certain things that add to the narrator feeling disconnected and really mess



with her mind. Like, the betrayal from her ex-lover, the emotional impact of having an abortion, and struggling to trust others. All of these things really take a toll on her and make her feel even more alienated. The betrayal from her ex-lover is a significant factor that makes the narrator feel isolated and causes her a lot of psychological distress. It is like a big blow to her emotions and plays a major role in her sense of alienation. She states, “He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I’ll never trust that word again” (30).

The narrator’s trust in the man whom she loves shatters as he betrays her, and compels her to get rid of her baby, His existing family further paints himself as a selfish person. The narrator going through an abortion really messes with her head and has a big impact on her psychological well-being. It is like this experience adds to her feelings of being disconnected and alone. It is a lot for her to process and it definitely takes a toll on her mental state. This abortion hurts her and makes her suffer a lot; So, even though deep down she knows it was an abortion, the narrator tries to convince herself that it was more like a divorce. That’s why she uses the word "divorce" instead of ‘abortion’ It is like she is trying to distance herself from the harsh reality of what happened and find a way to cope with it. It is a way for her to make sense of her emotions and the situation she is in. “ they must have mentioned it to Paul; that, but not the divorce” (25). She prefers to view her situation as a divorce because divorce does not involve ending a pregnancy or taking the life of a baby, which is seen as shameful and sinful by society. It is like she is trying to find a way to avoid the guilt and stigma associated with abortion. By framing it as a divorce, she can maintain a sense of dignity and distance herself from the negative connotations. It is her way of protecting herself emotionally. “leaving my child, that was the unpardonable sin” (31). Abortion is an incredibly difficult experience for a sensitive woman like the protagonist. The narrator is left feeling all alone, with nobody by her side to offer support or understanding. She is left feeling isolated and it adds to the emotional weight she is already carrying. Social pressure is another factor that contributes to the narrator’s alienation.

This social pressure begins in her early childhood, and it was charged on her by her parent mainly her mother, and as a result, it shaped her into a certain gender role. Throughout the course of the novel the



narrator is always doing house chores like dries the plates, leans the cabin, weeds the garden, washing dishes, and weeps the floors. The narrator learns to do so from her mother who was occupied by household tasks while her father was occupied by outside tasks. The narrator states that gender roles are learned behaviours from childhood, according to her during childhood “The brain is neutral ...what to feel was lie what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it” (79). Indeed, this social pressure leads the narrator into a total withdrawal from what surrounds her and keeps her alienated from society.

Language also plays a prominent role in making the narrator feels socially alienated particularly in a county like Canada where people speak French not English language, the narrator feels embarrassed speaking French to the shop keeper when she was at the store to get some food, because her high school French makes her accent sound like a tourist, the narrator wishes not to be an American.

Through the course of the novel, we have seen that there are a lot of factors that contribute and increase the narrator’s alienation, psychological trauma, and even behaving like a wild animal these factors such as the memories of her childhood, Lack of sense of true identity, the trauma of her abortion, the betrayal of her ex-lover, Fear of failure in establishing a strong relationship with people, all these factors influence the narrator’s persona leading her to madness. returning to her home in search for her father makes her recollects everything that she has undergone in her life which makes her feel more ghosted and alienated. Her choice to stay all by herself on that island up in northern Quebec and her deep connection with nature helps her to become more aware and conscious of herself. She starts to understand who she is as a person, her true identity. Being surrounded by nature and solitude gives her the space to reflect and discover herself on a deeper level. It is a transformative experience that brings her closer to her own humanity. The narrator comes to this realization that finding harmony with the world is the key to overcome her feelings of alienation. She discovers this powerful treatment for herself. She chooses to go back to the city and start a fresh chapter in her life with Joe. It's a beautiful transformation and a testament to the narrator's strength and resilience.



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