

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL QUEST IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING AND ARUN JOSHI'S THE LAST LABYRINTH : A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Modern man has been under the vicious impact of modernization and industrialization. The advancement in the field of science and technology came as a boon to him so that he could lead his life comfortable with the help of machines. The catastrophic impact of the technological revolution had been quite alarming that he found his life void. It is distinct that this ruinous state of mankind is due to lack of ethical standards and moral values. In modern society, man gets depressed and he undergoes deep personality crises. The psychological journey of the unnamed Narrator in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing undertakes three basic journeys. The psychological journey allows the narrator to reconcile her past and ultimately leads to the conclusion of the physical journey. Som Bhaskar, the narrator – protagonist of Arun Joshi's The Last Labyrinth is disillusioned and he is unable to relate himself meaningfully in his surroundings. He is a fractured personality who finds himself helpless in the indifferent social world of India. He continues to unravel the labyrinths of life. His anguish for physical pleasure gets dissolved and he understands that self-control is the first step to the attainment of spiritual freedom.

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian icon in the literary domain. Her novel Surfacing was the first to gain international attention. It relates an unnamed narrator's search for her missing father, presumed dead. It portrays the story of an invisibly visible character without name in the form of the narrator of the story. The narrator returns to her hometown i.e. Northern Quebec after several years in search of her missing father. She is at first shocked to see the sea-changes in the region and the wild nature which is caused by the tools of progress in the name of economic and material development. J. Brooks Bouson, a feminist critic remarks that "Surfacing rejects the masculinity culture- which is depicted as both rationalistic and dangerously aggressive- and idealizes a nature-identified femininity "(39).

The unnamed Narrator in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* returns to Quebec after years of absence in search for her missing father. She brings her boyfriend Joe, and a married couple Anna and David. On the way to a village near her father's island, the Narrator visits her father's friend, Paul. Paul can provide no new information on how to locate the narrator's father. Finally, the narrator comes to know that her father is no more. She returns to her country at last.

The Narrator undertakes three basic journeys, a physical quest to search for her lost father, a biographical journey into her past, and most importantly a psychological journey. The psychological journey allows the narrator to reconcile her past and ultimately leads to the conclusion of the physical journey. In this psychological voyage into her inner self, the narrator, while travelling from cognizant rational reasoning to subconscious dissociated really progresses through three stages. In the first stage, the narrator is in touch with reality; she lives and exists in a state of mind known in Freudian psychology. This conviction is elucidated at the end of the passage when the Narrator comments: "anesthesia, that's one technique, if it hurts invent a different pain. I'm all right ". (Atwood 13)

When she arrives, she continues to rationally attempt to solve the physical quest, her father's disappearance. However, she refuses to believe that her father could be dead, she says, "I can't accept it though, he knew too much, he was too careful" (5) She continually represses unpleasant thoughts into her subconscious. She begins to fantasize that her father is lurking in the woods, psychotic and watching her. As the truth about her father becomes revealed, she is forced to abandon her "anesthesia". At the same time, she is undergoing flashbacks of her memory, unpleasant thoughts which she had subdued into her sub consciousness. A particularly big lie is the issue of an abortion she refuses to accept as having taken place. She states, "But I couldn't have brought the child here, I never identified it as mine, I didn't name it before it was born even, the way you are supposed to. It was my husband's he imposed it on me" (37). She believes her lie that she had left her child in the city. She must believe it, it is her "anesthesia". As each fantasy is disproven, she delves further into her subconsciousness from the ugly thoughts that she must face.

The title *Surfacing* is very significant as it reveals the efforts of an individual's identification which undergoes many phases of physical troubles and mental traumas. All the efforts of the Narrator in the novel for identity come up on the surface in the midst of nature from deep conflict between self and society. The protagonist does not bear a name ultimately suggests her alienation from society and her loss of identity. Laing, a psychiatrist says "the individual seems to be the vehicle of a personality that is not his own. Someone else's personality seems to possess him and to be finding

expression through his words and actions, whereas the individual's own personality is temporarily lost or gone" (58) By depriving the protagonist of a name, Atwood has been able to portray a story of not a particular woman but the millions of women who may identify with her.

At the outset of the novel, the protagonist has revealed the fact that she has already lost her identity. Towards the end of the novel, she realizes "it's too late; I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending" (168). Her identity remains under a mask. Every human being needs his/her identity which helps to develop one's personality. So the quest for identity is very important for human predicament because the loss of identity would always result in utter dejection. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist's search for an explicit identity is fulfilled in the end of the novel. Her passive attitude ends up as an activist survives with dignity. Her search for identity is completed at the end of the novel when she returns to the city and decides to give birth to her second child. She is no longer a victim. Carol P. Christ opines, 'The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest and Vision "a male-defined world, to the greater terror and risk, and also the great potential, healing and joy, of a world defined by the heroine's own feeling and judgment" (325).

The unnamed protagonist acquires a radical perception of reality that is developed through an intense psychological journey through on the island that served as her childhood home. Truth can be taken from the narrator's viewpoint but the reader must explore the inner turmoil plaguing her in order to understand the basis of such beliefs.

Arun Joshi is one of the most significant Indian English novelists. In his novel, *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), Som Bhaskar, a young intelligent millionaire is essentially turbulent and groping through the labyrinths of life. Being a business tycoon, he is never contented with his lot. He is portrayed as an embodiment of chaos and uncertainty. He cannot believe anything and he walks tightrope between illusion and reality. He is a product of twin worlds- the western world of science and rationalism and the Indian world of faith and transcendentalism. O.P.Mathur aptly remarks, "The Last Labyrinth seems to depict the vague but unmistakably reaching out for faith and understanding by a man lost in the labyrinth of desires and the vague simmering of his discontent with this type of life". (204 – 217)

Som Bhaskar is a millionaire industrialist . He is married to a woman of his choime who has borne him two children. Like his father, he is intellectually an accomplished man. An insatiable cry of "I want, I want, I want " keeps on haunting him His life remains a quest for an undefined

thing in the name of a dark labyrinth. The novel closes with his aborted attempt to end himself as he aims his revolver at his skull. But his wife, Geeta, intervenes he feels as though he has come out of a sleep. Som's arm facing Geeta, "like a traffic policeman" perhaps indicates affirmation.

Som is the battle ground between the two hungers of body and spirit. He is a fusion of two conflicting human faculties, instinct and reason. The blend of two distinctly separate sides of human faculty corresponds with the basic thematic background of the novel. Instinct is the very ground of Kama to which Som responds with a sense of immediacy. His reasoning enables him to seek the evidence of the existence of God encircled by the world of Maya. He becomes a 'sad man' (56) losing his head unable to guide himself in the direction of the right path, (i.e.) dharma.

Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth* probes into the turbulent inner world of an existential hero, Som who becomes a millionaire at the age of thirty. His personality reveals the fact that he is suffering from insecurity and hollowness and that they propel him from one goal to another. His doubtfulness in the serene company of his wife Geeta gets multiplied not only because of his terrible loneliness but also because of the lack of relevance in life. He is absolutely driven by undefined worldly hungers – hunger for money hunger for fame and so on. He does not find happiness in the company of his wife Geeta. His attempts to win his owner's concubine Anuradha end in failure. He goes to Europe with his wife Geeta hoping to get rid of his obsession with "Benares, Aftab, Anuradha, their Haveli- all were bores, frogs shock in their marshy wells. What I wanted, I Decided, was to go abroad, get the hell away from this land of obsession" (113). But Anuradha disappears, conveying the idea that one has to sacrifice something to gain anything.

Anuradha's disappearance makes him plead to God that he is not happy because of his spiritual hollowness. R.S. Pathak considers Som as a "western, educated, affluent young man who while feverishly searching for his roots discovers in the process a haunting emptiness and void". (139). Som gets mentally shattered and physically exhausted with dreams and insomnia. Though he could look at himself in the mirror, "lean, crow-footed, graying, I could not, then, see the hunger but there was the boredom and the endless depths of it. I woke up in the middle of the night, depressed, the taste of tranquillizers in my mouth" (21). His knowledge has done him "Blessed little good". (129). He finds life absurd and there is no solution to his problem. He is the embodiment of chaos and uncertainty. He is puzzled between the scientific reasoning of the philosophers – Jung, Freud and Darwin and the faith and trust of his mother and wife Geeta. He does not attempt to

solve the problems through faith and he continues to remain alienated. Despair overtakes him and he continues to remain alienated. Despair overtakes him and he tries to put an end to this tortured existence. Geeta, his understanding wife prevents him from doing so.

In *The Last Labyrinth*, the humanizing call is presented on a more intense level of experience. Som, the protagonist relates the events of his life in flashback. He belongs to the upper crust of life. He has a morbid urge for identifying last labyrinth of life. The very first sentence of the novel expresses the motto of Som's life. "Above all, I have a score to settle. I forget nothing, forgive no one" (1). He can find neither truth nor the remedy for his suffering. He is alienated from society and from himself. The frequently related expression "I want, I want, I want" (78) defines the structural principle of the narrative.

Som, the narrator finds himself in the shattered mirror and in each fragmented piece; he is deformed with funny voice. Devinder Mohan is of the view that Joshi, like Camus, is a novelist of sensibility and he has encountered the dangers of isolation and madness. He calls Joshi, a 'naturalistic rebel' (194) who work out the language of interior monologue with psychological acceptance of facts as facts.

This novel deals with the journey of man from the temporal to the immutable centre and it suggests the path of human salvation. It is hinted that true faith can take over the difficulties of the mundane affairs and temporal values of life. The title of the novel *The last labyrinth* is highly significant. It stands for the great mystery that hangs about the labyrinth which is itself a matter of great inquiry. The structure of the novel is like that of labyrinth. Joshi extends the metaphor of labyrinth to the world, to Som Bhaskar's labyrinthine wanderings and to human beings in general. The novel is divided into three parts, with eleven, three and five chapters and the setting of each chapter shifts almost as frequently as Som does think. Like a lost person wandering endlessly in the labyrinth till the very end, the action of the novel shifts from one place to the other till the novel comes to an end. Joshi's protagonist shifts aimlessly from one place to the other as if playing the game of hide and seek.

The novel's action is mainly set in Lal Haveli. It is the arena of the whole action and it symbolizes death and desolation. This potent and obvious symbol runs like a thread all through the novel which ultimately justifies the title. Joshi uses this as a symbolic setting for Som who gropes through the labyrinth of life and death. The dark rooms form the apt backdrop for Som's own journey into the dark night of his soul. He finds within himself "nothing but an empty roaring, like

the roar of the sea in a conch” (115). Joshi’s broad humanistic, outlook is demonstrated through his moral vision in his novel. “The passage he patently conveys through his fiction is that man can draw great sustenance from his spiritual and moral womb even as he lies groaning on the debris of the shattered moral and spiritual values”. (Sharma 123)

Joshi is concerned with the decaying upper crust of the Indian society. His novel reveals his remarkable inwardness with the language and poise. The weight of his Indian experience is successfully carried by his language which is a keen device to probe psychological states. It adequately conveys the frenzied outcry of the erring individuals and their inner thoughts.

Both novels deal with the journey of man from the temporal to the immutable centre. They suggest the path of human salvation. True faith can take over the difficulties of the mundane affairs and temporal values of life are the central message of the novelist. The unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* takes her inner journey, which is depicted in two different ways, first as a dive into the lake, where at the lake’s bottom; she confronts her father’s body and the memory of her aborted fetus. Som is an apt symbol of the rational man. He lacks human understanding, charity, tolerance and kindness. Moreover, he is selfish and egoistic. The opening words of the novel reveal his nature. “Above all, I have a score to settle. I forget nothing, forgive no one”. 5) His disturbed psyche brings ruin and chaos on Anuradha, Aftab and himself also. In the same way, the unnamed protagonist affects the other characters.

In both novels, similar images like loneliness, separation, hypocrisy, coldness, corruption, disease, death and the absence of individuality, honesty and universal human values. These images help in creating an atmosphere of alienation. Thereby, they facilitate the work of the artist in depicting such alienated characters.

Both protagonists of Atwood and Joshi are not religious or saintly. But they are humble enough to learn lessons taught to them by life’s problems. They try to face the challenges of their meaningless life by outstripping the narrow confines of their distraught selves. Joshi looks upon his novels basically as attempts at self-expression and self-understanding. In his Interview to M.R. Dua, Joshi says:

“My novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself..... If I did not write, I imagine I would use some other medium to carry on my exploration”. (Dhawan 18)

One becomes aware of one's responsibility as an agent in the face of situations such as death, struggle, guilt, or anxiety. Through commitment man provides a reason for his existence and this helps him to integrate society. Identity crisis is in general refers to psychological stress or anxiety about the sense of identity. A person undergoes this psychologically distressing experience when he feels that his personal identity is being spoiled or threatened. Identity crisis means the feeling of the loss of a sense of personal identity or depersonalization. Two types of experiences generally represent threats to personal identity. They are violation of self expectations and changes in the self in whole or in part.

A person who does not have or dissembles an identity often becomes neurotic, even schizophrenic. His feeling of split personality is both painful and troublesome. Having lost the sense of personal identity, such a man feels alienated and lonely. Gradually, he makes frantic efforts to seek, organize and affirm his sense of identity. His affiliation with the group of his choice, his acceptance and recognition as a person as a career role in the society, his commitment to definite values in life will produce feelings of belonging and reaffirmations of his lost identity. The term "Affirmation" means confirmation of anything established; to declare something true positively or firmly.

The hero of Joshi's novel adopts a cynical attitude towards life due to social pressures, dissolution of old faiths and dogmas and uncertain loyalties. He gets alienated and from the society gradually. The urge for alienation arises out of emotional insecurity. Uncertainty leads to the quest for identity on the part of the alienated self. Joshi never accepts alienation as the ultimate condition of life. It is a transitional phase in the protagonist's quest for self-knowledge. The spiral pattern of CHAOS – ALIENATION- ORDER is in consonance with the novels of Joshi. Similarly, the novel *Surfacing* is well balanced in the tree part division: rising action, climax and falling action. The problem of the disappearance of her father, a tree survivor and botanist, results in rising action as she sets out searching for the clues. Joshi's protagonist and the angst ridden narrator of Margaret Atwood arrive at self-realization and discover the higher values of life by discovering through self-probing and self- exploration.

Any great writer's works should hold out great promise for the future generation. In this context, the contribution of Atwood and Joshi is an added significance to literature. The three planes of existence – physical or material, intellectual and the spiritual correspond to the three

states of matter, called in Sanskrit Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Both protagonists are affected by these three states of matter. They choose the right path of life for themselves, to lead a life of dignity, peace and happiness.

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