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**WOMEN'S ROLES AND THE PROTAGONIST'S QUEST FOR
WOMANHOOD IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*
BA thesis**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* that was published in 1972, could be viewed as a critique on society and gender roles in the 1960s and the 1970s. It is important to write about these topics as they are still relevant today, fifty years later. The thesis analyses the roles of women in a male dominated society as depicted through the female characters in the novel.

The thesis includes an introduction, two chapters and a conclusion. The first of the two core chapters is a literature review that gives an overview of the main themes and related critical perspectives on the novel discussed by scholars. This provides a basis for the analysis of the novel to follow in the empirical part of this thesis. The second part is divided into three subchapters, each analyzing one of the three female characters portrayed in the novel while simultaneously following the protagonist on her quest for womanhood. She feels alienated from her feelings, friends and the world and is looking to other women for answers on how to manage as a female in a society where women have less opportunities, choices and control over their lives than the men. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
INTRODUCTION.....	4
1. SCHOLARSHIP ON MARGARET ATWOOD’S <i>SURFACING</i>: KEY THEMES AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES	6
1.1 Quest of Enlightenment	6
1.2 Alienation	7
1.3 Abortion	8
1.5 Power.....	9
1.4 Nature.....	10
2. ANALYSIS OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS AND THE PROTAGONIST’S SEARCH FOR A ROLE MODEL IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S <i>SURFACING</i>.....	12
2.1 The Protagonist.....	13
2.2 Anna	17
2.3 The Mother.....	22
CONCLUSION.....	25
REFERENCES.....	27
RESÜMEE.....	28

INTRODUCTION

Although Margaret Atwood has famously abstained from calling herself a feminist and associating her writing with the feminist movement, she is an author who is knowledgeable of theory and culture, with her political views corresponding with the ones of feminist ideology but not limited to it (Tolan 2007: 1-2). In an interview after publishing her first novel *The Edible Woman*, Atwood has said: “I don’t consider it feminism; I just consider it social realism. That part of it is simply social reporting. It was written in 1965 and that’s what things were like in 1965” (Kaminski 1990: 27 quoted in Tolan 2007: 2). Whether she wants to label her work or not, readers have the freedom of interpretation and to analyze her work from a feminist point of view. Especially, since her work can be interpreted as a reflection of the realities of our society.

According to Tolan (2007: 1-2), during the four early decades of Atwood’s career, Second-Wave feminism broadened and continually “developed and counter-developed” and there is no doubt that her work has had an impact on it. Second-Wave feminism, as Tolan (2007: 2) defines it, is a term that covers a wide range of discourses on topics like gender, femininity and sexuality. Tolan (2007: 2-3) believes that although the motive and aim of the author should be taken into account, the meaning of a text does not have to forever remain unchanged, but rather discovering new meanings and connections should be encouraged. Every reader should be allowed to have a unique experience and to expand on the ideas presented in a text (Tolan 2007: 4-5), which is why I will analyze the novel from a feminist angle, as many important critics, Fiona Tolan and Carol Christ among others, have done before me.

The novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood was first published in 1972, but the topics it deals with are still relevant today, almost fifty years later, which is why it is important to keep writing about them. As does Atwood’s first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* deals with the female protagonist’s alienation from the expectations of society with additional issues

like “ecology, nationalism, spirituality and ancestry” (Tolan 2007: 35). In the 1970s Second-Wave feminism was still in its early stage of development and it is precisely in *Surfacing* that Atwood explores the topics that would later become notable in the feminist theory and it was around the time of the publication of the novel that “Canadian nationalism and feminism” for the first time started to be connected with topics like autonomy and identity (Tolan 2007: 35-36).

The novel *Surfacing* is about an unnamed woman who travels back to her childhood home in Quebec, Canada to investigate her father’s disappearance. With her she takes her lover Joe and their friends Anna and David, a married couple. As they decide to stay there longer than initially planned, the masks start coming off and the truth surfaces. The protagonist finds herself on a search for self and on a quest for womanhood.

The aim of this thesis is to demonstrate how the novel could be seen as a critique on society and gender roles. The thesis will look into the protagonist and her quest for womanhood in a male dominated society where because of set gender roles, women have less rights, fewer possibilities and at times no control over their lives or bodies. The literature review will provide an overview of the main themes and critical perspectives on the novel related to the topics and the aim of this study. The protagonist as a woman has been focused on by numerous critics, but the other two women characters have not got as much attention, even though they are equally intriguing and have an important role in the protagonist’s quest. This thesis will fill the gap in previous research. The empirical part will examine the protagonist herself and her experiences as a woman as well as two other female characters, her best friend Anna, and her deceased mother. The analysis of the novel will show how in a world where the protagonist feels lost as a woman, she is looking for strength, answers and a role model to get by as a woman.

1. SCHOLARSHIP ON MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*: KEY THEMES AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

The aim of the following literature review is to discuss the key themes and critical perspectives related to analyzing the portrayal of the female experience in the male dominated society and gender roles in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and the empirical part of this thesis. These topics and the theoretical perspectives from the works of the scholars who have studied the novel have been chosen to be included because they play an important role in analyzing the gender roles shown in the novel and the protagonist's realizations about the world and herself as a woman and coming to terms with the truth.

1.1 Quest of Enlightenment

Fiona Tolan (2007: 41) points out how reading and analyzing the novel *Surfacing* as a quest continues to be the most popular by the critics. The narrator's journey back to her childhood home in search of her father unexpectedly turns into a parallel quest of finding herself and while searching for her father she also discovers her inability to confront her past and the alienation she feels from the world and her feelings which results in her inability to act (Christ 1976: 317). Carol Christ (1976: 316-317) suggests that *Surfacing* is not only "a social quest of search for self" where the narrator starts off feeling alienated but also a specifically "female spiritual quest" where the narrator is looking for redemption. Christ also highlights how to be able to reach spiritual enlightenment the narrator must "choose the isolation of the visionary quest" (Christ 1992: 47 quoted in Tolan 2007: 41). Tolan (2007: 41) agrees and explains that typically quests like these are built on the idea that the protagonist can "escape the society" and find themselves in isolation. Atwood's novel seems to be fitting with the genre of the quest novel of having the narrator journey to the wilderness. Tolan also adds that for the most part *Surfacing* follows the traditional quest structure but that the quest for self was actually not

intentional by the narrator and was initially rather a way to escape and forget after living through the trauma of her abortion.

A woman's social quest is about the difficulties a woman faces in society regarding different gender roles and the feeling of alienation in society, whereas a spiritual quest is about "a woman's awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe" (Christ 1989: 8). The spiritual quest means asking oneself a simple question of "who am I?" (Christ 1980: 8). A woman must then listen to herself and stand face to face with her past and her experiences (Christ 1980: 9). The protagonist's journey back home turns out to be a quest of enlightenment which in essence becomes her search for identity.

1.2 Alienation

The protagonist is aware that she has lost touch with her feelings and feels alienated from the world, her feelings as well as her friends. Christ (1971: 319) points out how the woman is entirely cut off from her past because she refuses to confront her feelings regarding her past experiences and is no longer able to have any normal feelings. Not having been able to truly process her traumas might have led to her being out of touch with her emotions and therefore feel alienated from her surroundings. Christ (1972: 319) also suggests that the protagonist's alienation from the world is mostly shown by her detached and unemotional narration and the way "everything is seen; nothing is felt". As the story progresses, the reader can never be sure if and when the protagonist is a reliable narrator because of the numerous times her memories and stories she tells turn out to be altered or suppressed. Christ (1972: 319-320) parallels her alienation from her feelings with her inability to act and constantly seeing herself as a victim. Because she is at all times aware of the people surrounding her being able to hurt her, she is completely unaware of her own power to hurt others.

In addition to feeling alienated from her feelings, the narrator also feels estranged from her friends. Christ (1972: 323) suggests that it is her “extraordinary insight and sense of power” which ultimately distances her from her friends and that this alienation she feels is precisely why she must choose isolation to go on a quest of enlightenment and reach the revelations and power.

1.3 Abortion

Abortion is an important topic in the novel *Surfacing* because it is a key event in the protagonist’s life and one of the main reasons why she feels the need to escape from society. Cinda Gault (2007: 15) discusses how in the 1960s and the 1970s Margaret Atwood among other authors started writing about topics that had formerly been considered “taboo”, abortion being one of them. In *Surfacing* it is especially significant because the narrator is coerced into having an abortion that she herself does not even want to have. Gault also goes on to say that the abortion represents the narrator not being able to make her own choices as a woman because of her nationality. Because of the fact that the abortion is illegal, its meaning in the novel can be questioned and Canada is portrayed as “a nation that denies the protagonist her reproductive autonomy”. The novel’s descriptions of the protagonist’s abortion infuriate sympathetic readers during that time because of the dangerous circumstances that women had to experience to have control over their bodies (Gault 2007: 17). Christ (1976: 329) also debates the topic of abortion from an ethical point of view and points out how having the right to an abortion has been an important concern but because death and killing are also prominent themes in the novel, abortion can essentially be viewed as killing and the protagonist feels remorse over it, it is also possible the novel could be criticizing the act instead.

Gault further connects the topic of abortion with identity and points out how the protagonist as a Canadian is not permitted to have the abortion, because it is illegal and as an

individual and a woman she does not even want to have it but is being told to do so by her lover. She is seen as a criminal and victimized both as a woman as well as a citizen while also having no choice in the matter herself (Gault 2007: 18). Gault (2007: 19) points out how the choices the protagonist makes or is able to make are strongly influenced by gender and that even going against her lover's demands and not having the abortion, the outcome is most likely to be regrettable. Gault (2007: 19) adds that therefore it could be that the novel portrays how the choices women are given are not really choices at all.

1.5 Power

The novel is set in a male dominated world and the theme of power becomes evident in the way the readers are shown the power the male characters and the expectations of society have over the female characters. The protagonist's relationship with her previous lover, the professor, was also clearly a relationship of power and male dominance because of the way he convinced the woman to get an abortion. This affects the protagonist greatly and makes her feel like she has lost her power.

We see the protagonist throughout the novel identifying herself as powerless and power is something that is on her mind continuously. Power is something she feels she has lost and something she does not realize she is looking from the wrong places (Christ 1976: 20). Tolan (2007: 53) suggests that the novel could be showing how there is a certain kind of freedom and simplicity to accepting the role of a victim and that in a way it criticizes both women and Canadians for being prone to accepting this role and not acting.

The topic of power is also said to represent the human's mental outlook towards nature and other humans. In the novel *Surfacing* Margaret Atwood paints a picture of a society where people crave to have control over everything and everyone which leads to misbehavior and violation against other people and nature (Özdemir 2003: 59). Erinç Özdemir goes on to say

that the theme of power in the novel can also represent a “creative, psychologically and morally enabling force” which helps a person find their identity and no longer let themselves be a victim and that therefore, it can be safely stated that power itself cannot be defined as either good or evil, it rather depends on the circumstances. Christ (1980: 43, 44) suggests that the narrator linking the theme of power only with evil and not with herself is a portrayal of “typical female delusion of innocence” and results in her believing that all she can do is be a victim and watch others be victims, and that to get her power back, a person must realize that it is not only the other people who can do evil things with power.

Christ (1976: 329) concludes with a question that arises for the feminist theory regarding the theme of power portrayed in the novel *Surfacing* and biological and gender roles: “Is power to be achieved through the acceptance or rejection of female biological roles?” She states that it would not be right to regard Atwood’s portrayal as antifeminist because the divide between these different feminist viewpoints is a divide in feminism itself.

1.4 Nature

The theme of nature is an important one in the novel because of what it represents. Many critics draw parallels between the abortion in the novel with the destruction of nature. The violation of the female body correlates to the destruction of the narrator’s native land of Canada where she grew up (Davidson 1979: 42). Christ (1976: 320) suggests that because the protagonist is not able to face her past and reconcile herself to the abortion, she focuses on the destruction of the Canadian wilderness instead, blaming the Americans. Fiona Tolan (2007: 45) adds that to say that the way Atwood writes about the “illogical and victimized Mother Nature at the hands of masculine rational society” might make the reader feel discomfited “would be to underestimate the scepticism of the text.”

Nature is also an important theme because the wilderness is where the narrator's quest takes her and where she ultimately discovers herself and comes to terms with her past. Christ (1976: 326) writes how perceiving nature as a great and transformative power source might be due to the specifically feminine biological experiences women have in life which might make them feel more intimacy towards nature, whereas in literature the male heroes tend to see nature as more of something to be conquered. Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy. N Davidson (1979: 48) point out how the narrator needs to give herself completely over to nature and become a natural woman, one with nature to be able to come to her realizations and return to reality.

To conclude from the literature review, all the mentioned themes and related critical perspectives play an important role as a basis for analyzing the three female characters in the novel, their roles as women and the protagonist quest for womanhood through the other women. The protagonist unexpectedly finds herself on a social and spiritual quest of enlightenment because of the alienation she feels from everything around her. The topic of abortion is an important one regarding this thesis and the following analysis because as the critics who have written about *Surfacing* from a feminist point of view suggest, it is one of the major causes for the protagonist's sense of being lost in the world. The violation of her body is what makes the protagonist feel that her power has been taken from her and she begins a quest to retrieve it by looking to other women for answers. The theme of the destruction of nature has been related to the violation of the body with an unwanted abortion. Additionally, it is the wilderness and isolation where the protagonist's search takes her. Nature ultimately becomes her source of power because it is the natural part of herself that she feels she has lost a connection to and now needs to find. The above will serve as a basis for the empirical part of the thesis.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS AND THE PROTAGONIST'S SEARCH FOR A ROLE MODEL IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*

In this part of the thesis, I will analyze the gender roles as portrayed in the novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood and how the novel itself may be viewed as a critique on said gender roles and male dominance during the 1960s and 1970s, the setting of the novel. I will examine the protagonist who at the beginning of the novel feels completely lost with her sense of female identity in shambles. She is looking for strength and guidance from two very different women with disparate ways of life in a society where traditional gender roles are a norm.

The analysis will be divided into three parts and will examine the three main female characters appearing in the novel while simultaneously also following the protagonist on her quest to retrieve her lost power and find herself as a woman. Firstly, I will focus on the unnamed narrator and protagonist herself and her own experiences. She feels lost in the world and as Carol Christ (1976: 320) points out, she is looking for her lost power from the wrong places. She looks up to her friend Anna for seemingly having her life together and believing her to be a great example of how to be the perfect woman. She also envies Anna's relationship with her husband David and wonders what their secret to a functioning and happy marriage is. As they travel back to the protagonist's childhood home, things start to unravel, and the protagonist slowly begins to see how everything might not be how it appears. I will then analyze the character of Anna through the eyes of the protagonist and see how the perception of her friend changes throughout the novel. Lastly, I will focus on the descriptions and memories of the deceased mother of the protagonist and the realizations on how the protagonist might have overlooked her own mother as a role model on her quest for womanhood.

It is important to keep in mind that everything we know as readers is given to us through the protagonist's eyes. We see her perception of the world and the people around her which

therefore does not necessarily mean that things are exactly the way the protagonist perceives them to be. For example, everything we can gather about Anna are either the protagonist's own thoughts about her or the things Anna herself says or does. This is an interesting aspect of the novel because it affects our reading and understanding of the novel and even though we can never fully get to know Anna, it is interesting to see how the protagonist's perception of Anna changes, as she makes new discoveries about her friend as well as herself. Additionally, we cannot be sure to always consider the protagonist a reliable narrator because as the novel evolves, we constantly see her stories about her past shift. This could possibly be due to her inability to confront her past and the actuality of her experiences.

2.1 The Protagonist

One of the key events in the protagonist's life that affects her greatly is the abortion she is pressured to have by her previous lover. She represses and alters these memories because she is traumatized by the experience. She is not ready to face the fact that she still went through with it, even though she did not want to and feels regret over obeying. Additionally, having an abortion during this time was illegal which is a great example how women were deprived of their right to have control over the decisions regarding their bodies. Women in the same situations like the narrator had to endure dangerous conditions just to have control over their own lives and bodies. Later in the novel, after confronting her experience she describes the place as "Not even a hospital, not even the sanction of legality, official procedures. A house it was, shabby front room with magazines..." (Atwood 1979: 183). Having the baby regardless of what her lover told her to do would only have been detrimental to herself because of society's expectations for a woman and the condemning of unmarried and single mothers. Therefore, she had a choice but also did not at the same time. The novel does a great job in showing how complex the topic of abortion is and how it is never as simple as having the abortion or not having it. As a woman the protagonist felt pressure from multiple angles which ultimately

makes it impossible to choose the right path, if there ever even was a right path for her in such a situation. Kit Dobson (2009: 28) suggest that it is due to the distressing experience of losing a child through abortion which has caused the woman to have a difficult relationship with her body.

The relationship the narrator had with her previous lover was not balanced and it is clear that the male had the power over the female. The novel portrays a selfish art professor who sees the pregnancy of the narrator merely as an inconvenience, a problem to be taken care of and someone who wants to keep his life with his actual family as well as his “convenient mistress” (Gault 2007: 16). Knowing the abortion is illegal and with absolute disregard for the narrator’s safety, he uses his power over her to convince her to have an abortion and does not even go with her on the day. The power imbalance is also shown through the way the male sees her wish to become an artist “cute but misguided” (Atwood 1979: 63) and suggests she choose something else because “there have never been any important women artists” (Atwood 1979: 63). The narrator admits that even though they were never married she still listened to him. His male authority in the relationship was strong enough for her to not even consider questioning his statements. It is not until later that the protagonist starts to look at the world in a more critical way. This relationship and its power dynamic are most likely part of what caused the protagonist to develop a resentment towards marriage, male dominance and men overall.

The narrator’s need to carry a ring with her is very showing of the social expectations depicted in the novel. An unmarried woman is not taken seriously because on her own she is not seen as capable. Extramarital affairs are frowned upon and therefore, the narrator explains how in social situations she often puts on the ring and pretends to be married to make her life easier and avoid complications. While discussing her father’s disappearance with his friend Paul, he asks whether her husband is there with her to which she responds by lying and saying he is, even though her lover Joe is not her husband. The narrator explains to the reader that

“What he means is that a man should be handling this...” and that her “status is a problem” but Joe can be the substitute (Atwood 1979: 24).

The resentment she has developed towards marriage is shown in the novel constantly through the way the reader is able to follow her thoughts on her surroundings and situations. Her feelings become especially apparent when her lover Joe decides to propose to her. Henry C. Phelps describes the character of Joe as having “a blend of overt concern and strained hostility” (1997: 113) towards women and brings his antagonistic proposal as one of the examples of this because of the way Joe states they should and might as well get married. She is sure that Joe does not actually love her as a person but rather an idea of himself and just needs someone to join in with him in that. It did not even matter who it was (Atwood 1979: 149). Her trauma regarding relationships and therefore marriage is also portrayed through how she thinks Joe is threatening her with something when he is proposing and how she said no because “It was because I didn’t want to, that’s why it would gratify him, it would be a sacrifice, of my reluctance, my distaste.” (Atwood 1979: 110). At this point in her head she is already trying to figure out how she can escape once they are back in the city and how much money it would take, proving how in her opinion, saying yes to a marriage with Joe is something that is entirely unthinkable. She loses control over her emotions and asks “Why are you doing this to me? You’ll ruin it” (Atwood 1979: 112). She is sure that the only reason Joe would want to marry her would be to have control over her and as a woman she would merely be his property. On one hand, it is evident that her views on marriage have been distorted even though she was never really married to her previous lover and was only a mistress to him. On the other hand, considering her experiences with the last man she let take control over her and the trauma it instilled in her, it would also not be wrong to ask if she had just found out the truth about what it was to be a woman in their society. Later, when she is thinking back to her abortion, she denies Joe intercourse and thinks that even though Joe does not know this himself, he was also

one of the killers (Atwood 1979: 188). It is possible that with this thought the narrator could be connecting men in general with abortion, thinking that all men are like her previous lover.

The protagonist feels completely alienated from the world, her feelings and eventually her friends as well. She is not in touch with her feelings and has altered her memories to cope with the trauma of the coerced abortion she feels immense guilt over. As the novel progresses her story changes from having been married with a child to having been a mistress to an art professor who used his power over her to make her get an illegal abortion. She is unable to face the truth of her past which has made her detached and unemotional to people surrounding her. She admits this when she realizes she does not feel bad or much of anything for rejecting Joe's proposal and hurting him and realizes she had not felt anything for a while (Atwood 1979: 134). The narrator also feels she has to rehearse her feelings, study and imitate the people around her and memorize how she is supposed to react which goes to prove just how alienated she feels from her feelings because of her past trauma and experiences as a woman.

The protagonist looks up to her female friend Anna and feels that she has the answers. She sees her as an example of the perfect woman and Anna's marriage with David as the perfect functioning and happy relationship. She asks Anna how she manages it and how she keeps it together (Atwood 1979: 56). The reader learns that the narrator does not want to be the way she is and that if there were a "secret trick" she would want to know it. Anna's advice is to let go and make an emotional commitment (Atwood 1979: 56) which is already foreshadowing Anna's true take and key to getting by as a woman. Is the only and true solution really to just let go, conform and settle for the reality even if it is miserable?

2.2 Anna

At the beginning of the novel, as perceived by the protagonist, the reader gets the impression as if the narrator and the character of Anna are meant to be the opposites of each other. As the story evolves, in some sense this notion remains intact but it also becomes apparent, that the two women and especially Anna, are a lot more complex with different layers to their personalities and views. Therefore, we have to note that is impossible to label either one as just one or the other.

The narrator calls Anna her best woman friend (Atwood 1979: 7) but has only known her for two months. She also expresses how she likes Joe, Anna and David more than anyone else and trusts them (Atwood 1979: 16), later contradicting herself by adding how she does not actually know much about them or their pasts (Atwood 1979: 34). As she spends more time in close proximity with the other characters she starts to discover how Anna and her relationship with David might not be the best or even a decent example to her as a woman trying to find herself and her way in the world.

The novel *Surfacing* discusses the standards set for women from numerous aspects. Anna is a great example in criticizing how a woman is supposed to look and act a certain way. This is shown through the character of Anna and her need to always wear makeup. When the narrator realizes she has never actually seen her friend without makeup, Anna discloses how David does not like to see her without it (Atwood 1979: 52). When they go on an overnight camping trip and Anna forgets her makeup, she goes as far as to say “What’m I going to do? I forgot my makeup, he’ll kill me” and “He wants me to look like a young chick all the time, if I don’t he gets mad” (Atwood 1979: 156). This shows the unreasonable expectations males can have for females to look a certain way and change themselves to fit these expectations. I believe Anna complies with these expectations because of the need to be good enough and fit the image of the perfect woman that has already been too deeply rooted in her.

The key to analyzing Anna and her behavior as a woman is to also analyze her husband David. As the story progresses, various details and examples of David emerge and paint him to be the perfect example of male dominance, the most disturbing of which are his constant sexist comments about the female characters. He regularly comments on their bodies and makes sleazy jokes about sex. He constantly puts Anna down, exercising psychological torture and treats his wife as a servant and a property of his to have dominance over her. He says things like: "That's what I like, service!" (Atwood 1979: 41) as he pats his wife on her backside for getting him a beer. Anna does not fight this and has accepted her role as David's submissive wife.

Another example of how the character of David is the perfect portrayal of male dominance is the set of rules Anna claims he has for her. She tells the narrator that she has to follow the rules her husband has set for her and that she gets punished if she breaks any of them. She also says he keeps changing the rules because he likes to make her cry and is always watching her. David also uses sex as a punishment, either depriving her of it or hurting her with it (Atwood 1979: 156). He completely dismisses her feelings and her as an actual person. The way David acts towards his wife is not only controlling but manipulative as well. The narrator wishes she had not heard the things Anna revealed to her because the illusion she had of Anna as the perfect woman with all the answers and a functioning happy marriage was starting to crumble, making the protagonist as a woman feel more lost than ever.

The novel makes David's attitudes towards women and their rights clear on numerous occasions with the statements he makes. He tells Anna "None of that Women's Lib or you'll be out on the street. I won't have one in the house, they're preaching random castration, they get off on that, they're roving the streets in savage bands armed with garden shears" (Atwood 1979: 141). This is a perfect example of David's cliché antifeminist views and how in his opinion it is completely absurd to even consider giving females more rights. He finds the

thought of women asking for more repulsive and his rigid views leave his wife Anna no room to question her place as a woman. The protagonist being completely alienated from her feelings at this point and throughout the novel constantly thinking of herself as powerless claims “I think men ought to be superior” to which Anna feels betrayed and calls her friend brainwashed (Atwood 1979: 41). This is an interesting exchange of words because of the irony of Anna calling her friend brainwashed. Does she understand and acknowledge that the same can be said about herself? Özdemir (2003: 74) thinks that in the eyes of the protagonist Anna becomes the portrayal of “a negative version of femininity”. It is possible that Anna really possesses at least some of the answers and power the protagonist seeks but she does not know the right things to look for in her at this point in the novel.

Özdemir (2003: 73) suggests that Anna is the complete opposite of the protagonist regarding the attitude towards gender and that she is entirely restrained by sexual and power politics, but adds that in his opinion her relationship with David is more of “a complicity between victim and victor than straightforward domination-subordination” (Özdemir 2003: 73). The way we see Anna call her friend brainwashed for such a statement about men’s superiority shows how Anna might not be as blindly oppressed as she initially might appear and that there is definitely some resistance residing somewhere in her. Whether she will ever act on it, stand up for herself or even divorce David is an entirely different matter.

Anna as a woman does not appear to have a job herself or anything of her own to self-fulfill her. The novel does not make it clear whether this bothers her at all or not. The protagonist remembers Anna telling her how no one should be defined by their job but rather by who they are as a person and that when she is asked about what she does she talks about “fluidity and Being rather than Doing” (Atwood 1979: 70). This might be a way for her to comfort herself and find meaning in life despite not having anything self-fulfilling to do of her own. When she does not like the person she simply refers to herself as “David’s wife” (Atwood 1979: 70).

Could this mean her previous statement is merely something she says to cope? When she is not fond of a person she does not feel the need to make her seem more interesting and complete by not referring to herself only as the wife of someone. It is as if Anna does not have her own identity and her only purpose in life is to be a wife to someone and identify herself through her husband. At the same time, she will at times comfortably hide behind this anonymity when it suits her.

Similarly to the narrator's experience with her previous lover having complete disregard for her safety and making her get an abortion, Anna mentions how David wants her to go back on the pill even though as a result Anna had previously gotten a blood clot in her leg. Ignoring the dangers and putting his needs first, David calls the pill harmless and no worse than an aspirin, despite the evidence showing the opposite. The protagonist also adds that she herself was almost blind for a while as a result of the pill and Anna calls “them” bastards for not being able to come up with something that works without killing women (Atwood 1979: 100). The novel could be showing the absurdness of a pill like that even being made available for use despite the very real dangers it brings for women who use it. Even more absurd is the male selfishness and the endangering of women for one’s selfish reasons. This topic is relevant even today, fifty years later.

Several critics argue that Anna is blindly oppressed. The Davidsons (1979: 45) point out how even though she herself is desperately trying to make her marriage work with someone who constantly belittles her and has rules for her to control her, she is offended when she finds out the protagonist refused David’s attempts to sleep with her because of her own “compulsive need to conform to male expectations” which “fills her with unconscious self-loathing” (Onley 1974: 28 quoted in Davidson 1979: 45-46) and therefore feels the need to “condemn her friend for being different” (Davidson 1979: 46).

The incident with David, Joe, Anna and the camera seems to be the turning point of the narrator for finally starting to see the previously thought perfect relationship of Anna and David as the game of power and dominance it really is. Throughout the novel David and Joe have been filming clips of different sightings on their trip and intend on calling the film *Random samples*. One day out on the dock, David decides that he wants Anna to take her clothes off so he can film her for their movie but Anna refuses. David manipulates her, makes degrading comments about her, does not let her leave the dock and threatens to throw her in the water if she does not comply. When Joe tries to interfere, David tells him to shut up because she is his wife (Atwood 1979: 171-173). This is where the character of David perfectly represents the possessiveness, male arrogance and the power the male in this case feels he has over the female. David fully believes that Anna is her property. Anna ends up obeying and takes her clothes off while David makes another comment: "Look sexy now, move it; give us a little dance". Anna runs and jumps into the water herself and the narrator notices her crying when she comes out of the water (Atwood 1979: 174).

Later when the narrator asks David his reason for treating his wife that way she finds out how David really feels about Anna. He calls her too dumb and says "but I'm all for equality for women; she just doesn't happen to be equal and that's not my fault is it? What I married was a pair of boobs, she manipulated me into it..." (Atwood 1979: 176). This quote is a great insight into David and other males like him and their superiority complexes.

The narrator is finally starting to understand Anna and her complex relationship with David. She realizes how Anna cannot be an example to her on her quest for womanhood and finding her inner strength because she sees how Anna has almost entirely conformed to the male dominated world and is miserable for it, trying to salvage a relationship in which she as a woman is alone and oppressed, always in a battle of hate with her spouse. George Woodcock (1990: 50) even goes as far as to say that Anna "is hardly a character at all, for she has hardly

more depth than the transforming makeup she applies to her pallid features every morning” because she believes she will get punished if she does not. However, as I have previously mentioned, the reader only knows of what the protagonist perceives and therefore the truth about Anna and David is one of the novel’s mysteries. There is no way to know who is telling the truth or if either one is. Regarding Anna as “hardly a character” with no depth would be an oversight.

2.3 The Mother

Now that the protagonist’s illusions of Anna as the perfect woman have shattered and she has started to connect with her feelings, she is now beginning to realize that she has been looking for her power from the wrong places. She has had revelations and has finally faced the truth about her past, what happened with her previous lover and the event of her abortion. She is ready to connect with herself and take back her power. Margaret Atwood too has early in her career written: “Power after all is not real, not really there, people give it to each other” (Hengen 1993: 11).

Nature is thought to be represented by the mother of the protagonist by some of the critics and this is important for the conclusion of the analysis of the empirical part of this thesis because of the realizations the narrator comes to. We constantly see the protagonist remember and describe her late mother as a free spirit, in touch with nature. She remembers how her mother would often leave food for the jays, standing quietly as a tree, pulling weeds from the garden and sometimes she would even “simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest” (Atwood 1979: 62). At the beginning of the novel the protagonist admits that she feels it would not be possible to be like her mother: “it would need a time warp; she was either ten thousand years behind the rest of fifty years ahead of them” (Atwood 1979: 62).

At the beginning of the novel the protagonist mentions the kind of clothing she remembers from her childhood that women had to wear: “...long concealing skirts and dark

stockings and keep their arms covered in church. Shorts were against the law and many of them lived all their lives beside the lake without learning to swim because they were ashamed to put on bathing suits.” (Atwood: 1979). From this it can be assumed that the women were either not allowed to wear certain kinds of clothing because of the religious and conservative community or they were simply too afraid to wear certain things because of a fear of being judged by others. The mother of the protagonist on the other hand, seemed to be a lot more carefree regarding her clothes with her grey leather jacket for example, which is frequently mentioned. The protagonist also mentions how some of the older villagers would cross themselves when her family would pass by and believes it might have been because her mother was wearing pants and not a skirt or a dress (Atwood 1979: 65). Therefore, there were definitely also women who did not feel the need for change and rather disapproved of it. Already in this sense the mother was ahead of her time or simply had other priorities and valued her own comfort and wishes over what other people thought she should do.

The father’s job as a botanist and a tree scientist could have been one of the reasons enabling her to live more freely and not burden herself with playing the part of the perfect wife and woman set by the expectations of the society. She got to spend most of her time away from civilization and in nature. Additionally, the family being atheists could have played a part in the mother’s sense of freedom regarding what she could and could not wear.

It could be deducted that the protagonist had up until that point felt that her power over and the integrity of her own body had been taken from her with the abortion and that she has just now decided to finally take it back by getting pregnant by Joe. She says she feels her lost child resurfacing and forgiving her (Atwood 1979: 209). This is a powerful thought as the novel could be suggesting, that by taking her power back, she feels she is finally allowed to let go and be forgiven. “Nobody must find out or they will do that to me again, strap me to the death machine, emptiness machine, legs in metal framework, secret knives. This time I won’t let

them” (Atwood 1979: 210) she thinks to herself as she initially plans to have the baby by herself on the island.

Eventually she realizes that in order to connect with herself she must completely withdraw from civilization and become one with nature. She goes mad and does exactly this (Atwood 1979: 230), looking to find a connection to her enigmatic mother who represents the “feminine wisdom” the protagonist longs to find (Tolan 2007: 46). She burns the ring, trashes everything in the cabin and heads outside to live and eat in the wilderness with no clothes and only a blanket (Atwood 1979: 229-230). In her madness she indeed sees a vision of her mother feeding the jays, one with nature (Atwood 1979: 236).

The mother becomes the representation of the narrator’s inner strength as a woman. Erinc Özdemir (2003: 74) explains how the protagonist, on her quest to find her identity as a female, eventually realizes her mother has been someone to identify with all along because her mother was a “natural woman”, a part of the “natural world” and the only such woman she has ever known. Tolan (2007: 45) calls the mother of the narrator in *Surfacing* omnipotent, her and everything she is and portrays is all-powerful and she too believes how in the end it is precisely her mother that represents the knowledge and identity the protagonist seeks (2007: 46).

As the protagonist comes out of her madness, she realizes that she might love Joe after all (Atwood 1979: 249). The novel could be showing how by taking back her power she learns that it is alright for her to love Joe and not feel powerless at the same time. Above everything else, the woman concludes with refusing to be the victim. She vows to “give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone.” (Atwood 1979: 249). She has found strength in her mother and the wilderness and restored the connection to and the integrity of her body.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to demonstrate how the novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood could be seen as a critique on society and gender roles during the 1960s and 1970s when it was written and first published. The literature review provided the necessary background information on the key themes and critical perspectives related to the novel. All these themes were chosen because they play an important role in analyzing the novel and the female experiences presented in it. The empirical part of this thesis examined each of the three female characters in the novel. Firstly, it analyzed the protagonist and explained why she felt that she needed a role model and someone to look to for help. Secondly, a closer look was taken at the protagonist's friend Anna who she initially thought to be the perfect woman and example to her. And finally, it investigated the woman that her quest takes her to, her mother.

The thesis demonstrates how at the beginning of the novel the protagonist sees her friend Anna as someone to look up to and get guidance and answers from on how to be the perfect woman and content with herself as a woman. As the novel evolves, the protagonist learns a lot about Anna and soon realizes that she is in fact not someone who has the answers she seeks. Anna is a woman who has almost entirely conformed to her position in society as the obedient woman and faces some of the same kind of problems that have made the protagonist feel alienated and numb in her life. Anna, more than anyone, feels the pressure to act and look according to the expectations for a woman in society and has little to no might left in her to ever change. Her husband David plays an important part in this as he is the perfect representation of male dominance, arrogance and narcissism with his cliché antifeminist views. His inflexible perspectives leave no room for Anna to really challenge or question him and exercise the rights that she knows should have as a woman and as an equal. Anna has adjusted to this life and accepted her position as David's wife and this is unlikely to change.

The protagonist sympathizes with Anna but recognizes that her friend is an embodiment of the kind of woman she does not want to be, living a life that she does not want to live. She

starts seeking for her lost power elsewhere and by the end of the novel she realizes that her mother has been someone to look up to all along. For a long time, she has carried with her the memories of her mother, not knowing that she has always possessed the answers herself. She goes on a quest to find herself as a woman and get her power back. She isolates herself to become one with nature and connect with her omnipotent mother who is the representation of the wisdom and power she seeks. Her mother was a free spirit who had found the perfect balance between complying with the expectations of society and considering her own needs and wishes. The protagonist decides to follow in her mother's footsteps, promising to never feel powerless again and no longer let herself be the victim.

What this thesis adds to the previous studies about *Surfacing* from a feminist perspective is the importance of the characters of Anna and the protagonist's mother and their roles as females. These two women play an immense part in the protagonist's quest for womanhood, finding her place in society and leading a life that she could be content with. The significance of the topics discussed regarding women's roles has not diminished through time, which is why it is important to keep tackling them.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Keirily Hallik

Women's Roles and the Protagonist's Quest for Womanhood in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Naiste rollid ja peategelase naiseks olemise otsirännak Margaret Atwoodi romaanis „Pinnaletõus“

Bakalaureusetöö

2021

Lehekülgede arv: 28

Annotatsioon:

Bakalaureusetöö eesmärgiks on uurida Margaret Atwoodi romaanis kujutatud soorolle ja näidata kuidas raamat on 1960-70ndate ühiskonna ja soorollide peegel ja kriitika. Kuigi romaan avaldati aastal 1972, on seal käsitletud teemad asjakohased ka nüüd, peaaegu viiskümme aastat hiljem. Seega pole tähtsus neid käsitleda kuhugi kadunud.

Töö koosneb sissejuhatusest, kahest põhiosast ja kokkuvõttest. Kirjanduse ülevaates on välja toodud romaani olulisemad tööga seonduvad teemad ning mõned teemakohased tähtsamate kriitikute vaatepunktid. Iga teema on vajalik alus edasise analüüsi arendamiseks töö teises pooles. Empiiriline osa on jagatud kolmeks alapeatükiks ning analüüsib romaani kolme naistegelast ja nende kogemusi naistena. Teiste tegelaste tõlgendamine toimub läbi peategelase silmade ning seega on töös samaaegselt kujutatud ka peategelase enda otsirännakut.

Naine läheb tagasi oma lapsepõlve kodukohta, et uurida oma isa kadumist. Temaga lähevad kaasa tema partner Joe ja sõpradest abielupaar Anna ja David. Peategelane tunneb ennast patriarhaalses ühiskonnas võõrandunu ja eksinuna ning otsib eeskuju oma sõbrannast Annast, kellel tunduvad olevat vastused kõigile küsimustele. Õppides Annat rohkem tundma, avastab peategelane, et naine kehastab hoopis kedagi, kelle moodi ta olla ei taha. Anna on peaaegu täielikult kohandunud ühiskonna ootustega ning on kooselus mehega, kes teda alandab ja rõhub ning kes ei näe teda ja teisi naisi endaga võrdsetena. Peategelane avastab, et hoopis tema lahkunud ema on alati olnud keegi, keda naiseks olemises eeskujuks võtta. Tema ema oli vaba hing, kes elas oma elu perfektses tasakaalus ühiskonna ootuste ja isikliku heaolu ja vabaduse vahel. Emast saab peategelasele jõuallikas ja eeskuju naisena.

Märksõnad: soorollid, võõrandumine, otsirännak, Kanada kirjandus

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