



Language As A Violent Hierarchy: A Psychological And Linguistic Analysis Of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract: This paper explores the dualistic struggle for identity in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) through a bilateral analysis of linguistic alienation and the psychological effects of the island setting. The first section examines the **linguistic alienation**, adopting Jacques Derrida's concept and critique of **logocentrism** to argue how the protagonist perceives the English language as a "violent hierarchy" that blemishes her reality. By considering standardised language as a colonial and hegemonic "American" tool of diversification, she undergoes a drastic process of "un-naming" to escape the deceitful nature of the signifier. The second section shifts to the **psychological alienation**, focusing on the isolated island setting as an intangible space that coerces the transformation of the repressed. Pertaining to the psychological theories of dissociation and loss of identity, this study demonstrates how the island acts as a psychological penitentiary where the protagonist confronts the trauma of her past. Ultimately, the paper discusses how the protagonist's refuge in the woods is not a descent into insanity, but an obligatory psychological "surfacing." By deconstructing both the linguistic structures of society and the psychological restraints on her, she attains a unified consciousness, moving from a dissociated "floating head" to something coherent and rational.

Index Terms - Linguistic Alienation, Logocentrism, Psychological Setting, Dissociation, Trauma Recovery, Margaret Atwood.

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) remains a groundbreaking text in Canadian literary canon. Essentially, for its symbolical exploration of national identity and the spalling female psyche. Written during the heyday of Canadian cultural nationalism, the narrative follows an anonymous protagonist returning to her native home in Quebec. The plot ideally bends towards the re-discovery of her father, but quickly swerves into an existential and psychological crisis. The protagonist finds herself to be estranged not only from her past life but from the linguistic structures she uses to navigate through reality.

This paper contends that the protagonist's journey is a "bilateral surfacing"- a dual movement of the mind and the medium of expression. First, it deciphers her "linguistic alienation" using Jacques Derrida's concept of logocentrism to highlight how the protagonist views the English language as a "violent hierarchy" that colonises the worldly structures. Second, it analyses the workings behind her "psychological alienation" perceiving the island setting as a revelatory "mental space" where she confronts the repressed trauma of her abortion and loss to achieve an 'ascended' state of being. Ultimately, her descent into a feral, pre-verbal state is not presented as a fit of madness, but a premeditated deconstruction of the societal and linguistic chains that have historically confined her identity.

II. THE LINGUISTIC ALIENATION (THE PROBLEM OF WORDS)

The linguistic aspects of the novel *Surfacing* lies in the protagonist's belief that language is not a neutral tool for communication, but a system of colonization and fragmentation. She is of the opinion that English as a language presents itself as a "foreign language" that falters her roots with the natural world.

The problem lies in the language's linear and logical nature which unharmoniously coincides with her fluid and raw internal experiences. She begins to doubt lexical aspects of words in its entirety, considering them as "thin skins" over her version of reality. Atwood writes, "The trouble is all in the words, they are fallacious, they are 2-dimensional" (Atwood 165).

Atwood's employment of linguistic approaches to explore the concept of "hegemony" is highlighted when the protagonist associates the English language with "The Americans"—a term she uses for anyone (even Canadians) who seek to dominate, colonise, and destroy the landscape. Her father's maps are linguistic representations of the inspiring landscape. The maps, to her, are a "lie" because they attempt to exploit the never-ending aspect of symbols, converting them into a more limited nature. Barbara Hill Rigney suggests that the protagonist's psychological survival depends on her rejection of these words: "To find the father and the self, the narrator must revert to a pre-verbal state, for language is seen as the ultimate tool of the victors and the victimizers" (94).

The narrator is in a constant turmoil with the lexical structure of language which "translates" her true and hidden feelings into a language that is incapable of holding and representing it, leading to her emotional outburst. J. Brooks Bouson notes that "the narrator's psychic numbing and her sense of being 'cut off' from her body and feelings are symptomatic of her struggle against a 'masculine' language that values logic over intuition" (67).

The climax of the novel is a transcending journey through language. To find her missing father and her own identity, she decides it is imperative to move backwards through the stages of language. The Three Stages of her Linguistic Shift that the narrator experiences: the Deconstructive stage where she destroys her own illustrations and her father's notes. She is in a process of "erasing" her world: "I have to navigate by internal compass... the names of the animals and the plants are disappearing from my mind" (Atwood 150). The second stage is of **Silence** where she refrains from conversing with her companions with the objective that "langue" in Saussurean terms is a "system of division" that separates people. "Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole" (Atwood 146). Lastly, her primitive or feral stage; it is here that she breaks all cultural and linguistic barriers and strives towards the "null", where both language and sign is mostly absent. In the woods, she desires to perceive the world in man's true feral nature—without the presence of linguistic structures.

Ultimately, the protagonist realises that complete withdrawal from language will eventually lead to social isolation. To survive in the human society, she must return to language, but with a renewed objective.

"Withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death; I must separate myself from those who have died... The lake is quiet, the trees are optimistic... I can't see them, they are no longer gods. I have to create my own instructions."

The linguistic significance in the passage lies in the fact that the narrator assumes the role of a harbinger, in her own terms. She stops allowing the social structures of language of to define her and plans to use language as an independent choice rather than a constriction.

One of the predominant themes in *Surfacing* is the phenomenon that the language that we speak is co-related to the world that we perceive. The protagonist feels that the language "forces" her to see the world in a more diversified and colonial way. As English is a language of "nouns" (names and possessions) and "uniform time" (past, present, future), the protagonist feels that she is unable to reciprocate the "ever-present" nature of the island. As H. S. Macpherson elaborates, the protagonist considers language as a "translation" of a reality that is in truth formless and wordless. She experiences a "linguistic alienation" where her native tongue feels like a "foreign language" imposed upon her (Atwood 106).

In the linguistic domain, the English sentence structure quintessentially contains a Subject acting upon an Object.

(**SUBJECT**→ **VERB** **OBJECT**) The protagonist is of the view that human violence stems from this exact phenomenon. Roberta Rubenstein argues that the protagonist's psyche is at odds with the "logic of the sentence," which is practically the "logic of the hunt." The linguistic structure of English is considered one of a "preying" nature because of its imminent requirement of a "prey" or victim (an object) (393).

'Logocentrism,' as Derrida defines it, is "the metaphysics of phonetic writing" and the linguistic favouritism that privileges speech and "the word" as the "ultimate source of truth" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 3). Furthermore, Barbara Hill Rigney's work, *Madness and Sexual Politics*, explores how the protagonist actively undermines this structure. In this context, the protagonist's perceived loss of sanity is, in truth, a sophisticated protest against the linguistic conventions; by maintaining her silence, she effectively abjures the "logocentric" expectations of society.

The process of forfeit is perhaps the most arguable linguistic event in the novel. It represents a move from Symbolic Syntax to a Primitive one. The narrator's shedding of her clothes and blankets is symbolic to shedding her "nouns and pronouns." She is in such a state where she refutes the words associated with things. J. Brooks Bouson suggests that this "un-naming" is a "cleansing of the linguistic palate." In the process of rejecting the names of various plants and animals, she discards the "labels" signifying human's efforts to claim ownership on aspects of nature (71).

III. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ALIENATION (THE ISLAND AS A MENTAL SPACE)

Margaret Atwood's intriguing novel, *'Surfacing'* written in the backdrop of Canadian nationalism explores cultural topics of: existentialism, posthumanism, search for identity and human psychology. The psychological and symbolic structures present in the novel point towards the hidden underlying motifs of the author. These structures seemingly contribute to the deeper understanding of the novel.

The concept of "unexplored individualism" haunts the narrator from the initial stages of the novel. She returns to Quebec to find her father who has gone missing. In truth, she strives to find her old and powerful self which she had lost when she left the island. Her yearning for this was more strengthened by the sufferings she had to face staying away from the island - abortion, divorce and adhering to a loveless relationship with Joe. Roberta Rubenstein propounds upon the psychological necessity of this "obtrusive" past: "The narrator's fabricated memories function as a psychological shield, protecting her from the unbearable guilt of her abortion until she is strong enough to 'surface' and face the truth" (390). The island nourishes her and acts as a "fortress" where she can shelter herself from all external forces and influence. It is further validated in the novel as the narrator finds the primitive version of herself in the island itself after being left behind by Joe and the others. This version of her is devoid of any social boundaries whatsoever. She goes into a state of psychosis and runs around naked throughout the island, feasts on wild plants and lives in caverns.

The original town of Quebec where the group arrives first renders an inhospitable treatment towards them. The narrator herself accepts that the people in the town do not like her and have ostracized her throughout her life there. It is in the island that the narrator and her family have reconciled themselves.

The sojourn at the island acts as an "outlet" for the narrator. Filled with signs and symbols it provokes the narrator to begin her quest of self-identification and to step into the realm of psyche. Her fit of madness in the island is nothing but a psychological release of her pent-up anxiety, a result of years of mental torment: "I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. My head detached itself from my body; my head remained floating, a foot above the ground, connected by only a thin thread" (Atwood 108). Through her state of barbarism, she identifies her true self, she even imagines raising her child in the most primitive way possible; the same child whom she conceived out of pure psychological obligation, defying something done out of love or sexual desire. It was to replace her previous aborted child, whose reflection the narrator sees in the water whilst diving to find the Indian rock paintings

The island indirectly contributes as an agent to the precious discovery of the narrator's true identity. From the beginning various instances and objects alter the mental state of the narrator- her discovery of her father's mental instability, her constant fear of his re-emergence; Paul's wooden barometer; the narrator's ring. These symbols contain a common link between them, i.e., a suppression of one's true identity. The narrator's father's sudden state of madness points towards his obvious state of psychosis in lieu of freeing himself from societal entrapment. The narrator's ring, according to the narrator, is like a noose constantly suffocating her on her way to "epiphany." She laments, and sarcastically plans to wear the two rings (ex-husband and Joe's) on her neck instead of her finger.

The character of Anna and her humiliation and suffering in the hands of her husband David obliquely hints at the demoralising effects that an unsuccessful marriage can have on an individual. Anna is a sort of a “puppet” latched to David’s fingers and lives solely according to his will. Through the decaying relation between the characters of David and Anna, Atwood shows how marriage, as an institution, is nothing but a mirage; and how it restraints a person’s scope for freedom. On the contrary, Joe’s insistence on marriage and his proposal to the narrator shows how he overvalues the concept of marriage. David’s condescending comments on Anna, his insistence on her wearing makeup all the time, and his impelling to her for stripping nude for him to film her; and Anna’s willingness to obey these commands shows how she has lost her identity as a woman and more shockingly as a human being. Anna’s involvement in sexual intercourse with Joe along with David’s allegations of “cheating” can be considered as measures she takes to escape her misery and relieve herself with superficial actions of physical and psychological exultation – which would not have been possible if she had not visited the island. The narrator, here, comes across Anna’s condition and inevitably gets affected by it.

It is quite evident that the island acts as a promoter for “self-discovery.” It is in this island itself the novel’s main tensions and paradoxes are settled i.e., when the narrator ascends from her state of a feral and looks into the mirror, she realises her true self - “I must stop being a mirror, I must stop reflecting the people around me. I must be my own source of light” (Atwood 160). She spies on Joe when he returns in search of her and realises that they both share a mutual love for each other. She waits for his arrival and for him to take her back. The narrator’s psychological objective is fulfilled and she has triumphed, it is now time for her to leave the island. The island is of no use to her anymore and therefore it longs for the arrival of a new subject.

The island’s action is twofold but stems out of one common dichotomy – it either “kills” or it “saves” the former in the narrator’s father’s case. Arguably, the outcome would have been the same in the narrator’s case if her fit of madness in the island had prolonged further, she would have met the same fate as of her father. To the reader it may strike that why does every action turn abysmal in the island setting- the answer lies not in the ordinary but solely in the psychological realm.

IV. CONCLUSION

The amalgamation of linguistic alienation and psychological elements in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* brings to the fore, a narrative where the theme of the self-identification is pertinent to the understanding of the novel. From a linguistic perspective, the protagonist’s epiphany highlights a veritable clash against the idea of “logocentrism”, where language is perceived as a “violent hierarchy.” By associating English as a “second language” (Atwood 106) and a tool of hegemony, the narrator refutes the phenomenon of naming things and concepts as a predatory act and symbol that hinders the laws of the natural world. Her cathartic descent into silence should not be considered as a refrain from communication, but a well-executed linguistic turn —a “un-naming” process directed towards a “fallacious” and “2-dimensional” nature of words (Atwood 165) in search of a pristine reality.

The setting of the Canadian woods and the island serves as a psychological refuge where the narrator reconstructs herself - “psychic numbing” (Bouson 67) and mitigates the subdued memories of her past. Her “head/body” split is a symbolic transition-a mechanism to cope with the society.

Ultimately, *Surfacing* concludes that language and social structures are inherently flawed. The narrator’s “surfacing” signifies a psychological advent to her acceptance of her required return to the world of language, but with a new ground-breaking consciousness. She vows to no longer act as a “reflection” of others’ expectations, but as an explorer who has explored the “internal compass” (Atwood 150) necessary to navigate through the dissociations of human existence.

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