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"Feminist Reclamation through Madness: Analyzing the Protagonists of *Surfacing* and *The Madwoman in the Attic*"

¹Dr Shipra Malik, ²Dr Anupriya Singh

¹ Associate Professor, ²Associate Professor

¹Department of English, ¹SKIT College, Jaipur, India

ABSTRACT :

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972) intricately weaves themes of identity, gender, and power through the lens of a protagonist who grapples with the complexities of personal and societal expectations. It explores madness as a form of resistance and assertion of feminism. In the novel, Madness is presented not as a destructive force but as a means by which the protagonist can reject patriarchal norms and assert her autonomy. This paper examines how madness in *Surfacing* serves as a feminist strategy, drawing from psychoanalytic theory, feminist literary criticism, and post-structuralist ideas to analyze the protagonist's mental disintegration as a form of self-liberation and defiance against the male-dominated society.. 3

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is often hailed as a quintessential feminist novel that explores the complex intersection of female identity, trauma, and autonomy. The novel is centered around an unnamed female narrator who embarks on a journey of self-discovery, returning to her childhood home in rural Quebec after the mysterious disappearance of her father. As the story unfolds, the protagonist's mental state deteriorates, leading her to experience a profound psychic fragmentation. While this madness could easily be interpreted as a manifestation of female hysteria, Atwood subverts this traditional trope by using madness as a tool for feminist resistance. In *Surfacing*, madness becomes an assertive act, a radical defiance against the oppressive structures of gender and society.

Numerous literary and scholarly contexts have examined the relationship between feminism and insanity. Scholars like Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982) and Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady* (1985) have examined how women's mental health has traditionally been pathologized, frequently as a strategy to suppress and repress female voices. The protagonist's journey into lunacy in Atwood's *Surfacing* is not presented as a straightforward story of victimization, but rather as a strong declaration of her agency, regaining her identity and defying the limitations imposed by patriarchal society. This paper aims to explore how madness in *Surfacing* serves as a feminist act. It will analyze how the narrator's unravelling consciousness allows her to transcend societal gender norms and make visible the systemic oppression of women. By reclaiming madness, Atwood's protagonist challenges the boundaries of sanity, and in doing so, subverts the very definitions of what it means to be a woman.

Madness and Feminism

The idea of crazy has historically been used to marginalize and oppress women. "Hysteria" was frequently employed in the 19th and early 20th centuries to characterize women's mental anguish or nonconformity to gender norms, as Elaine Showalter contends. Madness became a way to pathologize the feminine experience in this setting. Madness was presented as an innate weakness or defect in the female mind rather than addressing the true causes of women's suffering, which include emotional abuse, gender inequity, and oppression. Similarly, a more complex understanding of feminine madness can be found in Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of madness, especially in her *Powers of Horror* investigation of the abject. The rejection of social standards and the erasure of self-identity, which frequently leads to women's psychological collapse, are addressed in Kristeva's concept of the abject. Kristeva emphasizes the process's capacity for rebirth and transformation even as she acknowledges the trauma connected to it. Madness turns as a location of resistance in Atwood's *Surfacing*. The protagonist's mental breakdown symbolizes a failure to live up to patriarchal norms rather than female weakness or tyranny. Instead of being a passive state, her insanity turns into a means of challenging gendered expectations and a required dismantling of her manufactured identity in search of authenticity. By doing this, Atwood challenges the social forces that mold and restrict women's identities in addition to the mental institutions that seek to regulate them.

Madness as Feminist Assertion

The fact that Atwood's heroine is an anonymous lady adds to the experience's universality. After her father vanished, she moved back to the house she grew up in, and the story takes place as a psychological unraveling. The protagonist's struggle with her identity as a woman is reflected in her growing insanity, and Atwood uses her fractured awareness to examine the limitations imposed on women in society.

The narrator immediately displays signs of mental illness. A mental health crisis is indicated by her dissociative moods, incomplete memories, and the peculiar tone of the story. However, the protagonist's unravelling can be seen as a feminist act since her journey into madness allows her to break free from the constrictive limitations society has set on her. The conventional belief that sanity is inevitably associated with conformity is questioned by Atwood's use of crazy in *Surfacing*. The protagonist uses her insanity to establish her independence by defying the expectations of her family and the masculine characters in her immediate environment.

The protagonist's tense relationship with her former lover Joe, for instance, exemplifies the gender dynamics that drive her insane. Joe represents the stereotypically patriarchal character who tries to dominate and own the female lead. This dynamic is upset by her insanity since she defies his expectations of what it means to be a woman. By doing this, Atwood implies that the protagonist's denial of sanity is a kind of protest against the roles that have traditionally been placed on women: mother, lover, and wife. Additionally, the narrator's mental breakdown is a reflection of her defiance of conventional norms on parenthood and sexuality. The novel's examination of pregnancy, abortion, and the female body is connected to feminist discussions on women's control over their own bodies. The protagonist eventually faces her dread and rejection of the exact structures that have created her sense of self as her hold on reality weakens and she starts to peel back the layers of identity that society has forced upon her. In this way, the path to insanity turns into a declaration of autonomy and self-awareness.

Nature and Madness: Reclaiming the Body

The relationship between nature and insanity is one of the main themes of *Surfacing*. Atwood contrasts the protagonist's spiral into mental disarray with the natural landscape. Regaining her own identity outside of society norms is symbolized by the narrator's absorption in the forest, where she reestablishes her connection to the soil and its primordial energies. The setting turns into a place where the main character can let go of the social norms that have influenced how she views femininity. In particular, the water's imagery is crucial in representing the protagonist's descent into lunacy as well as her claim to a new identity. Water is a metaphor for the unconscious, the depths of one's emotions, and the flexibility of gender and identity. As the protagonist swims in the water, she moves closer to a place of personal authenticity, where madness is no longer a pathologized state but a form of liberation.

Atwood's feminist critique of madness extends to her exploration of the relationship between the female body and the natural world. The protagonist's journey through madness is deeply connected to her bodily experience, as she confronts her trauma, sexuality, and power within her body. The body, in *Surfacing*, is a site of resistance, where the protagonist's descent into madness allows her to reclaim her agency and her selfhood. This confrontation with the body and nature symbolizes a feminist assertion of control and autonomy. In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood presents a complex psychological journey for its unnamed female protagonist, whose internal transformation can be analyzed through the lens of psychoanalysis. The protagonist's descent into madness is not merely a path to insanity but a profound psychological evolution that involves confronting repressed memories, reclaiming a fractured sense of self, and navigating the dynamics of gender, power, and identity. The process can be understood as a psychoanalytical transformation wherein the protagonist undergoes a shift from alienation and repression to self-realization, ultimately achieving a form of psychological rebirth.

The Repression of Identity

At the beginning of *Surfacing*, the protagonist is detached from her own sense of identity, emotionally fragmented, and psychologically scarred. Her repression is evident in her disconnection from her own past, her strained relationships, and her inability to confront her emotions. This state of repression can be understood through Freudian concepts of the unconscious, in which the protagonist's mental state is governed by repressed traumas and desires that she is unwilling to confront. One of the key repressions is her abandonment of her father and her role in his disappearance, which emerges later in the narrative.

The protagonist's fractured mental state reflects what Freud termed *repression*, where painful memories or desires are pushed out of conscious awareness because they are too difficult to deal with. Her fragmented memories of her family, her relationship with her ex-lover Joe, and her encounter with the natural world serve as a mirror to her own disjointed sense of self. The psychoanalytic perspective suggests that, by repressing these aspects of her identity, she distances herself from her true feelings and desires, creating a psychological divide that impedes her ability to form a coherent self.

The Return of the Repressed: Confronting the Past

As the protagonist journeys to her childhood home, she begins to confront the repressed memories of her past, particularly those related to her family and her father's disappearance. Psychoanalytically, this can be viewed as a process of the return of the repressed—where unconscious thoughts and feelings surface and demand attention. The protagonist's disorienting experiences in the natural environment mirror the emergence of these long-buried memories and unresolved traumas.

Atwood uses the motif of the wilderness as a symbolic representation of the unconscious mind, a place where the protagonist's suppressed memories, fears, and desires come to light. As she navigates the physical wilderness, she is also navigating her own psychological wilderness. This parallels the Freudian idea of the *return of the repressed*, where aspects of the self that have been denied or ignored are reawakened, often in disturbing or overwhelming ways.

A significant moment in her psychoanalytical transformation is when the protagonist reflects on her past relationship with her father and realizes the profound emotional neglect and trauma she suffered. Her memories of her mother's abandonment and her father's failure to provide emotional support are catalysts for the protagonist's psychological breakdown, but they also mark the beginning of a process of understanding and acceptance.

The Role of the Father Figure: Oedipal Complex

The protagonist's relationship with her father is central to her psychoanalytical transformation, and the novel contains subtle elements of Freud's *Oedipus Complex*. The father figure in *Surfacing* represents both authority and emotional neglect. Freud's Oedipus Complex typically involves a child's repressed desire for the parent of the opposite sex and rivalry with the same-sex parent. In the case of the protagonist, however, the dynamics are complicated by a lack of warmth from both parents. Her psychological development is stunted, and she harbors a deep resentment and sense of abandonment by both figures, which is a central theme in her journey toward self-realization.

In psychoanalytic terms, her inability to reconcile her relationship with her father symbolizes a failure to integrate the paternal authority, which Freud suggests is necessary for the development of a healthy ego and identity. The protagonist's emotional fragmentation can be seen as a failure to navigate this Oedipal phase, leading to a disruption in her psychic equilibrium.

The Descent into Madness: A Break from Social Norms

The protagonist's descent into madness can be interpreted as a psychoanalytical act of rebellion against the restrictions imposed by both societal norms and internalized patriarchal expectations. Her breakdown represents a rejection of the roles and identities that society has constructed for her as a woman. In Freudian terms, this could be seen as a rebellion against the *superego*, the moralizing, socializing aspect of the psyche that internalizes societal expectations.

Atwood's depiction of madness in *Surfacing* is not a straightforward narrative of deterioration but a symbolic journey toward freedom. As the protagonist loses touch with her conventional sense of self, she begins to reconnect with a more primal and authentic form of existence, one that is uninhibited by patriarchal ideals. Madness, in this sense, functions as a form of psychological liberation, a way of shedding the false identities imposed on her by society and reclaiming her autonomy.

This "madness" is echoed through the protagonist's increasingly erratic behavior and hallucinations, which blur the lines between reality and fantasy. These psychological episodes can be understood as a breakdown of the ego, which in Freudian terms would represent the collapse of the individual's sense of self as shaped by societal expectations and external pressures.

Rebirth and Integration of the Self

The protagonist's eventual psychological integration can be seen as a kind of psychoanalytic rebirth. Through the confrontation with her past traumas and the acceptance of her emotional and psychological wounds, she is able to piece together a more coherent sense of self. In Freudian terms, this could be understood as the reintegration of the id, ego, and superego in a more balanced way, leading to a more authentic and self-aware individual.

This transformation culminates in the novel's conclusion, where the protagonist sheds the last of her emotional and psychological burdens and attains a state of clarity. She regains her autonomy, rejecting the need for validation from the male characters (such as Joe and the figure of the father) and embraces a connection with herself that is not mediated by external expectations. The protagonist's eventual communion with nature and her symbolic return to a more animalistic, instinctual state of being represent her psychological rebirth, free from the constraints of both her past and the gendered expectations placed on her.

The protagonist's descent into madness is not a narrative of loss but one of recovery and self-liberation, offering a profound exploration of how women can reclaim their identity in the face of overwhelming psychological and societal pressures. Through this lens, the novel offers a feminist critique of traditional gender roles and the psychological costs of conforming to them. In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood presents madness not as a debilitating condition but as a form of feminist resistance. The protagonist's descent into madness allows her to break free from patriarchal norms and reclaim her autonomy. By rejecting the constructed identities imposed upon her, the protagonist embraces madness as a means of self-liberation, asserting her agency in a world that seeks to define and control her, "I am not a woman who has learned how to be a woman. I am learning." (Atwood 64). The novel challenges conventional notions of sanity and gender, using madness as a powerful tool to subvert patriarchal power and offer a critique of the social forces that shape female identity. Through the lens of madness, Atwood crafts a narrative of feminist assertion that remains both compelling and relevant in the discourse on gender and power.

The concept of feminist assertion of identity in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, as discussed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal work, revolves around how women's voices and identities have been historically marginalized in literature and society. Gilbert and Gubar analyze the motif of the "madwoman" in 19th-century literature, particularly in works like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and argue that the "madwoman" symbolizes a suppressed female identity that resists patriarchal constraints.

The feminist assertion of identity, according to *The Madwoman in the Attic*, can be understood in the following ways:

Subverting Patriarchal Narratives of Female Identity

In the traditional literary canon, women have often been portrayed as passive, dependent, and emotionally fragile. The "madwoman," however, is an embodiment of the chaotic, untamed aspects of the female psyche that patriarchal culture seeks to suppress or confine. In works like *Jane Eyre*, the

madwoman (Bertha Mason) exists as a symbol of the repressed desires, anger, and rebellion of the female protagonist (Jane), who must fight against a restrictive social and personal identity.

By presenting the madwoman as a character who defies the expectations imposed on her, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the madwoman is an assertion of identity that challenges the traditional, limited roles for women. The "madness" of the madwoman represents the rejection of prescribed roles of wife, daughter, and mother, which the patriarchal society has defined for her.

The Madwoman as a Symbol of Repression and Liberation

Gilbert and Gubar argue that the madwoman is not simply a tragic or pathological figure but also a symbol of female oppression and, paradoxically, a form of liberation. The repression of the madwoman's desires, sexuality, and autonomy mirrors the broader societal repression of women's agency and voice.

When the madwoman "breaks out" of the attic or is otherwise given expression in literature, it marks an assertion of the female self against the boundaries of social expectations. Thus, the madwoman's rebellion, while portrayed as madness, is actually an assertion of identity and a powerful rejection of her subjugation.

Madness as a Feminist Act

In the feminist reading of the madwoman, madness becomes a radical act of self-expression. It is a direct challenge to the narrow definitions of femininity and sanity enforced by patriarchal society. The madwoman's madness allows her to express desires, frustrations, and emotions that would otherwise be suppressed or ignored.

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the madwoman represents a force of resistance—a rejection of the narrow, socially constructed roles of women. In this way, madness can be viewed as an assertion of female identity that refuses to conform to a socially prescribed notion of what a woman "should" be.

The Transformation of the "Madwoman" into Empowered Identity

The madwoman in literature often appears to be a tragic figure, yet, according to feminist criticism, her role can be transformative. Her madness can signify a breaking free from societal constraints and the reclaiming of personal identity. In this context, the madwoman's expression of "madness" is an act of reasserting her subjectivity.

For instance, in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason's madness is an expression of the rebellion against both her confining marriage and the restrictions of her gendered existence. Though Bertha is ultimately imprisoned and silenced, her character has become a symbol of the dangers of repressing the female spirit and identity. The feminist reading of her character suggests that her violent outbursts represent an assertion of identity that could not be fully realized within the confines of her societal role.

The Intersection of Madness and Feminist Liberation

Gilbert and Gubar also explore the idea that the "madness" of the madwoman can be interpreted as a resistance to the roles and expectations placed on women. This madness, though presented as irrational or unstable within the narrative, is tied to the oppressive social systems that demand women conform to idealized feminine norms.

The madwoman's rebellion becomes an assertion of a new, liberated identity—one that is not bound by traditional notions of womanhood. In feminist terms, madness can be understood not as a pathology but as a powerful declaration of individuality and self-determination. It is the madwoman's ultimate refusal to conform to socially acceptable roles that makes her an icon of feminist resistance.

Conclusion: Feminist Assertion of Identity

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the feminist assertion of identity through the madwoman is an assertion of autonomy and self-expression in the face of rigid gender roles. The madwoman's madness challenges the limits placed on women and subverts patriarchal ideals of sanity and femininity. Through this lens, madness is not merely an affliction but a radical form of resistance, and the madwoman becomes a symbol of the oppressed female identity seeking liberation. By reclaiming the madwoman's voice, Gilbert and Gubar highlight how this figure in literature allows for a feminist assertion of identity—one that rejects the traditional roles and seeks a new sense of self outside the constraints of societal expectations.

Madness is the only way to let go of her fear and pain of past memories. That is the reason she tries to temper her past memory by incorporating events and memories from different point of time. She tries to make her past more tolerable by moulding the harsh facts and realities from her past life. She recants the memory of her wedding, replacing it with the memory of having an affair with her art professor and aborting their baby. Interestingly, the false memory contains multiple true facts lifted from other sources. For example, she remembers a fountain from the company town near the village, but inserts the fountain into the memory of her wedding. She remembers what her lover said to her after the abortion, but instead remembers him saying it after her wedding. She even goes on to create a new false memory just as she exposes the repressed one. She remembers her brother keeping frogs in jars and inserts that memory into her abortion, falsely claiming that the doctors gave her the fetus in a jar. The narrator's memories change themselves to fit with her desires and emotions, effectively erasing her abortion. She tries to combat the sadness and pain of her past by adopting this method. But after encountering things in present her real past emerges to the surface which she has embedded somewhere deep in her subconscious mind she tries to face her fears b relapsing in the lap of nature. As she always felt that nature only has the potential to heal her past wounds. As a female with repressed memories

and emotions she is not even able to understand whether she loves Joe or not. Her confused analysis of his character and lack of faith on his love for shows

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