Available online at www.jlls.org

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(4), 3072-3078; 2021

Gender Performativity and Myth in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing

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APA Citation:

Dhanappriya, R., & Uma Samundeeswari, J. (2021). Gender Performativity and Myth in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17*(4), 3072-3078

Submission Date: 11/10/2021

Acceptance Date: 25/12/2021

Abstract

The representation of woman in literature has been considered as one of the most important forms of socialization. The utilization of mythmaking and human-animal relationships reflected in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing.* Atwood shows how societal restrictions can devalue the connections between the body, the mind, and the natural world. The formation of relational selves encourages both the communication with entities beyond the human realm and also the engagement in creative deconstruction that helps establish fluidity. Atwood represents the restrictions created by a dominant, patriarchal society that separates the body, the mind, and the natural world. These boundaries, and the negative connotations surrounding them, are deconstructed in a manner that places new emphasis on the environment and the changing perceptions of the female protagonists. *Surfacing* subverts isolated female identities to create relational selves that deconstruct the restrictions patriarchal society has over language, the mind, and the body; these fluid selves exist in the realm of creative difference rather than a sameness that forms oppressive (and potentially violent) binaries between the self and the other, the human and the animal, and the male and the female.

Keywords*: Myth, feminism, violence, power, gender, relationship, genre, victim.*

1. Introduction

Atwood's writing styles as well as her use of fairy tales and mythmaking generate this realm of difference open to new ways of identifying the self through interconnections otherwise rejected or ignored out of fear of the other. In terms of mythmaking, Atwood take part in recreating or forming new myths that involve deconstructing restrictions and showing the potential relationships between their characters and the natural world, particularly animals. Atwood's *Surfacing* reflects on the power myths have in our lives while recognizing the caution required when taking part in mythopoeic creations. Atwood's use of fairy tale elements and mythmaking provides a method of negotiating violence, power, and relationships. Of particular concern in *Surfacing* is the patriarchal notion that having power inevitably produces violence against another. In the case of gender roles, this falls into the male as aggressor/female as victim binary, with Atwood's protagonist perceiving herself in the role of the victim. Atwood's use of the fairy tale genre is designed to critique the censorship of violence, fear, and the body in children's tales. Fairy tale themes of metamorphosis, amputation, and power relations also are presented throughout Atwood's work. Furthermore, Atwood's use of the fairy

tale genre fits together with the myths of the masculine frontier, primitivism, and the narrator's falsification of her own past as she unconsciously creates her own myths even as she criticizes others.

Atwood takes a critical perspective on how mythmaking is integrated into society within literature and culture. In particular, she recognizes the myths that surround female writers. In this case, it is important to note how myths are being connected to gender prejudices in terms of female writers, with Atwood being presented as Medusa, the Virgin Mary, and the loving mother. Her response shows the variety of critiques Atwood gets from her works that revolve around representations of gender. She recognizes the *power* such myths can have in the formation of a social identity. Myths are within the very fabric of humanity, and she appears to suggest the impossibility of ever truly separating from these myths. In "Social Myths in Political and Literary Contexts," Nurith Gertz studies how myths can be negative and controlling to identity, stating, "A society's conventional myths…convey an agreed-upon meaning of which the individual is not always consciously aware" (623). Becoming aware of restrictive social myths becomes important to the demythologizing process.

Atwood's novel *Surfacing* focuses on how society and language can prevent interconnections from forming between humans and the natural world. Such boundaries limit the physical, social, and emotional movement of the main female characters, particularly the nameless narrator. The narrator's isolation exists not only because of hierarchal boundaries but also her own self-made barriers that block out past traumatic events. Such alienation cuts her off from meaningful relationships both within and outside of the human realm. Hence, *Surfacing* reflects upon the danger of separating the mind from the body as well as the rational from the irrational. As the novel progresses, the narrator undergoes a transformation that leads her to reject everything human-made, including her friends and her job. She leaves civilization to become an animal, uniting herself with the natural world and developing a sense of non destructive power. The narrator's transformation does not physically change her into an animal; instead, she mentally becomes joined with the environment and the animals within it, developing a constantly changing, fluid identity that exists in ambiguity. Throughout the novel, the narrator reflects on the killing mentality of humans, sympathizes with animals, and perceives the interconnections between humanity and the nature that others avoid out of fear or ignorance. There is a clear representation of how hierarchal definitions of value can be limiting and lead to violence against those undervalued (women) or outside (animals) of the value hierarchy.

Surfacing presents mythmaking in a more pessimistic light. The narrator's use of myths in *Surfacing* becomes problematic in the manner she whitewashes violence from her life. In her transformative state, the flawed narrator begins to deconstruct the myths she has surrounded herself with by unconsciously clinging to new, problematic myths associated with primitivism and escapist ideals of wilderness. Particularly, the narrator attempts to negotiate the violence directed at women and nature by radically rejecting society for the natural world, unaware that she falls into the trap of living out a primitive, frontier myth that does not give her the means to "positively" re-join the dominant culture. Such unconscious mythmaking is dangerous because it creates idealizations and half-truths, forming barriers that restrict the potential of a co-existing relationship between humanity and nature. The "cautionary" aspect of mythmaking presented in *Surfacing* therefore has to do with the limitations existing in a mythologized "iconic" state that unconsciously blocks potential interconnections.

Similarly, *Surfacing* breaks through dualistic notions that separate body and mind, humans and animals, men and women. The inventive use of language in Atwood's writing raises unanswerable questions and veils this novel in ambiguity. David Ward puts it well in his article "*Surfacing:* Separation, Transition, Incorporation": "*Surfacing* is a novel which both invites and resists interpretation: its force is bound in with its indeterminacy" (95). Atwood's unnamed narrator experiences alienation due to social constructions and her own falsified biography she uses to block out past trauma. She creates an isolated self that questions the boundaries that surround not only her but environmental entities as well, including animals. The transformative experience the narrator undergoes allows her to escape an identity formed by lies and restrictions in favor of a fluid self based on interconnections with the natural world. Her new identity exists in ambiguity but listens and

interacts with alternate forms of communication beyond the human language. She also shows how problems can arise via the mythmaking process. Overall, *Surfacing*, through the use of ambiguity, explores the struggle of an initially alienated narrator to establish an "interconnected" self, one that leads to the rejection of prohibitive dualisms influenced by (patriarchal) language systems. However, this project is not fully realized by the narrator because of her unconscious adherence to the misanthropic or mythic belief that humanity is irrevocably violent.

In S*urfacing*, the narrator wonders what response animals would give if they could speak, stating, "What would they really say? Accusation, lament, an outcry of rage; but they had no spokesman" (Atwood 131). Similarly, she brings up experiments done on children to test their language ability: "depriving them [the children] of words, they [the doctors] found at a certain age the mind is incapable of absorbing any language; but how could they tell the child hadn't invented one, unrecognizable to everyone but itself?" (Atwood 76). She finds herself incapable of conforming to such restrictions, particularly when she encounters the term love: "It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine. He [Joe] must have known what he meant but it was an imprecise word; the Eskimos had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many for love" (Atwood 107). This statement is interesting not just for the reflection on the limitations of words but also how they relate to emotions; the narrator finds that words are not enough to express feelings, such as love, because the definitions are too overarching to serve her individual feelings. Words in this sense are products of a culture that impact the utilization of certain words. Here, the fear of the body is reflected in the English language; it becomes important to understand this connection mainly because the body itself can play a role in alternate forms of communication. Such associations with fear and the body can prevent new discourses from developing. According to the narrator, language restricts the body, and, "She [the narrator] is depicted as enacting a painful but determined search for another language, one that would allow non-destructive relationships with others and nature" (Özdemir 58).

Just as names can be inaccurate, so can stories. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist cuts out of her life the loss she feels after the abortion of her child. The story she creates protects her from the pain of losing the child. She believes her own lie, becoming willfully ignorant of the truth. Moreover, the narrator attempts to make her invulnerable to such pain to protect herself. By doing so, she cuts herself off from relationships that could help her heal. The narrator creates a lie to live by, one that she can accept and control, a world that Plum wood suggests is "structured to sustain the concept of continuing, narrative self; we remake the world in that way as our own, investing it with meaning, re conceiving it as sane, survivable, amenable to hope and resolution" ("Prey to the Crocodile"). Maintaining the story detaches the narrator; the lie holds her loosely together but prevents her from substantial relationships and emotions.

The cut off life of the narrator appears when she looks at old pictures of herself. These pictures reflect her alienation by suggesting the removal of significant parts. The way she remembers the past is based solely on her own interpretation, and she lives in fear of losing that meaning. Thus, the myth becomes her lifeline to free her from pain. In "Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*: Strange Familiarity," Peter Quartermaine studies this evasion in the title of this novel, commenting, "'surfacing' also describes that shared survival instinct which looks only rarely beyond immediate specifics; we prefer self-reflections on a calm surface to any glimpse of monsters beneath" (120). Quartermaine helps to understand why the narrator grips her fabricated biography so intensely—she does not want to glimpse that nightmarish past that mars and twists her into the monstrous.

Similarly, the fairy tale genre in *Surfacing* reflects on how some fairy tales dilute gruesome ideologies in favor of superficial stories of childish fantasy. Interestingly, the censorship used to hide the horrid in such tales directly connects to the narrator's own fabricated biography in the way she buries violent acts (like her abortion) into her unconsciousness. Irony exists in how the narrator utilizes censorship but also critiques it, especially in her current job as a fairy tale book illustrator. Immediately, the notion of fear becomes censored, picking and choosing what children do and do not see. This censorship is common in social media and representational of how the narrator is not the only one who attempts to avoid fear and horror, especially since many original fairy tales were in fact

gruesome. Her recognition that the body does not exist in these stories exemplifies the distancing from the incontrollable and grotesque qualities that have historically been associated with it. Whitewashing the body and violence from fairy tales relates to Bettelheim's definition of "optimistic meliorism," in which, "The dominant culture wishes to pretend, particularly where children are concerned, that the dark side of man does not exist" (8). Atwood's narrator is wary of this "optimistic meliorism" but also guilty of it herself when she tries to efface or hide the violence in her own life.

Atwood's narrator is wary of this "optimistic meliorism" but also guilty of it herself when she tries to efface or hide the violence in her own life. The narrator's inability to capture the expurgated versions of fairy tales (and she fails to do so throughout the novel). The conventional princess will not form on the page and becomes altered—she has both masculine (the mustache) and animal characteristics (the fangs). Through the drawing, the princess takes on several identities that associate with the narrator's final transformation and her gravitation towards the animal. The symbolic of the narrator's avoidance of the negative, reflected in the potentially violent wolf becoming "an overweight collie." Such a change from dangerous animal to spoiled pet reflects on the narrator's domestication of violence in her own life and her initial choice to see herself situated in the position of victim with no power.

Through fairy tale imagery, Atwood also shows how the narrator sees violence as the direct result of having power. The narrator finds rotten beans and imagines them as magical. Such a statement reflects on how women with power in traditional tales became "evil" in the eyes of a patriarchal society where the virtues of women were based on submission and gentility. The narrator rejects power because of her belief that all power is frightening and malicious, an assumption stemming from her painful choices of the past, such as the abortion of her child. In this manner, power holds a troubling role for the narrator because she does not want it and yet still wields it through her dominant position as a human.

Surfacing opposes the fragmenting force of fake, censored, and socially 'sanitized' fairy-tale images to the paradoxically real power of the main embedded tales, suggesting that Atwood recognizes how original tales that do not refrain from violence hold a power over stories restricted in content for younger readers. Similar to fairy tale censorship, *Surfacing* confronts the frontier myth and explores the way it censors violence and forms boundaries. Masculine wilderness ideologies are social myths that produce a problematic separation between wilderness and civilization. Drawing upon such ideologies means taking part in mythologizing (and limiting perceptions of) wilderness. The position of the wilderness as masculine resonates in *Surfacing* in the characters of David and Joe, city men entering what they perceive as the wilderness of Quebec, a place to get away from the femininizing tendencies of civilization. Notably, these two men decide to create a documentary to capture aspects of the wild. In "Decapitation, Cannibalism, and Rebirth in *Surfacing*," Sharon Wilson correctly terms this video as "fakelore," stating, "Joe and David's 'folklore' collection, 'random samples,' containing footage of a bottle house, a stuffed moose, a 'captured' log, and a nude woman, comments on folklore snobbery and cultural and gender imperialism…and a global twentieth-century wasteland as well as the Canadian and U.S. ones" (109). Breaking down this catalog, the images included in their documentary are all artificial in contrast to the wilderness image David and Joe seek to capture: the moose is dead (as is a heron also presented in the video), the house is made of human waste, the log is where they "took turns shooting each other [with a camera] standing beside it [the log], arms folded and one foot on it as if it was a lion" (Atwood 81), and the woman is forced to strip for the video. These images of domination remark upon the imperial nature of the documentary and relate the objectification of the female to the destruction of the environment. David and Joe both project themselves upon the environment by capturing in the camera lens what they believe it should contain.

Both the delusional masculine wilderness fantasies and the censored fairy tales in *Surfacing* reflect the world through a skewed lens; neither discourse maintains a connection with its violent and terrifying origins, catering instead to fantasies of masculine empowerment and childhood innocence. Such an omission of the abject disconnects one from reality and limits perceptions into categories, often in the form of binaries. The narrator initially views her life through such binaries, identifying

with certain social constructs, such as rationality, beauty, and gender. She attempts to avoid blurring any of the social boundaries because doing so would produce uncertainty and draw her closer to what she has censored from her own life.

Such restrictions and potentially detrimental notions of value exist throughout *Surfacing*. In particular, the narrator points to her, animals, and the environment as bound by these notions of patriarchal value largely presented in dualistic modes of thought. Insofar as she internalizes this value system, the narrator identifies herself as a subject defined by the rational/irrational binary, by surface-level beauty norms, and by commodities images of the female body even though she also finds fault with these ways of thinking. Her relationship with this man places her in a role of inferiority in which her creativity and individuality are devalued. Furthermore, her past relationship with her art teacher impacts how the narrator defines the worth of her current lover, Joe. She values him for his physical body and for his failure as a potter. She finds it far safer to fall back into rationality and avoid the so-called "animal" nature that relates more to the emotional, bodily, and "inferior" side of the rational/irrational dualism.

Along with her own mind-body alienation, the narrator reflects how mirrors and cosmetics are restrictions created by patriarchal society to promote female conformity to superficial beauty norms. Particularly, she observes her traveling companion, Anna, and how she is confined to a realm of surface beauty that fails to acknowledge any subjective depth. The narrator's reflections on beauty connects to Wolf's point that beauty is socially controlled and, "Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that they [women] will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring 'beauties'" (66). Anna's beauty is essential in her relationship with her husband, David; her appearance is built off of slathering her face with makeup, and she claims David has never seen her face without it (Atwood 41). Along with her own mind-body alienation, the narrator reflects how mirrors and cosmetics are restrictions created by patriarchal society to promote female conformity to superficial beauty norms. Particularly, she observes her traveling companion, Anna, and how she is confined to a realm of surface beauty that fails to acknowledge any subjective depth. The narrator's reflections on beauty connects to Wolf's point that beauty is socially controlled and, "Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that they [women] will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring 'beauties'" (66). Anna's very image is made synthetic by her application of cosmetics and this takes away her identity, making her appear doll-like even without the makeup. Such intensive use of cosmetics can be associated with Wolf's conversation on airbrushing wrinkles off women's faces in magazines, which makes a "value judgment…about the value of the female life: that less is more. For the narrator, Anna's use of mirrors and cosmetics artificially create a false self and limit individual power. While Anna has control over her appearance, it is the only power she has left.

The protagonist notes how David perceives women as objects existing for the completion of his own desires when she thinks the following: "he needed me [the narrator] for an abstract principle; it would be enough for him if our genitals could be detached like two kitchen appliances and copulate in mid-air" (Atwood 153). This quotation relates how women can become "tools" for pleasure by focusing on particular parts of the body rather than the whole person, much like the pictures of landscapes. The removal of blemishes to create "perfect," idealized images of both landscapes and women serves to create an artificiality that erodes our capacity to appreciate natural beauty and a healthy environment. The false beauty the narrator analyzes extends to the objectification of the female body that can lead to adverse vulnerability. The connection between negative vulnerability and the objectified body is seen in the relationship between Anna and David, where Anna is susceptible to derogation. The power dynamic between Anna and her husband exists on a battlefield where each attempts to place the other in an inferior, vulnerable position. Anna does so by using her body: "Anna was more than sad, she was desperate, her body her only weapon and she was fighting for her life, he was her life, and her life was the fight: she was fighting because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere.

Anna's body thus becomes a "weapon" she uses against David by having sex with his friend Joe. The objectification of Anna's body is further presented when David tells her to get naked for the documentary, "Random Samples," he and Joe are creating. Their marriage is one of possession, with David as the possessor who judges and humiliates Anna through her body. The narrator recognizes David as a liar and a man who likes to exist in the dominant realm where he can take what he likes sexually from women. The narrator recognizes David as a liar and a man who likes to exist in the dominant realm where he can take what he likes sexually from women. When the narrator denies his sexual advances she gains power over him; she takes away his language and places him in the awkward position: "The power flowed from my eyes, I could see into him…verbs and nouns glued on to him and shredding away…he didn't know what language to use, he'd forgotten his own" (Atwood 153). In denying him, the narrator does not allow him to get back at his wife for sleeping with Joe, preventing him from assuaging a vulnerability he does not wish to feel. The narrator's recognition of her capacity for power over patriarchal forces, including misogynistic David, allows her to begin to overcome restrictions placed around the female body. She rejects David and begins to favor the animal over the human, reflecting on how "he [David] was lying about [her], [but] animals don't lie" (Atwood 154). The animal becomes a central focus for the narrator and further illustrates how value and language can negatively subordinate those considered to be different within a patriarchal society.

The restrictions surrounding the narrator can be further analyzed by studying how the human/animal binary leads to violence and limitations to both animals and groups of people, particularly women. *Surfacing* reflects on the self-appointed "superior" position of humans in comparison to animals through the notions of hierarchal value and willful ignorance. The intermingling between the two sides of the human/animal binary can be seen through the narrator's perspective on violence done to animals, predator-prey relationships, and the role of scientific specimens throughout this novel. This analysis expresses the dangers of dualistic thinking and shows how the narrator begins to associate more with the animal than the human, leading to her transformative experience to escape patriarchal limitations.

Hierarchal value systems can separate humans from animals and lead to violence against those deemed other. In this novel, the power of the "superior" human that solidifies the boundary between the human and the animal becomes especially apparent through the relationship between the predator (the human) and the prey (the animal). The narrator at first attempts to rationalize this superior positioning of humanity by attempting to convince herself that humans act violently toward the environment largely to obtain the sustenance needed to support life, such as food and resources. An example of her attempts to rationalize this violence is when the narrator feels guilty about killing a fish, then thinks, "that's irrational, killing certain things is all right, food and enemies, fish and mosquitoes; and wasps, where there are too many of them boiling water down their tunnels" (Atwood 62). In this passage she draws on several examples of why killing has been justified: for food, for enemies, for pests, and for population control. This rationalization of violence becomes increasingly difficult to uphold until the narrator can no longer come up with excuses for such destruction.

David's above statement unsettlingly shows how nations are often founded on violent acts against others and how such horrors are often hidden from the surface. Similar to the censorship of fairy tales, *Surfacing* reveals the danger of mythologizing national history in a manner that conceals violence. Such concealment is another form of willful ignorance, perceived particularly through the narrator's claim to victimhood. This novel reinterprets the myths that place Canada in the position of a vulnerable victim (as a dominated country colonized by Britain and shadowed by the U.S.) by presenting similarities between Canada and the narrator's own victimization. Along with the destruction of animals, Canada's history contains violence against the natural world and other humans, particularly Native Americans, in the name of development (Kapuscinki 116). The removal of violence from history prevents a holistic understanding of the culture from forming or, in terms of the narrator, an understanding of herself. Cronon articulates how avoiding history negatively creates a false identity, stating, "The flight from history…represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past" (16).

2. Conclusion

Atwood's *Surfacing* opens up awareness to societal restrictions that seek to separate the self from the other, the human from the animal, and the male from the female. There is a need to recognize how certain social myths and norms in Western culture are limiting in the way they reject difference, define value, and negate otherness. In becoming conscious of these myths, one can potentially break them down or recreate them to better fit a more eco centric sense of living—a living based on care rather than violence and multiplicity rather than singularity. Focusing on the role of mythmaking (in literature and in society) provides another means of interpreting the various relationships humans (can) have with the environment. Similarly, studying female animal transformations through the theoretical lenses of post-structuralism, postmodernism, animal studies, and various types of feminism particularly eco feminism) encourages a more diverse understanding of the interconnections that exist in the world.

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