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WOMEN IN QUEST OF IDENTITY AND SELF-DISCOVERY

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ABSTRACT

The paper tries to focus on women's struggle in the novels of Margret Atwood namely *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. The paper gives a short introduction to feminism Canadian literature and the themes in Margret Atwood's works. *Surfacing* is an extremely complex work which lends itself to several interpretations. It is a novel about search for identity and self-discovery. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a futuristic dystopian tale set in the Republic of Gilead and is about Women whose only function is to breed. The study attempts to bring out the struggle suffering and tortures of the protagonist namely the unnamed in *surfacing* and offered in *The Handmaid's tale*. It address the fundamental human issues like cruelty and violence which are associated with power and emphasizes the fact that men exploit women for their pleasure and needs.

Key words: feminism, identity, self-discovery.

Feminism is a range of movements and ideologies that share a common goal to define establish and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal employment. Feminism is generally thought of as phenomenon of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and focused on the acquisition of a few basic political rights and liberty for women. The nineteenth century feminists saw far greater differences between the 'male' and 'female' nature of than their present counterparts do.

Atwood's second Published novel *Surfacing* focuses on a young female protagonist and her increasing discomfort in relationships with men. *Surfacing* also introduces the theme of Canadian nationalism and corresponding concerns about the preservation of the Canadian wilderness, together with a very accurate depiction of Canadian regional geography. The opening of *surfacing* describes the narrator's journey by car back through the land scape of her childhood .*Surfacing* takes up a similar

story of self-discovery ,but tells it not only from the point of view of a woman but also from the point of view of a Canadian woman.

The Handmaids's Tale was published in 1985,Margaret Atwood had already been an internationally recognized figure in literature for twenty years . Her work has been characterized as having a "feminist "focus, and this novel certainly fit into that simple understanding ;the story describes a society where dehumanization of women is not just a custom but actually the law.

Being women 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. 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. Margaret

Atwood's novel, *Surfacing* offered 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. The novel makes us think us about feminine experience and female self – expression in specific ways.

Despite the fact that Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* seems to recover a voice of the past as far as women's issues are concerned. 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.

The familiarity of multitude of female experience is reflected through Atwood's novel. The novel is an effort to connect parts of feminine experience that have intentionally or unconsciously been discarded especially since its plot involves a women'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 women in many different ways.

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. She is coming to terms with these hidden aspects of her feminity and is 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 factor. He gave a wedding ring and almost succeed in creating the image of himself as her husband. The unnatural act of her abortion and the continual struggle for her to feel comfortable with words and language illustrate the extent to which society or men oppressed and consumed the surfer.

"The unborn child was my husband's he imposed it on me all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He

measured everything he wanted a replica of himself"(Sur 198)

According to them a women has no right to have a baby without husband when the pregnancy of the protagonist concluded not in childbirth but in abortion she feels emptied and amputated. The protagonist suffers from a guilty complex at the end of the story. The novel emphasizes that men exploit women's bodies for their pleasure and needs. *Surfacing* reflects the condition of women as powerless and manipulate and power is only in the hands of men, Women have no right to do anything. In *Surfacing* we can observe men always misuse and women always use nature. The condition of women in the novel "woman sawn a part in a wooden crate".

In *Surfacing* her construction of the concept of wilderness both physically and mentally express her own concern. In her struggle against oppression and domination, she associates herself with the natural world, with landscape and with animals. It is possible to say that the turning point, the major discovery in the novel happens when the unnamed narrator dives into the lake where she finds a shadows image that might be her father's body, but in fact she sees it as the body of her aborted child. The abortion has an enormous impact on the narrator's life and she has thus brought out a traumatic memory. The heroine of *Surfacing* is in 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 an unpleasant experience of the birth of a child that she herself did not want to have. As she confuses 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 as she floats into her memories of the event. The protagonist of the novel regrets to not having made a different choice with respect to the child she considers herself a victim of social circumstances just like many women who have found and continued to find themselves in her position.

In *Surfacing* Atwood points out the dissatisfaction caused by being women as well as

the impossibilities it entails. Through 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 standard of beauty. Atwood's efforts to familiarize the readers of *Surfacing* with the experience of being women and especially with dealing, tackling a variety of problems under different circumstances can be said to continue to the present day.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the regime demands high moral retribution and a virtuous lifestyle as a result of the sexual freedom, free abortion and high increase of venereal diseases. At the end of the twentieth century many women remain sterile. The women who are still fertile are recruited as "Handmaids" and their only mission in life is to give birth to the offspring of the commander whose wife is infertile.

The main character in the novel is Offred, one of these unfortunate servants. Her only right to exist depends on her various productivity. She lives with the commander and his wife in highly supervised center. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the main female characters find way to escape this situation rather than deal with them.

In this novel they use different tactics to cope with their situation. The protagonist is trapped within a dystopian society comprising of a community riddled by despair. Though she is not physically tortured the overwhelming and ridiculously powerful government mentally enslaves her. Offred lives in a horrific society which prevents her from being freed. Essentially the government enslaves her because she is a female and she is fertile. Offred memories about the way life used to be with her husband, Luke, her daughter and her best friend Moria provides her with temporary relief from her binding situation. Also Offred befriends the commander's aide Nick. Offred longs to be with her husband and she feels that she can find his love by being with Nick. She risks her life several times just to be with Nick. Feeling loved by Nick gives her a hope in her otherwise miserable life. Instead of proclaiming her feelings out loud she suppresses them. The result is a series of recordings which

describes her life and the things she wishes she could change. Through these examples it is apparent that Offred cannot resolve her problems because of outside circumstance.

The Handmaid's Tale deal with females being unable to resolve their problems. "The main female characters find way to escape their situations rather than deal with them". As a dystopian novel focusing on some predominant feminist issues such as reproduction, anti abortion, infertility, power, politics, ruthlessness, suppression of women in a male chauvinist society, exploitation of women as a plaything used for absolute sexual pleasure.

The protagonist recollection of her happy past her husband Luke and her daughter vindicated the variety of their carefree life in striking contrast to the present desponded predicament.

The Handmaid's Tale also concentrates on the evils of political system which aggravates the women's anguished plight. The protagonist Offred undergoes extreme torture, pain anguish and utter humiliation in the power of commander who keeps her for her fertility much to the grudge and chagrin of his wife. She has to live a life rather one can say she exists in the midst of her bisexual friend Moira, her consoling friend Nick and sadists Aunt Lydia and Aunt Elizabeth. "There is more than one kind of freedom said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to, now you are being given freedom from" (Hmt 272)

The novel is a prognostication of the ruthless scenario of dogmatic, authoritarian and despotic form of repression in the name of religious values which is instrumental for the social isolation of women. "Atwood's feminist concerns are plain here but so too are her concern for basic human rights".

Offred tries to combat her situation in different ways, she feels trapped in an overwhelming excruciating dystopian society which curbs her freedom. She is enslaved by the government physically and psychologically because of her fecundity.

Atwood presents "a timeless vision on sexual politics in a fallen world" Offred shows an

indomitable will power and determination in her effort to escape from the obnoxious clutch of Gilead despite the struggle and torture that she undergoes as a handmaid.

In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale* as women is denied the right to possess or to have control over their own body. their body is segmented and their value is determined on the basis of her reproductive capability.

Margaret Atwood, as a feminist writer and a Canadian nationalist concentrates on the issue of gender equality, Women's problems and their quest for identity in her novels. Her novels portray the power struggle between sexes. Atwood, in her novels explores and illuminates miserable conditions of women in the suffocating patriarchal society. Though her fictional landscape is Canada and the characters are drawn invariably from the Canadian society, yet the issues she deals with in her fiction, give it a universal character and appeal. Atwood raises her voice against the gender based injustices and proposes feminist alternative through her writing. Her feminist vision is much border than any of her contemporary feminist writers. She is a versatile feminist writer who covers all aspects of feminism in her novels.

In *Surfacing* Margaret Atwood shows a serious concern with women's destiny in a male-dominated world. It is an attempt to expose male prejudice against women's creativity and talent. The novel is a novel about search for identity and self-discovery and it intends to highlight the imbalances of power between sexes. The nameless protagonist rebels against women's reduction to the status of an object. The unnamed woman protagonist is searching her roots. She tries to link herself with her past through her search for her missing father and accepts her complicity in her abortion. She displays her resolve and strength to face life. She quests for an explicit identity, which she ultimately gains.

Her decision to give birth to her second child is indeed a fulfillment of her quest. She shows path to many other women like her who are victimized by this patriarchal structure of power and domination.

In the *Handmaid tale*, Atwood present the dystopic vision of reality where a totalitarian state completely appropriates women's identity. This novel has a strong female discourse and it is conceived by sensitive feminist imagination. *The Handmaid's tale* set in the Republic of Gilead, depicts the social isolation of women who are deprived of their basic human rights. This novel gives a realistic description of a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian, horrifying and brutal patriarchal society which is completely an anti-woman society. The world that the novelist depicts in this novel is representative of her most horrifying vision of a male- dominated society. Women in the Republic of Gilead are manipulated and oppressed by men. It is absolutely clear that gender is the only factor which is responsible for women's victimization in the patriarchal state of Gilead. *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts various modes of the exploitation of women. It reveals how women are subordinated and oppressed by men in this male- dominated society. Women are even deprived of education, jobs, property, fashionable clothes and make- up. She has no name of her own; she merely lends a face to a name tag. She is denied hand- lotion and face – cream, as these could arouse her sensuality She is mere body; a womb that can bear child for some brave lady, her face is of no consequence. The women in Gilead have nothing to live for. She is a slave to the system that dominates and inferiorizes her, thus encouraging an inhuman patriarchal power structure. She continues to be a national resource.

The fact that her victimized protagonists suffer from specifically female issues has to be acknowledged as well. Many of the struggles that they are forced to deal with are strictly feminine struggles; the nameless protagonist from *surfacing* is haunted by her abortion and *Offered* is objectified by the mere fact that she has "Viable Ovaries". These women struggle because they are women. In order to survive they need to address the inequalities of their societies and reconstruct themselves. The study of women' struggle can be extended to other novels of Margaret Atwood namely *The Edible woman*, *Bodily harm*, *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye* for further study.

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