

Socio – Cultural Concern in Margaret Atwood’s Novels

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood is a multi-faceted genius in Canadian literature. In her novel *Surfacing* nameless protagonist of the story returns the undeveloped island, Northern Quebec, where she grew up, to search for his missing father. The protagonist realizes the gap between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she gets in direct contact with nature. Her association with nature raises her consciousness in regards to subordination of women. Since the novel introduces issue pertaining to feminism and environmentalism, it constitutes a representative literary example of ecological feminism. The *Blind Assassin* encompasses a science fiction story within the main narrative. Iris Chase, the eldest daughter of a wealthy man who owns a button factory is the narrator of the story. The readers follow the span of Iris’s life as well as things going on around her community through her. With the help of her sister, her husband, her sister-in-law, and her dead parents, Iris discovers her family secrets; her family’s covered up stories; and finds out that not everything is the way it seems. The *Blind Assassin* is a tale of loss of wealth, heartbreaks, deaths, and sufferings. The language, events and characters in this novel reflect a world that oppresses and dominates both women and nature. The study analyzes the novels in socio-cultural.

KEYWORDS: *nature, women, surfacing, patriarchy*

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is quintessentially a Canadian novelist and an outspoken novelist in Canada. Although she has been acclaimed to have “the magic of turning the particular and the parochial into the universal according to *The Times, London*, the depth and complexity of her critique contemporary society are stunning. In *Surfacing* she has taken upon herself the task of deciphering life in the late twentieth century in Canada says *vogue*. A staunch nationalist, Atwood’s attempts at blaming “the Americans” for the depredation and ruin of the lake.

This comes out through the attitude of the protagonist and David. David calls them rotten capitalist bastards who are all out to unleash another war, which will be between the Canadian nationalist guerrilla movement and the “Yanks” in which the guerrillas will never even make it through a winter. Because of their lack of knowledge and experience of the countryside, they would die of starvation and exposure.

In survival her critical study of Canadian literature Margaret Atwood states that people often seek out the victim role like the protagonist of *Surfacing* as a way of escaping responsibility. The protagonist avoids the moral responsibility of her failed marriage and her aborted child because she considers herself a victim. Similarly slogan shouting political activists like David avoid the responsibility of the destruction of their country’s natural resources by seeing Canada as a victim of the United States.

MARGARET ATWOOD’S PROTAGONIST:

Yet the protagonist sees the Americans as a reincarnation of Hitler. Out to destroy the remnants of civilization in her part of the country. When she finds out that they are her own country men, she glibly remarks, it doesn’t matter what country they’re from they’re still Americans. Her near acceptance of Joe at the end of the novel is because he isn’t an American; I can see that now he isn’t anything. He is only half formed, and for that reason I can trust him. Americans in the final analysis comes to mean not just someone from the

United States of America. The word is refined as the 20th century, technological, modern man, alienated from Nature. When she senses that her friends are behaving like robots she begins to feel that they are becoming Americans. She says: if you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them. For her to be an American is to kill for sport or destroy without any understanding or guilt about what one has destroyed. To be an American is to be unable to understand that we must treat the universe with care because Nature is sacred.

Atwood seems to be thinking in terms of images in *Surfacing* and Americans are an image of senseless killing and destruction. When she arrives on the island, the protagonist remarks, “Senseless killing, it was game, after the war they’d been bored.”

The protagonist misses the ideal Canadian past. This does not seem to be the northern Quebec she once knew. The Americans have killed nature for their sport. They are anti-life, anti-nature. The protagonist who, right from her childhood, has believed in non-violence, protests against it, against the “monstrous indifference” to the suffering of other living beings. Since, she has herself subverted nature by aborting her fetus, she must compensate of this anti-nature activity by bearing a child. By shedding her clothes, the protagonist becomes one with nature and reaches a stage when “the take is quiet, the trees surround asking and giving nothing.”

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONCERN:

Surfacing in a sense deals with raising people’s consciousness against getting alienated from their mooring, their culture, their past, their people, their language in an attempt to imitate the culture of the dominant group and in this case an impersonal, competitive culture where machine have replaced the organist of life. But it is no use living in the past feeling nostalgic about it: one must, like the protagonist, come to terms with reality, not escape from it.

Nevertheless, the backbone of *The Blind Assassin* is a memoir written by 82-year-old Iris Chase, in which she spins the story of her life, as well as that of her younger sibling Laura. The sisters were born to an affluent factory owner, Norval Chase, and his Methodist wife in the second decade of the previous century in the fictional town of Port Ticonderoga. However, since, as has already been outlined, the primary text is a memoir, the family saga is presented from Iris's point of view and is totally dependent on her memory. On a number of occasions the protagonist herself contemplates how selective and fallible memory can be, or how the very same events may be differently interpreted and memorized by individuals. These ponderings on the nature of memory and text, represented here by the memoir, emphasize the fact that the novel is more concerned with the 'act of enunciating' than the enunciation itself. By stressing the relativity of the viewpoint, Iris encourages the reader to ponder upon the fact that her version of events may not necessarily be the only possible version. To foreground the status of *The Blind Assassin* as a historical novel the author incorporated into the book various documents from the past, such as newspaper clippings. Although many of these cuttings are of Atwood's contriving and were merely inspired by actual events, they allow the author, through the use of pastiche, to poke fun at a number of dominant ideologies of the past, and to highlight how profound and inevitable the social changes of the last century were. Thus, *The Blind Assassin* is to a large extent "a social commentary on Canada from its colonial heyday through fully-fledged industrialization, labour unrest, and the battle of democratic and fascist ideologies"

SENSE OF NARRATIVE:

Nevertheless, the novel's subject matter also revolves around the issue of the social position of women throughout the 20th century, for, as Atwood argues, "The goals of feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we're living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole subject". Once again the aforementioned sci-fi parable provides a number of observations on the topic. Indeed, the tragic fate of the sacrificial tongueless virgins of Sakiel-Norn, who the night before the votive ceremony are raped by the Lord of the Underworld, mirrors the sad plight of the Chase sisters. Although Iris and Laura represent two distinct attitudes towards social expectations and limitations imposed on those by the patriarchal society of early 20th century Canada, both of them fall victim to sexual and mental abuse inflicted by the men surrounding them, and both suffer their lot in silence, like the mute sacrificial virgins from Alex's tale.

It takes Iris nearly fifty years to shatter the silence and learn speech again, to tell her story of official history.

CONCLUSION:

Nevertheless, the primary narrative also offers many instances of social changes in other spheres of life. The family saga opens with the description of Iris's grandmother Adelia, from the respected Montfort family, who was affluent once but by the beginning of the 20th century, had lost most of their fortune. Thus, at the age of twenty-three, "which was counted over the hill in those days", Adelia was forced to marry money through her union with Benjamin Chase, the local button factory owner. Brought up in an aristocratic family, she wanted culture above all, and did everything she could to refine the crude button money of her husband by throwing twelve-course dinners for important guests and designing the Chase mansion, Avilion. What is noteworthy, however, above all is her Old Continent complex. She missed the artistic salons which she had a chance to frequent while holidaying in England in the days when her family still prospered. Her obsession with the displays of European culture, be it a garden statue, a family tomb with two Victorian angels, or a Christmas card inscription, made her a laughing stock among the townspeople. Even Iris seems to poke fun at her grandmother's pretenses when commenting on her choice of the motto for a Christmas card: "Tennyson was somewhat out of date, by English standards Oscar Wilde was in the ascendant then, at least among the younger set but then, everything in Port Ticonderoga was somewhat out of date". Notwithstanding, Iris is not critical of her grandmother as such, but rather envisages her as a romantic heroine trapped in a monotonous, loveless marriage to a well-off manufacturer. Noteworthy then is the fact that her grandma's sentiments for England and European culture seem quaint but alien to the 82-year-old Iris, who seems to have a very strong sense of being Canadian.

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