

## Embracing the maternal: the importance of intergenerational transmission in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

*Accepter le maternel : l'importance de la transmission intergénérationnelle dans  
le roman Surfacing de Margaret Atwood*

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## **Embracing the maternal: the importance of intergenerational transmission in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing***

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Drawing on psychoanalysis, Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing*, masterly depicts the suppression of trauma and the mechanisms that allow it to reconfigure. The article investigates the implications of the protagonist's abortion for her concept of self, as well as manifests the objectification of a pregnant woman during both labouring and abortive procedures. It scrutinizes what role the relationship between the heroine and her late mother plays in the identity formation and the healing process of the former, emphasizing the importance of intergenerational transmission.

En s'appuyant sur la psychanalyse, le deuxième roman d'Atwood, *Surfacing*, décrit magistralement la suppression du traumatisme et les mécanismes qui permettent de l'accepter. L'article montre comment l'avortement de la protagoniste influence sa vision d'elle-même, ainsi que le fait de traiter une femme enceinte comme un objet pendant les procédures de travail et d'avortement. Il analyse le rôle que joue la relation entre l'héroïne et sa défunte mère dans la formation de l'identité et le processus de guérison de la première, soulignant l'importance de la transmission intergénérationnelle.

Published in 1972, Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing*, recounts the story of a young woman who returns to the wilderness of Northern Quebec, in order to investigate the disappearance of her father. Thinly disguised as a mystery novel, *Surfacing* gives in fact an account of a spiritual journey of the nameless protagonist. Obligated to go back to her long-unvisited home, the heroine is inadvertently confronted with memories of her childhood, her parents and their separation upon her departure for city life. The painful reminiscences of her divorce and a lost child reemerge to be eventually discredited as a cover-up story for her abortion. Drawing heavily on psychoanalysis, the novel masterly depicts the suppression of trauma and mechanisms that allow it to reconfigure so that it becomes a bearable experience. Simultaneously, the book also demonstrates the emotional costs the traumatized person incurs in order to separate themselves from the disturbing event. With the help of her parents' ghosts, the main heroine manages to confront the memory of her abortion and regain inner peace. The discussion of women's reproductive rights which underpins *Surfacing* constitutes a vital point of reference for the current debates on abortion and procreation that recently reemerged all over the world. In America, they were a response to Donald Trump's public endorsement of anti-abortion activists and his promise to curtail federal funding for abortions. In Poland, the participants of Polish street manifestations, known as black marches, protested against the right-wing government's attempt to outlaw abortion completely, including the only three cases in which it is allowed now, that is, rape, incest or danger to the mother's life. In Argentina, the mass demonstrations, which frequently featured protesters dressed in Atwood's handmaid's costumes, have successfully led to legalizing

abortion up to the fourteenth week of pregnancy in the country which, like Poland, had had the strictest anti-abortion laws. The following article investigates the implications of the protagonist's abortion for her concept of self, as well as manifests the objectification of a pregnant woman during both labouring and abortive procedures. It scrutinizes what role the relationship between the protagonist and her late mother plays in the identity formation as well as the healing process of the former, emphasizing the importance of intergenerational transmission. Finally, it discusses the novel's overlap with Atwood's *Survival*, published the same year as *Surfacing*. The heroine's rejection of victimhood as part of her self-empowerment is read as a fictional realization of the model of four victim positions Atwood theorized in her guide to Canadian literature.

### **Emotional numbing and the formation of false memories as defence mechanisms**

Although the experience of abortion lies at the very heart of the narrative, it is not revealed until the end of the novel. The heroine's erasure of harrowing memories of her termination may be read as a defence mechanism as much as it may be interpreted as an attempt to hide the clandestine character of the procedure, for which she could have been incriminated. At the moment of the publication of *Surfacing* abortion was still illegal in Canada and until 1988 remained one of the crucial points of second-wave feminist agenda. From the initial scenes a careful reader can spot cracks in the protagonist's first-person narrative that either take a form of disparate thoughts or memories in which certain details seem to be incongruous. One of the first comments that foreshadows the aforementioned revelation only seemingly pertains to the consumption of ice cream: "I bite down into the cone and I can't feel anything for a minute but the knife-hard pin up the side of my face. Anaesthesia, that's one technique: if it hurts invent a different pain" (13). Anaesthesia naturally refers to emotional numbing that is a common symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder and a defence mechanism that allows the sufferer to keep distressing memories at bay (MCNALLY 2003). However, its downside is a decreased ability to embrace any feelings, including the positive ones; hence, a general lack of interest in oneself and others. The protagonist confesses: "I didn't feel awful; I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time. [...] At some point my neck must have closed over, pond freezing or a wound, shutting me into my head; [...]" (105). The body, which was once the source of sensuous pleasure but was later violated by forced abortion, has been denied its sensation by the mind. Her self has been limited to cognitive processes in the absence of bodily experiences. The metaphor of a wound blatantly points to a traumatic event while a frozen pond foreshadows her dive into an underwater cave that will eventually commence her process of recovery. In psychoanalysis, a pond or a lake functions as a

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subconscious part of the mind in whose waters the suppressed contents reside, hence, the heroine's ultimate "[d]iving into the lake works both as a realistic description and as a metaphor for descent into the territory of subconscious" (HOWELLS 2006, 46). The frozen pond mentioned by the protagonist prior to her dive would indicate her unwillingness to confront her subconscious. The rigid and smooth surface of the iced pond hides the rough memory of her abortion beneath. However, the power of the repressed content is such that it will find a way to seep into the conscious mind in a disguised form.

With reference to emotional numbness, it is worth investigating another metaphor that the heroine employs to describe her condition, namely, that of a woman cut in two. In his study of Atwood's poetry, Dennis Cooley (1994, 75) observes that this trope permeates Atwood's writing, both poetry and fiction, and though he claims it is particularly conspicuous in her 1970s works, the image of a female body separated at the neck appears also in her later novels, including *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). In Cooley's understanding, the neck, which "figures as pinched conduit between faculties (mind/body)" denotes a split in a woman's psyche (1994, 75). Although the ultimate meaning of this trope in the novel resonates with Cooley's interpretation, the metaphor also serves other purposes as it allows the novelist to reflect on the position of women in general. The scene the narrator initially evokes is that of an illusionist trick done with mirrors in which a female assistant is allegedly sawed into two. Interestingly, it is never a woman prestidigitator cutting up a male volunteer. This presumably innocent performance exposes a deep-seated conviction of female submissiveness and passivity. Impressive and entertaining on the surface level, this illusion is in fact a fantasized femicide offering the audience a vicarious pleasure of taming and enslaving a woman. The very smile on the female assistant's face additionally reinforces the notion that women take on their docile role gladly. The trick naturally leaves the woman assistant intact, but at its metaphoric level she never stays the same for her head has been separated from her body, depriving her of integrity. That is how the protagonist feels about herself: "I'd allowed myself to be cut in two" (108). Hers, however, was the case of an illusion gone wrong, ending in bloodshed and permanent separation: "[...] I came apart. 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" (108). As Helen Buss observes, this body-mind separation has disastrous consequences for the heroine because "the unintegrated female and maternal elements fall under the control of others" (BUSS 1989, 78). Succumbing to social pressure of a patriarchal system that looks down on unmarried mothers as well as permitting her former lover to decide for her, the protagonist allowed

herself to be mutilated both emotionally and physically. Because her abortion was coerced, not only was it a violation of her freedom of choice but her bodily boundaries, too. Therefore, the words “detached” and “severed” refer to psychological consequences of the abortion, namely, emotional numbing, as much as they activate the very memory of this experience. A fetus is detached from a woman’s womb to become a severed part while the word “terminal”, fairly incongruous in the depiction of the discussed illusion, immediately triggers the association with the expression “termination of pregnancy”. As a result of separation from her unborn child, the protagonist goes numb, that is, separates herself from emotions to evade confronting feelings of loss, disappointment and, eventually, guilt. The censorship her ego imposed on her subconscious to suppress the memory of the traumatic event is also evident in the fact that the heroine does not dream: “I used to have dreams but I don’t any longer” (43).

Apart from emotional numbing, another mechanism the heroine unconsciously employs to evade painful reminiscences and deal with her trauma is selective dissociative amnesia (MCNALLY 2003, 171-185), which involves distorting the actual and forming false memories. “I couldn’t accept it, that mutilation, ruin I’d made, I needed a different version. I pieced it together the best way I could, flattening it, scrapbook, collage, pasting over the wrong parts” (143-144), she confesses. In order to eradicate the memory of abortion the heroine’s mind replaced it with the fake reminiscence of a birth of a child that was later lost to her after divorce. The false memories of her wedding day, which never took place for she had an affair with a married man, or of her imaginary labour demonstrate cracks through which the repressed trauma seeps through. The first passages concerning her ex-husband and their child show the heroine as “the offending party” (47) and attribute the decision for ending their marriage to her. While none of it is true, such a configuration of past events enables the protagonist to allegedly assume the position of quasi power and escape the victim position. Substituting the memory of abortion with lost custody over her child is meant to alleviate the incurred distress. What alarms the reader, however, is the fact that the protagonist has not retained a single picture of her child which she could hold on to. Additionally, her confession: “I have to behave as though it doesn’t exist, because for me it can’t, it was taken away from me, exported, deported (48)” reveals the violent nature of this mother-child separation. The immediate comment that follows: “A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled.” (48) is another attempt of the censored memory of her abortion to access the conscious mind. The use of “sliced off” which seems out of place when discussing a loss of custody is well-suited to depict the termination. After all, an act of abortion consists in the separation of the fetus from the mother’s womb with the use of sharp surgical tools. On one

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hand, slicing off suggests blood, pain and a physical wound that needs healing, on the other, it represents a deep emotional cleavage, which is reinforced by the metaphor of a Siamese twin.

Later in the narrative the protagonist recalls her alleged labour:

[T]hey shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair of 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. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practising on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. [...] I won't let them do that to me ever again. (80)

The above quotation masterly merges two distinct experiences, namely, labour and abortion. Their fusion into one false memory is facilitated by the fact that they overlap. They both objectify a pregnant woman and reduce her to her womb. Her body is immobilized so that she remains submissive and her pubic hair is removed for the convenience of the medical staff. As a patient, she has no power over her own body which is a machine probed by numerous specialists. Emily Martin asserts that the metaphor of the pregnant body as a machine "underlies and accounts for our willingness to apply technology to birth and to intervene in the process. The woman's body is the machine and the doctor is the mechanic or technician who 'fixes' it" (2001, 54). The moment the false narrative results in a fissure is the appearance of a fork. While during a Caesarean section an infant is indeed taken out of a woman's womb, in most cases no surgical tool is necessary in order to do it, the word "fork", however, invokes one medical instrument used to facilitate labour, that is, forceps. The administration of this device takes place when a woman in labour is not capable of pushing her baby through the birth canal. With the use of the forceps and physical strength the obstetrician attempts to take the infant out of their mother. The use of this tool has, however, bad fame since it often incurs permanent nerve or brain damage to the delivered baby. The parallel between the forceps and a grotesque metaphor of "fork" is based then on the forceful extraction of the baby through the vaginal canal during both assisted vaginal delivery and an abortive procedure. Additionally, speaking of the baby as a "pickle" also betrays the fact that the protagonist is speaking of an abortion rather than the actual birth. Playing on the ambiguity of the word "pickle" that can denote a difficult situation, the expression "take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar" (80) suggests ease with which an unwanted pregnancy can be dealt with, thus, downplaying the

consequences of a termination. What is more, on a visual level a “pickle” resembles a human fetus in its early stages of development and both are submerged in liquid substances. While it is impossible to determine whether the abortion became a traumatic experience in the heroine’s life due to its coercive character or perhaps owing to the protagonist’s silent complicity, “it is the narrator’s failure of maternity that exacerbates her self-alienation” (RUBENSTEIN 1976, 391). Nonetheless, not until she takes responsibility for her involvement in the termination can her process of recovery commence: “I could have said no but I didn’t; that made me one of them too, a killer” (145).

### **Acknowledging the trauma and the commencement of healing**

The ensuing part of analysis will take under scrutiny the way the protagonist of *Surfacing* finally acknowledges the repressed memory of her abortion and begins her process of healing. Beginning with Chapter Nine up to Chapter Nineteen inclusive, the narration shifts from the present to past tense as if there has been a lapse in time. As Quartermaine elucidates, it “acts as a time loop of discovery” during which “the narrator’s past slowly surfaces and assumes a shaping role in her ongoing present” (1994, 126). The novel exploits the imagery of water and a lake to symbolize the heroine’s subconscious as well as the unconscious. The underwater search for Native American cave paintings the heroine’s father was obsessed about turns into an exploration of self and the confrontation with the female unconscious. To capture the heroine’s rebirth journey Annis Pratt applies the Jungian term *Wiedergeburt* which involves “either renovation or transformation of an individual so that all of his or her faculties are brought into conscious play” (1981, 140). She further explicates that “[t]he process by which such a crystallization of the personality comes about is one by which the self, which Jung differentiates from the ego, leaves the narrow bounds of its persona or social mask and plunges into the unconscious” (PRATT 1981, 141). Thus, an overt parallel between the heroine’s submersion in the lake and the unconscious is drawn. Though Pratt’s analysis is primarily preoccupied with the protagonist’s confrontation with the repressed female tradition that has “its analogues in the pre- or acivilizational worlds of a lost culture” (PRATT 1981, 141), my reading of the novel weighs towards the importance of the subconscious content, the importance of the communal unconscious not excluding.

Going deeper and deeper into the lake, the protagonist reaches the point of weightlessness and “free-floating” (142). Having an out-of-body experience, thus suspending her usual channels of perception, the heroine manages to sense something hiding beneath her: “It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it

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was dead" (142). Intuitively suspecting what she has just encountered, that is, a spectre of her aborted child, the heroine experiences a panic attack. In order to block this disturbing, repressed memory her ego immediately comes up with a cover-up story. It endeavours to disguise the floating embryo as her drowned brother. Luckily, her stay in the wilderness has dwindled the powers of her ego, which was in charge of her city persona, and she finds strength to resist its censorship: "Then I recognized it: it wasn't ever my brother I'd been remembering, that had been a disguise" (143). Interestingly, little does the confrontation with a suppressed-so-far traumatic experience resemble an epiphany, in fact, it is usually a long and painful process in which subsequent layers of lies and false memories need to be peeled and demystified. Furthermore, the recovery is additionally stifled by the ego's continual attempts to protect itself from unpleasant content and accepting complicity in actions that are morally dubious and ruin the ego's self-image. Therefore, when the narrator finally acknowledges her abortion, her ego prompts an image of a discarded embryo preserved in a glass container: "it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled" (143), in order to disguise the brutal truth of the fetus being flashed down the sewage pipes. It also invents the heroine's rage upon her regaining consciousness after anaesthetic: "I had been furious with them, I knocked it [the bottle] off the table, my life on the floor, glass egg and shattered blood, nothing could be done" (143). The false memory of her outburst is most likely an ego's bid at reinforcing the heroine's victimhood, thus exonerating her from the participation in the abortive procedure. However, the protagonist yet again succeeds at fending off ego's attacks: "That was wrong, I never saw it. They scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw them, it was travelling through the sewers by the time I woke" (143).

It is suggested that a thin line separates cruelty to animals from the brutal treatment of humans (121). The novel-length preoccupation with Americans' barbarity can be read as a projection of the heroine's own repressed feelings of guilt, the focus on their savagery allowing her to avoid the confrontation with the brutality of an abortion. The empathetic approach she demonstrates and urges towards animals is in blatant disagreement with her termination which was, after all, a form of annihilation of a living creature: "He said it wasn't a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it" (144-145). By terminating her pregnancy, the heroine became one of the "killers" (145). Instead of life she chose death, whose spectre accompanied her continually: "Since then I'd carried that death inside me, layering it over, a cyst, a tumor, black pearl" (145). This breach of integrity most likely triggered the protagonist's trauma as,



by agreeing to an abortion, she betrayed herself, her ideals and the ideals of her parents (her superego). The termination separated her from her family, who never learnt about her condition and, as a result, the intergenerational transmission was disturbed: “They never knew, about that or why I left. Their own innocence, closing them in glass, their artificial garden, greenhouse. They didn’t teach us about evil, they didn’t understand about it, how could I describe it to them?” (144). Such a radical separation on the heroine’s part points to her immaturity and limited introspection. The parents she felt the urge to detach herself from were not her actual mother and father but the superego that they represented. According to Freud, the superego emerges as the last of three agencies of the human personality, following the id and ego. With the help of its guardians a child slowly learns socially acceptable norms and develops self-control. In the process of successful individuation the external system of parental rewards and punishments is superseded by the child’s superego that acts as conscience. The violation of its moral standards results in the feelings of guilt and the sense of disloyalty to parents who were the initial source of these norms. The betrayal of one’s ideals can be interpreted as a break with family’s tradition. Freud explicates this mechanism in the following manner:

a child’s super-ego is in fact constructed on the model not of its parents but of its parents’ super-ego; the contents which fill it are the same and it becomes the vehicle of tradition and of all the time-resisting judgments of value which have propagated themselves in this manner from generation to generation (FREUD 1933, 95-6).

Therefore, every transgression of the superego’s standards weakens the intergenerational transmission. In the case of the heroine, her offence was so grave, according to her superego, that she punished herself by total separation from her parents. “Their innocence” foregrounded her guilt, her fall from grace. The image of her parents as closed “in glass, their artificial garden, greenhouse” also points to their figurative function rather than actual people. The confrontation with parental figures, which are often memory figures, is one of the phases Annis Pratt considers indispensable in the course of female rebirth journey. This meeting “constitutes an experience which belongs both to the realm of subconscious or societal experience and to the powerful mother- and father-imagos haunting the deepest reaches of the unconscious” (PRATT 1981, 143). Hence, as a part of her healing the protagonist needs to first confront the archetypal parental figures in order to reconnect with her real, not idealized parents and restore the disrupted intergenerational transmission.

### Confrontation with parental figures

The first mention of the protagonist's mother is the reminiscence of a hospital visit and the ultimate conversation between the protagonist and her mother. Dying of brain cancer and maintained on morphine, her parent did not look or act herself: "She may not have known who I was: she didn't ask me why I left or where I'd been [...]" (22). Since her mother's disorientation disabled any meaningful conversation, instead of bringing the desired reunion or absolution, their last encounter reinforced the breach between the two of them. Upon her departure, the heroine informs her parent that she is not going to attend the funeral, hoping to receive exemption. Her refusal to participate in the memorial service may stem from unwillingness to go back to her family home from which she chose to detach herself as unworthy. However, it may also indicate her reluctance to accept her mother's mortality, which would point to her immaturity. Entering her family cabin for the first time in years, the heroine recalls her mother lying on the sofa in an attempt to wait out her migraines: "We came to have faith in her ability to recover, from anything; we ceased to take her illnesses seriously, they were only natural phases, like cocoons. When she died I was disappointed in her" (35). The belief in maternal omnipotence and immortality is a type of magical thinking children indulge in but it also mirrors the social expectations surrounding mothers about which Shari L. Thurer writes:

If we could only outgrow the feeling that our female parent is omnipotent and responsible for every blessing and curse of existence, we might figure out what can be expected of mom, and what is owed to her, a human person (THURER 1994, 19).

Looking for the lost connection with her parents, not only must the protagonist recognize them as human beings of flesh and blood but she also needs to regain the lost connection with nature. Both her parents stand for the natural order, their sense of right and wrong coming from careful observation of natural processes. They are of land, deeply rooted in their bush locality, living harmonious lives. In the eyes of the protagonist, not only was her mother endowed with secret knowledge that she was unwilling to divulge but she was also blessed with protective powers. As Thurer observes, "in our failing to distinguish between nature and mother, we assign to each properties that belong to the other" (1994, 19). The two memories that overtly demonstrate these nature-based maternal qualities are of the heroine's brother's near-drowning and of the mother chasing away the bear. When asked by her daughter where the rescued sibling would have gone but for her, the mother plainly admitted she did not know. While none of her parents were religious, the father believed in science, "you died when your

brain died” (75); the mother anchored the possibility of the existence of other intangible reality though definitely beyond the reach of any institutionalized church. Her spirituality was of a similar nature to that of indigenous inhabitants of the land she lived on. For these reasons, the protagonist confesses: “My father explained everything but my mother never did, which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn’t tell” (74). Her mother’s intuitive knowledge was superior to her father’s expertise that relied on scientific methods.

In the scene with the bear that came to the campfire, the heroine’s mother is portrayed almost like a shamaness: “That was the picture I kept, my mother seen from the back, arms upraised as though she was flying, and the bear terrified” (79). The image of the fearless mother facing a bear in order to protect her children underscores the heroine’s cowardice in succumbing to the external pressure and terminating the life of her prospective child. The memory of her mother’s valiance, which initially acts like a whip with which the heroine flogs herself for her transgression, ultimately becomes a source of her own courage to protect her newly conceived baby from being taken away from her. Another memory that mirrors the protagonist’s repressed sense of her own maternal inadequacy is the reminiscence of the mother rescuing her son from drowning. As Sue Thomas observes: “The symbolism of life-giving fishing from water in the narrator’s mother’s rescuing of her son is [...] Freudian. Freud says that when a woman rescues a child from water she is represented as the mother who bore the child” (THOMAS 1988, 76). Therefore, as her mother’s double, the protagonist, “another fisher with a maternal role model in her memory, has failed through her abortion, failed in her life-giving, reproductive, creative capacity to make the transformation from woman to mother” (THOMAS 1988, 76–77). She has interrupted the intergenerational transmission by refusing to become a mother herself.

Despite living a simple life in the bush, through her lack of concern for keeping up appearances, the mother impersonated the goals of then contemporary feminism, that is, freedom from socially prescribed gender roles. The narrator notes: “Impossible to be like my mother, it would take a time warp; she was either ten thousand years behind the rest or fifty years ahead of them” (52). In her shrewd criticism of women bodies reduced to attractive appendices for the fashionable clothing, the heroine’s mother preceded the second wave. Although the daughter “believed in glamour” (42), which was “a kind of religion” (42) to her teenage self, it is important to emphasize that she was “not acculturated to this religion by her mother” (THOMAS 1988, 81). The mother seems to be well aware of and forewarns her teenage daughter about the pernicious influence of the male gaze. Spotting her fourteen-year-old applying lipstick, she explains “You don’t need that here [...] there’s no one to look at you” (44), thus encouraging her

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offspring to stop observing her reflection in the societal gaze. Free to roam the forest and feed birds whenever she felt like doing, the mother functioned beyond the oppression of the fashion and advertising world her contemporaries were subjected to. Her power then is of a two-fold kind: firstly, it derives from the natural world whose rules she perfectly understands, secondly, it comes from her rejection of social constraints. The violation of both these aspects through abortion, which is against nature and was performed because of social pressure, separates the heroine from her maternal parent.

The acknowledgement of her victim position is the starting point for transformation: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. [...] I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone" (191). Not until she sheds her powerlessness will she retrieve agency in her life. The heroine's surrender to her lover's demand on abortion resulted in her aborted child being "hurt"; therefore, its death is also her responsibility. In the act of coerced abortion she was simultaneously a victim and a perpetrator. Accepting accountability for past wrongdoings and the rejection of one's impotence is the only guarantee of integrating split self.

In *Survival* Margaret Atwood elaborates on four victim positions that underscore Canadian character and writing: 1) a denial of one's victimhood, 2) an acknowledgement of one's victimhood and treating it as fate, 3) an acknowledgement of one's victimhood but simultaneously refusing to see it is inevitable, and finally 4) becoming a creative non-victim (ATWOOD 1972, 36–39). The discussed novel accurately illustrates the protagonist's transition from the first to the last of Atwood's victim positions. Initially stuck in the denial phase, deluding herself that she was an offending party, the heroine comes to realize her own victimization. Nevertheless, she is convinced she can do nothing about the loss of her child. The moment she confronts her trauma and reunites with her old self, however, the heroine decides to fight back. Hoping that through voluntary pregnancy she can retrieve her lost offspring, she resolves to conceive a baby and challenge the society with her single motherhood. This time, nonetheless, both conception and pregnancy will be on her terms, free from social constraints or expectations and in accordance with nature. In an early review of *Surfacing*, Marge Piercy expressed her misgivings about the possibility of the protagonist's transcending the final victim position:

If Position Four involves being no more a victim or victor, how does one get there in an oppressed society except as a stance in one's head? To remain in the inner landscape is to drown, not to surface—to go mad or

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die. Can a victim cease being one except through some victory? (PIERCY 1973, 43–44)

She seriously doubted if “one woman can single-handedly leave off being a victim” (PIERCY 1973, 44). The only hope, which the critic rightly anticipated, was the consolidation of what was back then a growing body of a women’s culture and it is precisely through the contribution to this culture that the heroine of *Surfacing* prevails. The fact that she is the protagonist and the narrator of her own story moves her towards the ultimate of Atwood’s victim positions. Her narrative of self-discovery and self-empowerment allows her to shed the victim position and creatively transform herself into a non-victim. But for the re-connection with her (inner) parents, her transformation would not have taken place.

### **Embracing the maternal**

After the dive in the lake that initiated the heroine’s recovery from trauma and spiritual coming home, she starts to look for the signs and hidden messages her parents must have left for her. She endeavours to restore the intergenerational transmission. The telltale metaphor of her return to her parents’ realm is a swing. Although she has already spent some time in the cabin with her city friends, after the dive she begins to perceive her family home differently (148). The impression of the place being bigger may imply the activation of her memories when she herself was much smaller. In order to return home, she must adopt her role as a child of her parents anew.

Sherrill Grace encourages to read the discussed novel through the lens of Kora-Persephone and Demeter myth but with a difference. She argues that in this version of the narrative the daughter is looking for her mother with whom she lost connection. In Grace’s interpretation the protagonist of *Surfacing* would be representative of the generations of Western women to whom “access to Demetrian power is denied” (GRACE 1988, 44) and who need to “approach the more awesome force of the repressed, prohibited and scarcely imaginable Mother” (45). The critic urges the need to restore the lost matrilineage not only on the individual level but between whole generations of women. The protagonist’s quest is thus a search for the lost female tradition that has been subjugated by male dominance. The daughter, however, need not reject her father in order to reconnect with her mother since they are both crucial for her integrity: “[a]lthough they are opposite in their powers—the father bringing death, the mother life—in Atwood’s system, both principles are essential to rebirth and integral to a fuller existence” (GRACE 1988, 42). To spiritually come home the heroine must acknowledge her paternal and maternal lines. She has already

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discovered her father's testament to her but she has not yet encountered the mother's gift: "His was complicated, tangled, but hers would be simple as a hand, it would be final. I was not completed yet; there had to be a gift from each of them" (149). In order to complete the process of individuation a child must confront both its parents. While, in the case of women, the father figure is inextricably linked with the choice of a prospective partner, the figure of the mother serves as a basis for the daughter's own identity; in this sense, every woman is an extension of her mother (CHODOROW 1999, 134–138). The confrontation with the maternal figure is supposed to help a daughter realize and embrace this mechanism of repetition, yet simultaneously, enables her to separate from the mother and establish herself as an independent entity. Should she reject the mother, the daughter forsakes her maternal heritage and disrupts intergenerational transmission. The only successful resolution of the daughter's internal conflict between desired autonomy and identification with her mother is the recognition that a successful mother-daughter relationship is a repetition with a difference. The matrilineal tradition can be a source of a woman's strength provided she is given space to make autonomous decisions and is not reduced to her mother's mirror image. As Lorna Irvine observes, "the daughter inevitably carries her mother with her. But so also anxiety dominates her efforts to achieve autonomy. On the one hand, she longs to purge herself of a past that threatens her; on the other, she can give substance to herself only by celebrating her roots" (IRVINE 1980, 250). The heroine's mother's legacy turns out to be a picture the former drew in childhood and the latter kept tuck in a scrapbook. The drawing's symbolic meaning enhances the notion of a female transgenerational relay:

On the left was a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail. The picture was mine, I had made it. The baby was myself before I was born, the man was God, I'd drawn him when my brother learned in winter about the Devil and God: if the Devil was allowed a tail and horns, God needed them also, they were advantages. That was what the pictures had meant then but their first meaning was lost now like the meanings of the rock paintings. They were my guides, she had saved them for me, pictographs, I had to read their new meaning with the help of the power. [...] First I had to immerse myself in the other language. (158)

The gift the heroine discovers allows her to see herself as both her mother's progeny and a mother of her prospective child. The baby curled up inside the mother's womb that will one day be a mother herself resembles matryoshka nesting dolls: matrilineage shown as a procession of ever smaller

women that contain one another in succession. The “round moon” of a stomach additionally entrenches the picture’s reference to female power and its lunar nature. God with his horns and a tail stands for the natural order rather than divine law since his attributes give him a primeval character. His presence in the picture shows motherhood as a natural order of things that has roots in biology rather than culture. Annis Pratt points to the figure of Minotaur as a possible reference, reminding us that in the pre-Hellenic Cretan religion the queen established “her erotic, political and religious hegemony” (PRATT 1981, 151) through the ritual of love-making to the bull of Minos. The animal lover then served the purpose of asserting female power.

The absence of any other male figure in the drawing may be indicative of the fact that motherhood can be managed single-handedly by an expectant woman. The motherhood, which encompasses the mother and her progeny while simultaneously excluding the father, functions in the novel in a two-fold manner. Firstly, because it has been sanctioned by a primeval God it empowers the protagonist to become a mother despite social disapproval for single mothers and resist societal pressure to adjust and conform. Single parenthood, unlike in *The Edible Woman*, suddenly becomes a realistic possibility. Secondly, on a metaphoric level, the exclusion of the father figure is an attempt at maintaining matriarchal power that comes from nature but also a bid at keeping the patriarchal order at bay. Once the Law of the Father is introduced, the child’s union with the mother is lost irreparably. Therefore, the heroine wishes to “immerse [herself] in the other language” (158), the one that she communicated in before the Law of the Father, the language of pictographs and primordial signs, “alinguistic, prespeech and implicitly acivilizational” (PRATT 1981, 152). In Lacan’s understanding, the acquisition of a language is not merely limited to learning the set of rules that govern it but, above all, it is tantamount to the acceptance of the rules and laws that underlie a given society. Learning a mother tongue, which in the view of Lacan’s theory should rather be referred to as “a father tongue”, a child slowly internalizes the moral and societal norms shared by other users of the same language. In his essay on *Surfacing*, David Ward argues that “At the heart of this there is the notion of a level of language largely unregarded by man, one which might be said to exist around or beneath the elaborations of a human dialect - a level which has a semiotic if not a symbolic force” (WARD 1994, 99). Exploring the theories of Julia Kristeva, Melanie Klein and Jacques Lacan, he offers a number of possible interpretations that account for “the other language” the protagonist of *Surfacing* wishes to immerse herself in. One of them refers to Plato’s term *chora*, which in Kristeva’s understanding “denote[s] the primary processes which lie behind all signification, a totality which itself is non-expressive, constantly in motion under the impulsion of instinctual drives and

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stases, fundamentally unstable and provisional in nature" (quoted in WARD 1994, 106). *Chora* could then be understood as the pre-symbolic period, whose drives, as Ward explains, "are seen as being dominated by the sensorimotor organisation, itself structured in and by the mother's body" (WARD 1994, 107).

In order to reconnect with the realm of her mother, the heroine desires to reverse the process of linguistic and cultural subjugation. Since the Law of the Father, that is, patriarchal norms that take a dim view of single mothers, is to blame for her abortion and subsequent trauma, she resolves to reject it and live by her own principles. The meaning of the childhood picture dawns on her and she knows she must conceive a baby in order to reconnect with her parents, her old self, as well as to retribute her aborted child. This time, however, from the moment of conception to the very birth, she is going to have it her way, acting in accordance with nature:

I lie down, keeping the moon on my left hand and the absent sun on my right. [...] I guide him [Joe] into me, it's the right season, I hurry. He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds. (161-2)

Though it is much too early for the heroine to tell whether she has just conceived a baby, her embracing of potential motherhood is a step forward on her journey of recovery from trauma. Her prospective pregnancy becomes an act of redemption, though not in a religious but spiritual sense. The animal-like nature of the intercourse devoid of "redundant" (161) pleasure foregrounds the status of motherhood as instinctive and natural, which should not be corrupted by contrived social standards.

In her depiction of a future labour (162) the narrator strongly opposes any medical intervention, which rests upon the misconception that a birthing mother and a fetus are seen as "a conflicting dyad rather than as an integral unit" (ROTHMAN 1982, 48). Portraying the mother's heroine body as a threat to her baby reveals an ongoing fear of the maternal body, which, due to its mystical powers to give and sustain life, must be controlled "since society is threatened by the disorder of what is beyond its jurisdiction" (OAKLEY 1979, 608). Undermining the mother-baby integrity, obstetricians usurp the position of knowledge and because their expertise derives from medical studies, thus is rooted in culture, it is supreme to the mother's bodily experience, which is natural and therefore treated as inferior. As a challenge to the culturally structured



motherhood, the heroine insists on mothering and wants the delivery to take its course. Instead of being strapped to bed so that the baby's pulse can be monitored, she will crouch like an animal on the ground strewn with leaves with a full moon shining over her head. The lunar goddess will supervise the labour and grant her protection to a mother-to-be. The narrator further imagines: "I will never teach it any words. [...] Nobody must find out or they will do that to me again, strap me to the death machine, emptiness machine, legs in the metal framework, secret knives. This time I won't let them" (162). Incapacitating a pregnant woman through connecting her to the cardiocograph is still a common medical practice because it facilitates the full monitoring of the labour. Compelled to conform to the hospital policy, a pregnant woman becomes an invalid rather than an active participant in the delivery of her child, and consequently, a natural act of childbirth turns into a medical procedure. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's pivotal distinction between motherhood as institution and mothering as practice (RICH 1995, 13), it can be stipulated that in a highly medicalized birth the experience of mothering is corrupted by the institution of motherhood. This is the transformation the heroine refuses to undergo. A fully natural birth will help her restore the disrupted intergenerational transmission, shed her "civilized" (71) identity and renew her own relationship with the natural world. Prior to that she must follow a number of rituals reminiscent of a rite of passage in order to purge herself and make her worthy of reconnecting with her late parents.

The first vision reveals her mother feeding jays in front of the cabin. Sensing the heroine's approach, the mother looks at her briefly "as though she knows something is there but she can't see it" (182) and disappears along with the birds perching on her. When the daughter comes to investigate the place of sighting, she notices the birds up in the trees cawing at her and starts to wonder which jay is her mother. Although their meeting does not allow a direct communication and hence asking for forgiveness, the heroine's conviction of her parents' perpetual presence is confirmed. They are still there continuing their lives as part of the land. Such an interpretation of the encounter can be further supported by the sighting of the heroine's father who can no longer enter his estate as he now belongs to a different order. Man-made dwellings keep him "with its yellow eyes, wolf's eyes" (187) at bay. Both her parents still inhabit the forests the protagonist grew up in but their energy is not bound by any human concern. As the heroine notes about her wolf-like father: "It does not approve of me or disapprove of me, it tells me it has nothing to tell me, only the fact of itself" (187). This observation can be a powerful acknowledgement of her maturity for she finally frees her parents of acting as her superego. Neither her mother nor her father expect anything of her. The morning after the encounter with the father, the heroine realizes her communication with parents has come to an end: "I know

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they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when I summoned them. [...] I saw them and they spoke to me, in the other language. [...] To prefer life, I owe them that" (188). Whether by "life" the heroine means a genetic continuation of a bloodline or an environmentally conscious existence as opposed to a destructive "American" lifestyle, she does refer to an intergenerational transmission. The feeling of indebtedness towards her parents, apart from demonstrating her gratitude and appreciation, indicates her conscious choice to adopt her parents' legacy, their values. Thus, from now on she must always choose life and reject the infliction of any death, may it be a fetus or the natural environment. Acknowledging and vocalizing the crude truth of her parents' demise (189), the heroine can see them as human beings devoid of their parental nimbuses and her process of individuation is eventually completed. She sheds her victim position and resolves to "re-enter [her] own time" (191).

### **Conclusion**

Critical as always of any dominant ideology, in *Surfacing* Atwood stretched the notion of choice for women that lay at the heart of the 1970s feminists. While at the time of the publication of the discussed novel the women's liberation movement was primarily preoccupied with access to legal abortion, Atwood demonstrated that what women needed most of all was the right to choose freely. Coercing the heroine into an abortion, probably due to the lack of social approval of single mothers, was a violation of her reproductive rights. Portraying a protagonist that heals through willed pregnancy, Atwood challenged manifold feminist voices that viewed motherhood as the source of woman's oppression. In *Surfacing*, she manifested the importance of the mother-daughter bonding and the value of matrilineage. Reconnecting the daughter with her mother's realm, she recognizes that "whereas motherhood operates as a patriarchal institution to constrain, regulate, and dominate women and their mothering, mothers' own experiences of mothering can, nonetheless, be a site of empowerment" (O'REILLY 2016, 16). The heroine's decision to resolve her inner conflict through voluntary pregnancy, based on her own conditions, becomes a challenge to the society's norms. Her single status will not be an obstacle to her potential motherhood, should she choose not to marry her partner or even continue her relationship with him. Single parenthood, unlike in *The Edible Woman*, suddenly became a possibility and, simultaneously, a feminist manifesto, paving for scores of single mothers to follow.

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