

Journey through Nature and Self: The Melancholic Narrator in Atwood's *Surfacing*

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ABSTRACT

Julia Kristeva's melancholic subject is one who feels a sense of loss and cannot express herself openly. As a result of melancholia, the subject exhibits strange behaviour, loses her language, and isolate herself. As such, the melancholia is seen as a disorder of self-identity. It is the aim of this paper to discuss how Margaret Atwood's melancholic female subject in *Surfacing* goes on a quest-journey in the wilderness to deal with her sense of loss and regains a new life. In the initial part of her life, the protagonist is seen destroying herself through a loveless union with her husband, loss of her parents, and coerced abortion. As a melancholic subject, she is unable to express and share her grief with those around her. Her expedition in search of her missing father brings about new experiences in nature which eventually leads to her self-recognition as she finds ways to deal with her condition. This reading of Atwood's female protagonist as a melancholic subject provides a new depiction of how melancholia is healed through interaction with nature.

Keywords: Julia Kristeva, melancholic subject, nature, psychological quest, self-recognition

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* has been critically viewed from many different perspectives, such as: dealing with the protagonist's divided self (McLay, 1975); the mother-daughter relationship (Thomas, 1988), language and logic (Clark, 1983), themes of psychological quests (Kroller, 2004), and madness (Ozdemir, 2003). None, however, theorizes the protagonist being a melancholic subject who goes on a painful journey to achieve an integrated

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personality and wholeness with the help of and unification with nature.

In Julia Kristeva's view, the melancholic subject suffers a sense of loss which is not communicable. As the melancholic subject delves into sorrow she has no interest in "words, action, and even life itself" (1980, p. 3). Kristeva believes that melancholia is a disorder of self-identity and sense of loss:

Abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself (Black Sun, 1980, p. 3).

The subject mourns for something lost. In the absence of the Thing, she feels loss and she cannot share this feeling with others. As a result of melancholia she cannot use language as she is a stranger to her mother tongue. Without language, she becomes a heterogenous subject rather than a unified one. She needs to use language in order to become an 'I'. In order to gain unified subjectivity one should enter the symbolic realm of language. In addition, the melancholic subject "I" isolate herself from the world, "I" withdraw into her sadness, "I" do not speak, "I" cry, and "I" may kill herself (Kristeva, 2000, p. 47).

The protagonist in Atwood's *Surfacing* is also the unnamed narrator who may be seen as a melancholic subject, as theorized by Kristeva. The discussion which follows is an analysis of Atwood's *Surfacing* in light of Kristeva's theory to provide a different

reading of her protagonist's characterisation. This paper sheds light on the unnamed melancholic narrator whose traumas are healed through her relation with nature.

The Melancholic Narrator in Atwood's Surfacing

In this novel, the unnamed narrator faces different losses in her life which lead her to a melancholic condition. As the novel opens the narrator expresses her sadness over her mother's death, as a result of illness, and after that her father who "simply disappeared and then vanished into nothing" (Atwood, 1998, p. 20). She has lost both of her parents and could not come to terms with these losses and these unresolved pasts return to her present mind repeatedly. In addition to the loss of her parents, she lost her husband through divorce and this lack of love in her life adds to the previous miseries. Moreover, she also lost her child through a forced abortion and admits that she has "to behave as though it does not exist, because for [her] it can't, it was taken away from [her], exported, departed ... a section of [her] own life, sliced off from [her] like a Siamese twin, [her] own flesh cancelled, lapse, relapse" (Atwood, 1998, p. 45). All these losses affect her tremendously and lead her to a state of melancholia.

The narrator's melancholic condition can be seen in her various strange behaviour of telling unnecessary excessive lies, of unexplained cruelty towards nature, and her eventual loss of language and withdrawal from the society. She tells lies to her friends about herself, her marriage, and her family.

She also does not disclose the fact to her parents that she has had an abortion and lies to them by saying that she has left her child with her husband. Although legally married to her husband, she feels that she is having an affair with a married man (after discovering that her legal husband has another wife). She “felt like an incubator” knowing that she is trapped in a loveless relationship (Atwood, 1998, p. 30). In her make-believe world, she is imprisoned and in love with the “wrong person” (Atwood, 1998, p. 36). When she is finally divorced by her bigamous husband, she feels that “a divorce is like an amputation, [she] survive[s] but there is less of [her]” (Atwood, 1998, p. 39).

The next melancholic condition of the narrator can be seen in her strange behaviour towards nature. During her journey into the wilderness, she cruelly kills a fish by stepping and whacking “it quickly with the knife” instead of waiting for the fish to go through a natural death without water (Atwood, 1998, p. 62). This shows the narrator’s unexplained erratic behaviour towards nature. In addition to telling lies and her nonsensical behaviour toward nature, the narrator eventually loses language and wishes to be alone. As the narrator passes through nature during the initial part of the journey, she perceives that it becomes harder for her to communicate and she thinks “the words were coming out of [her] like the mechanical words from talking dolls, the kind with a pull tape at the back, the whole speech was unwinding” (Atwood, 1998, p. 87) as Kristeva posits “the depressed speak of nothing, they have

nothing to speak of “as they feel loss, a loss that cannot be expressed (1980, p. 51).

She cannot communicate through language as she feels that no one can understand her; as a result she turns into an inarticulate person and the language becomes foreign to her. In addition to being a stranger to her mother tongue, she feels numb within her body. “I did not feel awful, I realize I didn’t feel much of anything” (Atwood, 1998, p. 106). Repeatedly, she refers to language: “I couldn’t use it because it wasn’t mine ... “ ”I’m trying to tell the truth”, “...The voice wasn’t mine, it came from someone dressed as me imitating me” (Atwood, 1998, p. 107). As she cannot use language and share her feelings with others she feels that she “came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal” (Atwood, 1998, p. 109). As a melancholic subject, she is “silent and without verbal or desiring bonds with others” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 30).

Nature as the Healing Power

The narrator’s healing journey into the wilderness begins after she has undergone several incidences which lead to her revelation. In her journey, the narrator is initially accompanied by her current boyfriend, Joe, and her friends Anna and David (Anna is married to David). The incidence that changes her view of life is at the point when she saw a dead heron hanging from a tree. She suddenly feels an overwhelming feeling of anger towards the senseless killing of an innocent creature of

nature. This incidence floods her memories of her own cruelty dealing with her abortion and the killing of fish much earlier. If abortion was initially treated like “getting a wart removed” (Atwood, 1998, p. 169) and killing of the fish was seen as a normal mundane act of killing, now both are seen as an act of cruelty, of disrespect for nature. This subtle incident is an epiphany moment to the narrator which brings a turning point in her life. She suddenly becomes compassionate toward non-human creatures and surrounding.

Later on, during the course of her journey, the narrator becomes very much aware of the presence of nature as a living force. She dives into the lake and feels it very much alive: “I go off the dock and wade in from the shore, slowly, splashing water over my shoulders and neck, the cold climbing my thighs, my foot soles feel the sand and twigs and suck leaves” (Atwood, 1998, p. 72). She joins with nature and separates herself from her companion. She perceives that human and nature have an interrelationship because human’s behaviour toward nature is akin to living with other humans. From this epiphany onward, the narrator is a changed person. Unlike the previous episode of fishing when the narrator killed the fish senselessly, the narrator now refuses to kill fish as she considers herself part of nature.

If earlier in the story the narrator could not talk about her abortion, she now finds renewed energy to deal with her guilt. She is able to forgive herself when the memory of her aborted child comes into her

mind. The narrator becomes determined to have a unified self in order not to be numb anymore, “language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole” (Atwood, 1998, p. 147). Through her relation with nature, it becomes easy for her to confess her lies about her husband to herself:

he did say he loved me though, that was true; I didn't make it up. It was the night I locked myself in and turned on the water in the bathtub and he cried on the other side of the door. When I gave up and came out he showed me snapshots of his wife and children, his reasons, his stuffed and mounted family, they had names, he said I should be mature (Atwood, 1998, p. 150).

She comes to realise that the man with whom she married is not a single, but a married man with children who asks her to be rational after informing her that he is already married to another woman. Little by little the narrator heals her traumatic memories through nature. In fact, “surfacing” is a gerund, indicating process and activity rather than a completed action. Surfacing charts a change in the narrator’s subjective perception of reality, as she shifts from a position of alienation and victimhood to a new sense of the vital relationship between herself as human and land which inhabits (Howell, 2005, p. 49).

When the narrator was informed by her friends that her father was missing, they think “[she] should be filled with death,

[she] should be in mourning” (Atwood, 1998, p. 160); but in fact, she is not in mourning as she is part of nature now and knows that life and death are parts of nature, and no one can do anything about them because “nothing has died, everything is alive” (Atwood, 1998, p. 170). She feels there is no reason for her to mourn now that she has come to terms with the natural cycle of death and birth. Besides feeling fresh, with the help of nature, she is dealing with the traumatic problem of her abortion: “I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, rising from the lake where it has been poisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent” (Atwood, 1998, p. 165).

Her shattered mind as a result of losses has now healed as she passes through trauma with the magical help of nature and unification with it: “The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground” (Atwood, 1998, p. 187). As she becomes part of nature, she uses her own language to express herself; as she is nature and animals are words, she is words, too. From then on, she communicates with others in a new way: “As she merges with nature, she resists the rules of syntax and punctuation. She no longer regards language as necessary to being” (Petrilli, 2007, p. 47).

Therefore, in relation to nature, she does not feel any need to use rational discourse to communicate. She intends to use the language of nature because it is “one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs

held for a longer moment” (Atwood, 1998, p. 32). She learns how to use the language of nature rather than any symbolic language which has lost its meaning for her. As Ward argues the narrator’s “metamorphosis into a languageless being allows her passage into another world where she hopes to find another language that will guide her to some kind of truth” (2007, p. 49). As she uses the language of nature, she feels so secure within nature because as part of nature, nothing can harm her anymore: “if I go into the swamp, among the dead tree roots, I’ll be safe, they’d have to wade for me, the mud is soft, they’ll sink like bulldozers” (Atwood, 1998, p. 191).

The more she interacts with nature, the more she comes to terms with her feelings and grief. She feels her “feeling was beginning to seep back into” her, she is “tangled like a foot that’s been asleep” (Atwood, 1998, p. 171). Her numb body becomes responsive as a result of her relation to nature, and now she feels her own desires, sorrows and satisfaction and gets rid of her emotionally numb condition: “I can remember him, fake husband, more clearly, though, and now I feel nothing for him but sorrow” (Atwood, 1998, p. 195). She not only returns to reality but also gets rid of her feelings of emptiness. Unlike before, when she was unable to feel anything, now she has feelings of sorrow for her deceitful husband. Besides, she perceives that her unwanted abortion led her to refute her ability to “negotiate within rational discourse successfully” (Petrilli, 2007, p. 78). At the end of the novel, she is able to

communicate with others through language, and she is satisfied that she has “words that can be understood” (Atwood, 1998, p. 196). She decides to leave wilderness and return back to city as she is able to accept the imperfections in the world and she perceives that she cannot withdraw into isolation. She has re-entered the realm of language, dealt with her traumas, and achieved a unified self.

CONCLUSION

The unnamed melancholic narrator suffers from melancholia; therefore she cannot use language to articulate her losses. Her psyche is shattered into many pieces as she has lost part of herself through her abortion, divorce, and parents’ deaths. However, with the help of nature and her experiences in it, she learns how to deal with her repressed memories and unresolved grief and come to terms with them. Thus she acquires the language of nature to communicate and express her sense of loss. Finally, instead of a fragmented self, she gains an integrated personality and reaches wholeness. Tracing Atwood’s protagonist in *Surfacing* as a melancholic subject gives us an in-depth understanding of her predicament and how she eventually overcomes her situation.

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