

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN FEMALE QUEST FOR SELF -IDENTITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING* AND SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*

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### ABSTRACT

The main objective of the paper was to elucidate the Female quest for self-identity of the Canadians and Americans, Similarly in the Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, despite how the female characters are treated and how they are sufferings, how they are searching for their one's identity among the society. The novel *Surfacing*, which deals and grappling with notions of national and gendered identity, anticipated rising concerns about conservation and preservation and the emergence of Canadian nationalism. While in *The Bell Jar* aren't entirely typical of female teenagers' troubles today. As Susan Sniader Lanser and Teresa De Lauretis have written, Plath's work is about one woman in a specific period of American history when exciting career opportunities for women were rare. Esther's dilemma marriage and children versus successful career cannot be so easily generalized today. Also, while many male and female teenagers today face the difficult decision of whether to lose their virginity before marriage, few obsess over it to the point that Esther does in *The Bell Jar*.

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As the post-colonial criticism developed, the theorists have agreed upon the fact that the role of feminism in the post-colonial practice is crucial. Moreover, these two theories clearly have the same goals. On the one hand, the main objective of both of them is to disclose the traditional power structures, both patriarchal and imperial. On the other hand, both feminism and post-colonial criticism aim to show the way the writers challenge the respective forms of authority. The main

concerns of the post-colonial criticism are the formation of canon, the phases through which imperialism and decolonization have gone, as well as how these processes are expressed in literature. What is more, the criticism is also concerned with the ways of resistance within literary pieces, such as rewritings of traditional concepts and creating voices that stand in opposition. All these issues become the matrix and concern of feminist criticism. Not the least, crucial to feminism is also pointing at the

notion of diversity. For many women, the process of writing is an expression of themselves, it allows them to "throw off their chains" and to struggle for more autonomy.

The twentieth century has given rise to women's efforts to fight for their rights in the Western world. In the forties, they were relatively emancipated, since they perceived the encouragements to enter the workplace. There, they could enjoy a relative independence and they felt responsible. They proved that they can be "effectual workers", but when the World War II was over, they had to face new requirements: they had to give up the jobs to the males coming back from the war ("Feminism"). They were and felt misplaced, everyone expected them to take care of their homeplace instead. What is more, they had to fulfill the role of a perfect mother and wife. The fact that earlier they were able to taste independence, career and pay reminded women that there was still much work to be done.

This paper is an attempt to have a closer look at famous novels *Surfacing* by a Canadian women writer Margaret Atwood and *The Bell Jar* by an American women writer Sylvia Plath, Even though *Surfacing*, is the work of a Canadian Ecofeminist a novelist who played a crucial role in forming the Canadian literary canon and Atwood's novel *Surfacing* was published in 1972. But *The Bell Jar* is American writer and poet Sylvia Plath's only novel, which was originally published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas" in 1963. The novel is semi-autobiographical with the names of places and people changed. The book is often regarded as a roman à clef, with the protagonist's descent into mental illness paralleling Plath's own experiences with what may have been depression. The paper mainly focuses on how the women characters are

suffering and how they are able to find their female identity in a patriarchal society in their novels.

There are several ways through which an identity is formed; having self-knowledge which has been created through one's personal history, experience of childhood and one's membership to a certain society thus defines the person's concept of himself according to the set of norms of the given culture. These characteristics are essential to develop a stable personal identity and when these are complex or problematic the individual has to face struggle in the process of identity construction, so to speak, the person needs to find his place in society, resolve the problems of existing personality discrepancies, feelings of displacement and alienation from his culture.

The unnamed narrator in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* embarks on a journey of self-discovery during which she has to come to terms with her confusion of choices, uncertainties of her past, personal life incongruity and her defected interpersonal relationships with the people surrounding her. Erik Erikson formed his theory about "identity crisis" which provides explanations for the conflicts that a person has to struggle with. Although, Erikson based his theory on adolescents, he also states that every human being has to face temporary instability during different stages of life which needs constant redefinition of the self. "Today when the term identity refers, more often than not, to something noisily demonstrative, to a more or less desperate 'quest,' or to an almost deliberately confused 'search...'" The nameless narrator in Margaret Atwood's novel is on the pathway of unresolved crisis, she stands at the crossroads between different values, and her insecurity of her self-certainty limits her presenting her self-image to others. The novel reflects her journey of finding a resolution for

her identity crisis, her struggle to conquer one of the most difficult issues in lives.

In Spite of *The Bell Jar*, Esther searches consistently for some kind of identity but finds her options limited as a young woman with little money of her own. After a disappointing summer as a guest editor in New York City, she fails to be accepted into a prestigious writing course and gradually loses much of her sanity and ambition. She mentally explores many wild scenarios for happiness and fulfillment (e.g., apprenticing herself to a pottery maker, finding a European lover), tries to write a novel, does such bizarre things as wearing her mother's clothes and eating raw meat, and finally attempts suicide.

Obviously, she is not mentally well, but to some extent society's repressions for females and the lack of creative inspiration in her life have both contributed to her collapse. Since society does not encourage Esther to excel her excellent grades not withstanding she sometimes competes in bizarre ways. For example, at a banquet for the guest interns at Ladies' Day, she eats ravenously as if she must consume more than any of the other interns. She also feels inferior to Buddy Willard because he lost his virginity before she did.

But if we compared the female narrator of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is often seen as a representative of Canada. The international reputation of Canadian literature is to a large extent ascribed to Atwood whose literary activity finds its roots in two factors: she belongs to the category of writers who "are daughters of an empire in a settler and invader colony" and, secondly as inheritors of a history which was patriarchal in Canada. Both the facts contribute to the protagonist finding herself lost in the myths imposed on her during her life. She realizes the fact she wants to get rid of the false images in her mind, such as those of language, of relationships with other people, of spirituality and so on. Even though she longs for

finding her own vision of the world around her, she seeks the natural world to find the answers.

But in *The Bell Jar* the character Esther recovers much of her mental and emotional stability by the end of the novel, but the reasons for her improvement are not entirely clear. To some extent, Dr. Nolan has empowered Esther to understand her motivations, actions, and reactions, but some would argue Esther has at least partly responded to electroconvulsive shock. At least one critic, David Holbrook in *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, even questions to what extent Esther has recovered, when he writes, "All that her therapy achieves is symbolized by the last chapter that blankets the asylum grounds ... Sylvia Plath's insight is not deceived. 'Treatment' merely freezes her.

*Surfacing* is a novel about a young woman who is an artist going in search of her father on a deserted island in northern Quebec. She takes a couple of companions with her – her lover Joe, friend Anna and Anna's partner David. While attempting to find the father, she recalls feelings and events that have to do with her past. The main issue of the novel is that of searching for identity. The unnamed protagonist perceives herself as a victim; on the one hand, as a member of patriarchal society, she is a victim of men: not only, in the protagonist's view, do they make use of women's bodies for their own satisfaction, but also have more rights. They are those who have the main voice in creating history and think they are responsible for "saving the world , men think they can do it with guns" (*Surfacing* 176).

An account of sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* had discribed about some litaray ctitist, such as "Linda Wagner-Martin disagrees: ". Esther has indeed entered a new phase. She enters her new birth ritual, the process of leaving the asylum for the real world; with as much

confidence as an intelligent person can muster. There is no question that Plath intended to create a thoroughly positive ending for Esther's narrative." While the extent of Esther's recovery is debatable, the search for her identity will certainly continue after she is released from the asylum.

But if we compared into Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* opens with the depiction of generalized myths that the narrator lives with first of all, it elaborates on the myth of language, which the protagonist perceives as "the inadequacy of spoken words". Some myths of Canadian culture and history are treated, among others. That shows Canada as a peaceful space in the middle of nature. However, Atwood observes the falseness of this generalization and points at issues that prove the opposite. What is more, the narrator also elaborates on false images about her family and friends as well as those of Christianity and spirituality in general.

On the other hand, as a Canadian she feels oppressed by the cultural imperialism of Americans who regard the Canadians as the other. The young woman is shifting between her memories of her childhood and the experiences she goes through at present. Not only is she questing to understand and find her position in her family, but also in the Canadian society. As a victim she feels disconnected from her language, culture and history, and, not least, from members of her family, especially from her missing father; in fact, she perceives herself as a displaced person. These feelings evoke her an urgent need of recreation: the heroine of *Surfacing* wants to seek her lost identity, to find and reconstruct it again.

Notwithstanding *The Bell Jar* addresses the question of socially acceptable identity. It examines Esther's "quest to forge her own identity, to be herself rather than what others expect her to be". Esther is expected to become

a housewife, and a self-sufficient woman, without the options to achieve independence. Esther feels she is a prisoner to domestic duties and she fears the loss of her inner self. *The Bell Jar* sets out to highlight the problems with oppressive patriarchal society in mid-20th Century America. The men in Esther's life are all oppressive, whether it is in a physical manner or an emotional one.

While in *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood uses a wide range of symbols: among others she implies the imagery of water in the lake and she credits the central symbol of a father with a great importance. What is more, to accentuate the existence of the major Canadian myth, that of victimization, she operates with the notion of a victim and even depicts a certain narrative position to do it. Likewise, Atwood creates the heroine of *Surfacing* as a woman struggling with her body.

The main objective of the paper was to elucidate the Female quest for self-identity of the Canadians and Americans, Similarly in the Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, despite how the female characters are treated and how they are sufferings, how they are searching for their one's identity among the society. The novel *Surfacing*, which deals and grappling with notions of national and gendered identity, anticipated rising concerns about conservation and preservation and the emergence of Canadian nationalism. While in *The Bell Jar* aren't entirely typical of female teenagers' troubles today. As Susan Sniader Lanser and Teresa De Lauretis have written, Plath's work is about one woman in a specific period of American history when exciting career opportunities for women were rare. Esther's dilemma marriage and children versus successful career cannot be so easily generalized today. Also, while many male and female teenagers today face the difficult decision of whether to lose their virginity

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