



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Politics of Body and Writing the Self: Female Resistance and Self-Exploration in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

<sup>1</sup>Amina Mehmood\*, <sup>2</sup>Warda Abbas and <sup>3</sup>Sarah Azam

1. Lecturer. Department of English & Literary Studies. University of Management & Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Lecturer. Department of English & Literary Studies. University of Management & Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Lecturer. Department of English & Literary Studies. University of Management & Technology, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

\*Corresponding Author | [amina.mehmood@umt.edu.pk](mailto:amina.mehmood@umt.edu.pk)

## ABSTRACT

This research seeks to address the politics of female body and writing the 'self' in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. This study highlights the trope of feminine writing by discussing the significance of female body which is suppressed/colonized and suffers from identity crisis but reclaims itself by finding self-expression through body. By drawing upon the theoretical concepts of Helene Cixous's "Ecriture Feminine", it engages with the phenomenon that when a female body suffers from oppression and violence, it defies the patriarchal structures of phallogocentric language and constructs its own mode of resistance by writing through body which helps a woman find means to explore her lost self. The textual analysis demonstrates that the individual self of the female protagonist gets divided and bears psychic traumas which ultimately lead her towards resistance. Hence, the reclamation of self becomes an inevitable quest for the protagonist which she endeavors to explore and ultimately achieves it.

**KEYWORDS** Politics of Body, Feminine Language, Female Resistance, Writing through Body

## Introduction

This research seeks to address the politics of female body and trope of feminine writing in reclaiming the self in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. The pertinent questions that this study deals with highlight the causes of female oppression at the hands of patriarchal culture and dominance of phallogocentric language that renders the existence of women as inferior, subservient, sexual objects. The primary objective of this research is to showcase the ways with which the female protagonist struggles to reclaim her lost identity and gets back to her 'self' by writing through the medium of body. The consciousness with which she explores her female body and reclaims it by resisting to the male oppression leads her to the journey of self-exploration and self-reclamation. What facilitates her throughout the journey is the agency of her own body and the trope of feminine writing. She resists the patriarchal violence by rejecting the phallogocentric linguistic constructs and creating her own non-verbal or para-lingual meta-language which is termed as "Ecriture Feminine" by Helene Cixous. It is this trope of female writing through which the politics and agency of female body is reimaged and 'self' is reclaimed in the novel.

Atwood's narrative in *Surfacing*, addresses how the colonial enterprise in Canada seems to have done great damage to the ecology and, similarly women also suffer from

this damage not only at the hands of colonial power but also by patriarchy. The female protagonist in the novel suffers from identity crisis and goes back to her homeland to search for her parents and roots. In the course of her journey, she transforms herself from a subservient woman to a resistant figure, and during this process of transformation, her body becomes an active agent and a site of resistance and by this means, she explores her lost self.

### Literature Review

The trope of female body has been explored in *Surfacing* in various researches. The female body in the novel operates both as a metaphor for oppression and resistance. The body is a space where men exercise power and to counteract this power “bodily responses by female protagonist [occur through] verbal and physical challenges to patriarchal authority” (Katruk, 2006). The pertinent issue of the protagonist’s fissured body and lost identity is addressed as she goes through disturbed experience of marriage, abortion and divorce which leave her soul and body in shatters. She tries to restore herself from the damage showing resistance through her body.

The symbolic agency of the body has also been touched upon in the context of *Surfacing* where the study highlights the correlation of violence between female body and the land. The protagonist’s resistance emerges to reinforce that female potency defines itself when “the body [works] as ‘symbol’ and the body as ‘agent’” (Reischer, 2004). She acutely becomes conscious of her torn self after visiting her hometown in Canada and confronting the ecological destruction and diminishing natural resources. The very first sentence of the novel reinforces that environmental destruction, caused by war and American colonial project, has firmly gripped Canada in its clutches. The protagonist says “I can’t believe I’m on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up” (Atwood, 1979). The road signifies the journey on which the protagonist has set off. The lake and its surrounding area is degenerated as the narrator says that “the Americans hollowed out” everything. The colonial damage is visible in the protagonist’s remark when she says “Nothing is the same. I don’t know the way anymore”. The feeling of being lost is both literal as well as metaphoric as she has lost her roots and her ‘self’ and endeavors to revisit and regain them.

The ecological destruction, in *Surfacing*, at the hands of capitalists/colonizers has been viewed as a site of realization for the protagonist as she finds her own lost reflection in the destruction of the land. When she is lost on her way back to her hometown, she feels estranged, “Now we’re on my home ground, foreign territory”. The foreignness comes after the realization that everything has been destroyed or altered by the colonizers as the road is “closed for years” and the protagonist is told she needs “the new one”. Her friend, David, curses the colonizers by calling them “Bloody fascist pig Yanks”. He spitefully declares his hatred by cursing them; “Rotten capitalist bastards” (6) and condemns their act of invasion by stating, “If we could only kick out the fascist pig Yanks and the capitalists this would be a neat country”. The same capitalistic authority which has bruised the land, also harms the female body as “The body gets constructed differently right through a woman’s life by patriarchy and capitalism” (Sabala, 2010). The colonizers have defaced the country and left the landscape in a rotten state. In a same way, female body is also colonized as it has suffered through sexual exploitation and abortion.

According to Gautam, colonialism operates as an oppressive power structure which has “gone deep into the collective unconsciousness of Canada and [has] become metaphor for feminine and nature exploitation” (Gautam, 2012) After seeing the brutal damage done to ecology, the protagonist observes her own fissures more closely. She

realizes the “gap between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she encounters nature. Her evolving awareness of herself as a ‘victim’ is parallel to the “recognition that men destroy nature and women just for their fun. The relationship between nature and men is relationship of exploitation” (Bhalla, 2012). She equates the victimization of nature by the colonizers with the oppression done to her body and ‘self’ through the institute of marriage; an outcome of social and patriarchal constructs.

Tolan views that “system of interconnected, hierarchical oppositions results in a situation in which nature, women and Canada are all innocent victims of an aggressive, patriarchal, Americanized culture” in the novel (Tolan, 2007). The idea of failed marriage and violence done on her body reveals the psychological tension in *Surfacing* as her relationship could not work and she remained disturbed by it. According to her “marriage was like playing monopoly or doing crossword puzzles, either your mind worked...or it didn’t; and I’d proved mine didn’t” (Atwood, 1979). She says “For me it had not been like skiing, it was more like jumping off a cliff. That was the feeling I had all the time I was married; in the air, going down, waiting for the smash at the bottom”. When she asks her friend Anna about her experience of marriage, she replies “We tell a lot of jokes”. The suspicious manner, through which Anna gives a reply, leaves the protagonist reflecting that marriage seems a joke which has been played by her husband on her life. The failure of marriage leaves a gap in her life. She thinks that “A divorce is like an amputation; you survive but there is less of you”. The question of survival, after being divorced, bears the implication that her survival is in danger.

Marriage and divorce disturb her emotional and psychological self, whereas the abortion of her child damages her body and she assumes that her natural self is lost. “Sex used to smell like rubber gloves...no more handy green plastic packages, moon shaped so that the woman can pretend she is still natural, cyclical, instead of a chemical slot machine. But soon they’ll have the artificial womb” (Atwood, 1979). She revises the whole scene of her abortion in the mind when her body is seemed to be amputated. “I was emptied, amputated. I stank of salt and antiseptic; they had planted death in me like a seed”. Each body part is laid bare, hence, becomes vulnerable and an easy prey as she puts, “they shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don’t let you see, they don’t want you to understand, they want you to believe it’s their power, not yours”. All of her power is lost when she is put in a subject position.

The body becomes a passive victim when physical damage is carried out on her feminine self. “The destruction [is] wreaked upon her own body by way of a coerced abortion” (Tolan, 2007) as they stick needles into her body and she is treated as “a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. After that they fill your veins up with red plastic” (Atwood, 1979). The protagonist’s husband forced her to abort the child as she says “it was his idea, his fault”. She is numbed after the incident and thinks herself to be cut and divided. “It was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget”. The reference to flesh and its amputation signifies the damage done to her body which eventually leads her towards guilt as she “feel[s] a little sick, it’s because I’ve killed something, made it dead”. Her guilt springs forth with the thought that she was an accomplice to her husband in aborting the child as she complied with his idea and did not resist. “Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn’t a child but it could have been one, I didn’t allow it”. This guilt creates a gap and split in her personality. She considers her ‘self’ torn in two as she says “The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was

nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb". The consciousness of having a divided 'self' drives her to reclaim her body and lost self by embarking upon the journey of liberation.

### Material and Methods

This research is qualitative in nature. It employs textual analysis as a method to explore the agency of female language in the novel. This method will provide tools for exploring the politics of female body and its correlation between language and resistance.

### Theoretical Framework

By employing Helene Cixous' theoretical underpinning on 'Ecriture Feminine' i.e., female writing', its need and agency in countering phallogocentric linguistic constructs, this study highlights the role and politics of female body. The detailed textual analysis determines how female protagonist, through her body, deconstructs the patriarchal representation of women, and how feminine language reconstructs the female identity by defying and subverting the phallogocentric tradition of linguistic and cultural signs in the novel. Female resistance and self-exploration occur through the trope of female body which finds its expression through para-lingual and non-verbal gestures in the narrative apart from redefining female language.

Helene Cixous, in her seminal essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', reinforces the need and agency of feminine writing. Her theoretical insight urges women to "write [their] self" through body and "women must bring women to writing" because they have been "driven away violently from their bodies" (Cixous, 1976). For Cixous, female writing is profused with a "world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions". The locus of her feminine writing springs from female sexuality and body as she calls such narratives "female-sexed texts". Such writing, for Cixous, is "self-seeking" as "it does not contain, it carries, it does not hold back, it makes possible". It is not only emancipatory but inclusive as well because when a woman writes through her body she takes "precipitous flights between knowledge and invention" and she knows everything about her body "without exclusions, without stipulation". Her language does not "lack" rather it keeps "going without ever inscribing or discerning contours". Through writing her body she "arrives and becomes" and defies the "phallogocentric sublation" of patriarchal signs and constructs.

### Results and Discussion

The journey of the protagonist's resistance begins when she attempts to get her divided 'self' back, and inches a step forward and resists the patriarchal structures which surround her. She resists the male gaze of her partner, Joe, whom she is living with after her divorce. She "could feel her x-ray vision prying under my skin, a slight prickling sensation as though he was tracing me" (Atwood, 1979). She resists his looks and does not respond to him as he says to her "I get the feeling you don't give a shit about me". She detaches herself from any emotional feelings of love towards Joe and is least concerned about him.

Towards the journey of her self-exploration, she wishes to acquire knowledge which can enlighten her numbed self. "I would have felt there was something special about me, to be raised from the dead like that; I would have returned with secrets". At this point, she realizes that language could not help her in attaining her goal as she puts "Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole". Hence for the sake of wholeness, she

breaks away from language and considers that “to be deaf and dumb would be easier”. She believes that language could not express her feelings because it is male-oriented and phallogentric. When Joe asks her if she loves him she thinks “It was the language again, I could not use it because it was not mine. He must have known what he meant but it was an imprecise word”. Her distrust on male language grows and she creates her own meta-language.

She is bent on inventing her own symbolic language which can liberate her from the barriers of expression and allow her ‘self’ to be free from any structure. “First I had to immerse myself in the other language”. The ‘other’ language she refers to is the language which is termed as ‘*Écriture féminine*’ or women’s writing as it is argued “If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier...it is time for her to dislocate this “within” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of” (Cixous, 1976). The protagonist moves away from the male-centered discourse and creates her own symbolic language of the body in order to resist the hierarchical and oppressive structures and heal her wounded self. As Cixous argues that “We have been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty; we’ve been made victims of old fool’s game” (Cixous, 1976). Hence, the protagonist turns towards her body, delves deep into its convolutions, reveres it and endeavors to claim it again.

The body becomes a site of resistance and a significant trope through which she defies patriarchy and explores her lost self. “A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow” (Cixous, 1976). To come out of the shadow of men, the narrator makes use of her body as a defense mechanism. It is through her body that she identifies herself with nature and becomes a “natural woman”, a state which, hitherto, was denied to her (Atwood, 1979). “A state of nature...a tanned body on a beach with washed hair...hair like a frayed bathmat stuck with leaves and twigs. A new kind of centerfold”. The body which was amputated and marginalized previously, assumes a pivotal position and becomes the centre. After taking hold of her body she affirms that no one “will do that to me again, strap me to the death machine, emptiness machine...secret knives. This time I won’t let them” (Atwood, 1979). This is her first step towards transformation.

She gets complete agency over her body and transforms herself into an autonomous figure as she learns to speak through her body. She does not believe that phallogentric male language is a medium of expression and according to her “The language is wrong” (Atwood, 1979). The symbolic language she invents includes gestures, body movements and silence; thus, her language is the language of defiance which comes through body. “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classics and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse” (Cixous, 1976). She goes beyond the usual constraints of language and constructs her own discourse which ultimately leads her towards her resurrection because she had the “fear that I wasn’t alive” (Atwood, 1979). When the symbolic language begins to help her discover herself, she feels that “The words went out towards the shadows, smoke-thin, evaporating”. She considers herself to be no more in need of words.

The symbolic language, which becomes a means to self-exploration, reinforces the significance of female body which goes through the process of reformation as the protagonist hopes that “everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive”. She, after defying the structures of language and patriarchy, puts herself into an experiment

with her body. Though she does not love her partner, Joe, she tries to get pregnant by him and boldly objectifies his body for her own sake. She believes, while having an intercourse, that she will be successful in her pursuit as she says "I'll get pregnant. It's the right time". Her body makes her believe that "flesh making more flesh" would create "miracle" and she will reproduce another life out of her, which was formerly taken away from her by force (Atwood, 1979). The idea of getting pregnant also gives her strength because female body "brings the other to life ...and giving birth is neither losing, nor increasing. It is adding to life another" (Cixous, 1976). For Cixous, a female exercises complete agency over her body when she carries the desire for "swollen belly" and it provides her the "unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy which have actually been always exaggerated or conjured away—or cursed—in the classical texts". In a way, she defies the patriarchal construct of femininity which views female body only as 'producing machine' devoid of bodily pleasures.

The agency of ownership over the body gets reversed and now she will be the owner of her child as she is the owner of her body. She does not reject the vital feature of her feminine body i.e. reproduction, rather takes pride in it and makes it her strength as she envisions the scene of her childbirth by saying, "This time I will do it by myself, squatting...on dry leaves. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord" (Atwood, 1979). Her essential womanhood strengthens the trait of motherhood and this idea corresponds to Cixous's point of view when she argues that "In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes [as a] cradler and a giver" (Cixous, 1976). The idea of conceiving the child and the process of childbirth in itself highlights that it is, not men's, rather women's power and privilege which their bodies are endowed with and which they need to accept, acknowledge and claim as their own. A "woman is never far from 'mother'. There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (Cixous, 1976). Here the mother's milk and the act of writing/creation with white ink get intertwined as women truly write from the locus of their 'motherly' bodies.

The right to claim the body comes when she decides to dive into the lake. The lake is the first step towards her reclamation of body as she puts, "the lake was the entrance for me" (Atwood, 1979). This symbolic gesture of diving into lake and submerging her identity involves both her physical body and her inner self. On a deeper level, she is on her way towards "spiritual quest" (Christ, 1976). She wants to be completely transformed and purge her soul of the guilt of letting her child to be aborted. Her body helps her in exploring the lost part of her 'self' and reaffirming it. Her spiritual insight "surfaces through attention to the body" as the title of the novel 'surfacing' suggests. After submerging into the lake, she emerges or surfaces with renewed consciousness. This diving could be symbolically called a journey into self and subconscious which ultimately brings her back to her body. Her rejuvenation occurs when she realizes that "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long" (Atwood, 1979).

The lake works as an amorphous signifier which retains the capacity to be interpreted on multiple levels as she calls it "multilingual water" (Atwood, 1979). On a metaphorical level, the lake could be her fetus in which her child wallows. This lake is within her or she is within it. Two phenomenon occur simultaneously as she is both a mother of her yet unborn child and a reborn child coming out of the womb of her mother as she feels resurrected, "When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface, a cloth decoy; it jiggles in the waves I make, nudges gently". The lake becomes the metaphor for the fetus of the protagonist's own mother from which she

is born; since she experiences her own rebirth and revival and wants to “become a child again, a barbarian, a vandal; it was in us too, it was innate”

The desire, on her part, to become a child again is a desire to go back to the pre-lingual world where language does not exist. The proponents of *Écriture féminine* agree that female “resistance does take place in the form of *jouissance*, that is, in the direct re-experience of the physical pleasures of infancy” (Jones, 1981). She resists the phallogocentric language by denouncing it and constructs her own language of body. In a way, her rebirth is attached to the birth of feminine language. The desire of going back to the pre-lingual stage is the desire to return to the ‘real stage’ as termed by Lacan. It is the stage a child enjoys before it enters the language. It is the significant and formative stage because in it “there is no law, no patriarchy, no domination. It is also important since it is the stage that women should go back to in order to find their own language. The significance of the Real stems from the fact that in it there is no language” (Seda, 2005). That is why, the protagonist seems to be a child again and enjoying the ‘real’ stage as she breaks away from language and decides not to teach her child any language either. “I will never teach it any words” (Atwood, 1979). It does not necessarily mean that she would cut herself off from language, rather employ her body in speech. The protagonist who resists language “doesn’t ‘speak’, she throws her trembling body forward...it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech” (Cixous, 1976) and affirms “why talk when you are a word” (Atwood, 1979). Hence, it is the symbolic language of women’s body by which meanings find their vent.

After experiencing the rebirth and exploring her real self, she goes through the process of evolution and her body bears significant changes as she observes that “My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply” (Atwood, 1979). The revival of body and its re-emerging out of lake help her grow as a woman “silently, deep down inside...grows and multiplies” (Cixous, 1976) as if exploring her indefinite existence and expanding the innumerable potentialities of her body. After reclaiming the body, it seems she is transformed into an indefinable state and her identity shifts. “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, 1979). She associates herself with the geography and land, “I re-enter my own time...the primeval one” (185) and assumes to have gained her ‘natural’ self back. “I am part of the landscape; I could be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock”. Her power seems to be “cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide” (Cixous, 1976).

## Conclusion

Thus, towards the end of her journey of self-exploration, her body has gained the strength and wholeness which she needs to combat patriarchy and resist any further oppression and damage. The politics of body and birth of symbolic language operate as her tools in resisting the gendered and colonial repression. She attains her lost self and rightfully claims her body.

**References**

- Atwood, M. (1979). *Surfacing*. Great Britain : Virago Press .
- Bhalla, A. (2012). Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. *International Journal of Scientific and Research publications*, 2 (10), 1-6.
- Christ, P. C. (1976). Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision. *The University of Chicago Press*, 2 (2), 316-330.
- Cixous, H. (1976). The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs*, 1 (4), 875-893.
- Gautam, V. (2012). Role of Nature in Self-Exploration in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 2 (4), 1-3.
- Jones, A. R. (1981). Writing the Body: Towards an Understanding of an I Ecriture Feminine. *Feminist Studies*, 7 (2), 247-263.
- Katruk, K. H. (2006). *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*. London: Rutgers University Press.
- Reischer, E. (2004). The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33 (1), 297-317.
- Sabala, M. G. (2010). Body, Gender and Sexuality: Politics of Being and Belonging. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45 (17), 43-51.
- Seda, P. (2005). Feminine Writing as an Alternative to the Patriarchal Language. *MP: An Online Feminist Journal*, 3 (2), 7-15.
- Tolan, F. (2007). *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Netherlands : Rodopi Press.