

Exploring Selfhood in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and the *Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This study explores the quest for self-identity in Margaret Atwood's novels "Surfacing" and "The Handmaid's Tale." By examining the protagonists' journeys and the impact of societal and environmental factors, the research highlights the resilience of the human spirit in the search for individuality. The analysis draws on feminist and psychological perspectives to understand how Atwood portrays the struggle for identity against oppressive societal norms. The findings reveal significant similarities and differences in portraying self-identity in both novels, offering insights into the broader implications of identity formation in contemporary literature.

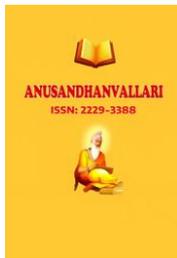
Keywords: Self-Identity, Margaret Atwood, Surfacing, The Handmaid's Tale, Feminism, Psychological Analysis, Societal Influence, Environmental Influence, Contemporary Literature

Introduction

Margaret Atwood, a prominent figure in contemporary literature, has profoundly impacted the literary world with her thought-provoking and often dystopian narratives. Two of her most acclaimed works, "Surfacing" and "The Handmaid's Tale," delve deeply into the theme of self-identity, exploring the complexities of personal and social identity within different contexts. "Surfacing," published in 1972, follows the journey of an unnamed protagonist who returns to her childhood home in rural Canada in search of her missing father. As she navigates the wilderness and confronts her past, she embarks on a quest for self-discovery and identity. The novel delves into themes of nature, memory, and the struggle to reclaim one's true self amidst societal expectations and personal trauma.

First published in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a dystopian vision of a future America where a totalitarian regime known as the Republic of Gilead subjugates women and strips them of their identities. The protagonist, Offred, a handmaid forced into reproductive servitude, grapples with the loss of her former self and fights to retain her identity and sense of autonomy. The novel explores themes of power, resistance, and the enduring human spirit in the face of oppression.

This article examines the quest for self-identity in "Surfacing" and "The Handmaid's Tale," analyzing how Atwood portrays the struggle for personal identity against societal and environmental influences. By exploring the protagonists' journeys, thematic elements, and critical interpretations, this study aims to shed light on the broader implications of self-identity in Atwood's works and their relevance in contemporary literary discourse.



"Surfacing" follows an unnamed narrator's journey to her remote childhood home in Quebec with her lover and two friends to search for her missing father. As the narrator delves into the wilderness, she confronts memories of her past, including her relationships, her childhood, and a traumatic abortion. The novel explores her gradual disintegration and eventual rebirth as she reconnects with nature and her true self. The narrator's journey is both a physical and psychological quest for identity. Her return to the wilderness symbolizes a return to a primal state, free from societal constraints. Throughout the novel, she grapples with fragmented memories and suppressed emotions, seeking to reclaim a sense of self that has been lost.

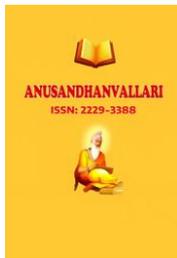
"Surfacing" has themes and symbols that underscore the protagonist's quest for identity. Nature plays a crucial role, representing purity and truth in contrast to the artificiality of modern life. The narrator's encounters with animals and the wilderness are metaphors for her journey towards self-discovery. The "surfacing" symbolizes emerging from repression and rediscovering one's true self. Scholars have extensively analyzed "Surfacing," often focusing on its feminist and ecological themes. The novel is seen as a critique of patriarchal society and its impact on women's identities. Additionally, it has been interpreted as an exploration of the interconnectedness of human and environmental health, with the narrator's psychological healing mirroring the natural world's resilience.

Set in a dystopian future, "The Handmaid's Tale" follows Offred, a woman forced into the role of a handmaid whose sole purpose is to bear children for the ruling class. The Republic of Gilead, a theocratic regime, has stripped women of their rights and identities. Offred navigates the oppressive society, reflecting on her past life and resisting the regime's control in subtle ways.

Offred's struggle with identity is central to the novel. She constantly battles to retain her sense of self in a society that seeks to erase it. Her memories of her past life, including her real name and family, serve as a lifeline, helping her maintain her individuality. The novel highlights the dehumanizing effects of Gilead's regime and the resilience of the human spirit.

"The Handmaid's Tale" is laden with identity-related themes and symbols. Using names and naming is significant, with handmaids being stripped of their original names and given ones denoting ownership. The colour red, worn by handmaids, symbolizes both fertility and oppression. The novel also explores themes of resistance, memory, and the power dynamics inherent in identity formation. Critical interpretations of "The Handmaid's Tale" often focus on its feminist and political dimensions. Scholars examine how the novel critiques patriarchal structures and the commodification of women's bodies. The dystopian setting serves as a powerful allegory for contemporary issues of gender and identity politics. "Surfacing" and "The Handmaid's Tale" centre around female protagonists who embark on profound journeys of self-discovery. In "Surfacing," the unnamed narrator returns to her childhood home in the wilderness of Quebec to search for her missing father. This physical journey mirrors her internal quest to uncover and reclaim her fragmented identity. The isolation of the natural environment catalyzes introspection and self-realization.

In contrast, "The Handmaid's Tale" features Offred, a woman living in the dystopian Republic of Gilead, where her identity is systematically stripped away by a totalitarian regime that reduces women to their reproductive functions. Offred's quest for self-identity is personal and a struggle against the oppressive forces that seek to define and control her. Despite these differing settings, both protagonists face a profound disconnection from their past selves. In "Surfacing," the narrator's amnesia and detachment from her emotions symbolize her lost identity. Offred's flashbacks to her life before Gilead reveal a woman who once had autonomy and freedom, highlighting the stark contrast to her present subjugation.



In "Surfacing," the natural environment plays a crucial role in the narrator's journey towards self-discovery. The wilderness represents a space free from societal constraints, allowing her to reconnect with her primal self. This journey into the wild symbolizes a return to one's roots and a shedding of imposed identities.

Conversely, "The Handmaid's Tale" portrays a society where environmental factors are manipulated to control individuals. The oppressive regime of Gilead uses environmental scarcity and fear to justify its draconian measures, thus moulding the identities of its citizens through repression and surveillance. Offred's struggle for self-identity is a fight to reclaim her sense of self from the rigid and dehumanizing structures of Gilead. Atwood's exploration of self-identity in both novels is deeply intertwined with feminist themes. In "Surfacing," the narrator's journey is also a feminist one, as she rejects the traditional roles imposed upon her and seeks a new, authentic self—the novel critiques how women's identities are often constructed through their relationships with men and societal expectations. "The Handmaid's Tale" is a more explicit critique of patriarchal oppression. Offred's identity is systematically erased by a regime that controls women's bodies and minds. Her resistance, however subtle, is a form of reclaiming her identity and asserting her personhood. The novel underscores the resilience of the female spirit and the continuous struggle against forces that seek to dominate and define women.

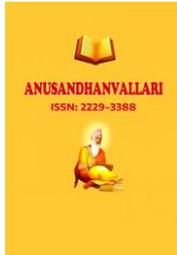
Conclusions

Margaret Atwood's "Surfacing" and "The Handmaid's Tale" offer profound insights into the quest for self-identity. Atwood explores the intricate interplay between individual psychology, societal expectations, and environmental influences through their respective narratives. Both novels underscore the resilience of the human spirit and the fundamental need for self-identity in the face of external pressures. These works resonate with contemporary readers, offering valuable perspectives on the ongoing struggle for personal and social identity. In "Surfacing" and "The Handmaid's Tale," Margaret Atwood masterfully explores the quest for self-identity, highlighting how individual and societal factors shape and challenge one's sense of self. In "Surfacing," the unnamed narrator's journey into the wilderness symbolizes a return to primal identity and self-awareness, free from societal constraints. This environment fosters introspection and a reconnection with her true self.

Conversely, "The Handmaid's Tale" depicts a dystopian society where a totalitarian regime brutally suppresses identity. Offred's struggle to reclaim her past and maintain her sense of self amidst oppressive forces underscores the resilience of the human spirit. Both novels emphasize the significant role of external factors—the liberating natural world in "Surfacing" or the repressive societal structures in "The Handmaid's Tale"—in shaping identity. Feminist perspectives are deeply embedded in these narratives, critiquing how societal norms and power structures construct and constrain women's identities. Atwood's portrayal of female protagonists reclaiming their identities offers a powerful commentary on the universal struggle for autonomy and self-realization. Overall, Atwood's works underscore the ongoing battle for self-identity in the face of external pressures, contributing valuable insights to literary and feminist studies. The narratives of "Surfacing" and "The Handmaid's Tale" resonate widely, reflecting the complexities of identity formation and the enduring quest for self in a constantly changing world. The implications of these narratives extend beyond literary analysis, offering insights into the broader discourse on identity formation, resistance, and the human spirit's resilience. Atwood's work continues to resonate, providing valuable commentary on the ongoing struggles for self-identity in the face of external pressure.

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