

Edita A. Bratanović¹

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philology, PhD candidate

EXPLORATION OF TRAUMA INFLUENCE ON FEMALE IDENTITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*

Surfacing, Margaret Atwood's second novel which was published in 1972, tackles complex and disturbing topics of abortion, traumatized experiences, and physical and psychological abuse of women. The novel discusses the lives of female characters whose identities are threatened by the traumatized experiences they have endured and the manners in which they attempt to overcome them. Traumas the female characters have suffered lead them to social and familial alienation, the creation of an inferiority complex, repressed memories, and the concealment of their deepest secrets that shaped their identities.

The aim of the paper is to elaborate on the potential causes of female characters' traumas, analyzing their psychological state of mind and background events, thoughts, and emotions that contributed to them. The paper will endeavor to present the narratological techniques and strategies that Margaret Atwood employs in portraying traumatic experiences and their powerful impact on female characters. Eventually, it will look into Atwood's possible suggestions on how to overcome traumatic events by examining female characters' psyche and their coping strategies with regard to trauma.

Key words: female identity, feminism, trauma studies.

1. Introduction

The subject of this paper is the very complex question of traumatized experiences and their influence on female characters' identities in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*. The aim of this paper is to shed light on various factors that contribute to the creation of traumas, analyzing their impact on

¹ Contact information: bratanovicedita@gmail.com

female characters' psyche and the characters' strategies in their attempts to overcome traumatic experiences.

Margaret Atwood is a distinguished writer equally appreciated for her beautiful writing style and the social criticism that is prominent in her work. The central themes of her fiction are women and the many burning issues they face. Atwood depicts women's struggles that make them a marginal societal category, wishing to explore culprits and possible solutions for women's problems. Regarding the topics prevalent in Atwood's fiction, Karen F. Stein asks the questions that she believes Atwood attempts to answer:

What would happen if we heard the stories of marginalized, usually silent people, especially women? What stories do women tell about themselves? What happens when their stories run counter to literary conventions or society's expectations? What factors limit or enhance their storytelling? How may they become authors, authorities of their own lives? (Stein 1999: 1)

Atwood brings marginalized female characters to the fore, wishing to draw attention to their stories and all the unfavorable aspects contributing to their struggles. In *Surfacing* Atwood sheds light on two emotionally and physically traumatized women whose traumas resurface on their trip when the literal quest for the protagonist's father turns into a metaphorical quest for self-actualization. Atwood portrays various causes of traumatized events, such as dysfunctional relationships, false ideals of marriage, men's insistence to control women when it comes to their way of life, whether or not they need to wear make-up, use birth control, terminate unplanned pregnancy, etc. Additionally, female characters are alienated from their families and friends, being forced to cope with their traumas in isolation, and not being able to form healthy relationships and establish closeness with people in their surroundings.

Discussing the subject matter of the novel, David Staines observes: "Although a feminist novel, *Surfacing* is simultaneously a study of victimization" (Staines as cited in Howells, 2006: 20). While Atwood does present her female characters as victims, she also emphasizes the necessity to overcome their victimization status in order to be able to overcome traumatic events. In this way, Atwood does not blame only men for women's position, but she suggests that women are also partially responsible for their traumatized identities. Atwood spoke extensively on the topic of victimization:

If you define yourself as innocent than nothing is ever your fault – it is always somebody else doing it to you, and until you stop defining yourself as a victim that will always be true. [...] And that is not only the Canadian stance towards the world, but the usual female one... (Atwood as cited in Tolan, 2007: 53).

Atwood exemplifies new viewpoint in the novel by juxtaposing two female characters, the unnamed protagonist and Anna. While the nature, scope, and intensity of the traumas they suffer through are completely different,

Atwood also depicts two different possibilities for dealing with traumas. The protagonist eventually deals with her repressed emotions, deciding not to be a victim anymore and taking her life into her own hands. On the other hand, Anna continues with her traumatized life, choosing to remain a victim, thus ruining a chance at a happy life.

As observed by David Ward: “*Surfacing* operates successfully as both mirror and map” (Ward as cited in Nicholson, 1994: 130). In other words, the novel represents the mirror of the social circumstances that induce traumatic experiences, but it also serves as the map showing the possible paths toward resolutions. In her analysis of the novel, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson makes an interesting analogy, comparing the novel to the palimpsest: “Put simply, the novel acts as a palimpsestic text – a text that is layered over with meanings that erase and disrupt the picture that the reader receives” (2010: 33). *Surfacing* requires readers’ active participation, as it is infused with multiple metaphors and layers of meaning, and together with the protagonist, readers embark on a journey toward finding the truth.

2. The concept of trauma manifested in the novel

Cathy Caruth, an English professor who wrote extensively on the topic of trauma, defined the concept of trauma in the following manner: “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996: 11). Understood in its broadest meaning, trauma refers to the unwilling, strong reaction of an individual to events that have profound consequences when it comes to the well-being of an individual. When it comes to the novel’s protagonist, she experienced the trauma of abortion, which she agreed to but that she did not wish to take part in, which imposed severe consequences on her mental well-being.

Given the context of traumatic experiences, it is significant to mention the thoughts of Judith Herman, a psychiatrist, researcher, and author, who remarks: “Trauma arrests the course of normal development by its repetitive intrusion into the survivor’s life” (1992: 37). Herman suggests that traumatized individuals are constantly reminded of the painful traumatic events which do not allow them to live their lives independently of the influence of trauma. This phenomenon is evident in the novel, as the narrator constantly struggles to move on with her life while the traumatic experience occupies her thoughts, mind, and emotions. Commenting further on the concept of trauma, Herman emphasizes that “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships” (1992: 51), as traumatized individuals often feel unable to share their experiences

and emotions with their friends and family. According to Herman, sharing traumas with the community is a necessary step on the pathway to a successful resolution. When it comes to the protagonist of *Surfacing*, the traumatic experience of abortion completely shattered her psyche, not allowing her to speak of her problems to anyone, her family, friends, or her boyfriend, thus forcing her to tackle it in total isolation. Analyzing the traumatic experience the protagonist suffered through, Josie P. Campbell noted: "Because of this one traumatic moment in her life, she is unable to face her own guilt in the "murder," and she separates herself not only from her private past, but from her parents, and more crucially, from all emotion" (Campbell as cited in McCombs, 1988: 171). Perhaps the reason why the protagonist prefers emotional numbness to speaking about the trauma she experienced is because she is subconsciously aware that she participated in something that she considered to be a murder, and she is aware that even the slightest emotion in relation to the abortion might provoke guilt regarding the most disturbing event in her life.

When it comes to the resolution of trauma, Herman elaborates on the recovery process: "Recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life" (1992: 155). In *Surfacing*, the protagonist's quest for her missing father turns into a quest for recovery. She accomplishes the first stage by reaching the place where she grew up, which is completely alienated from everything and everyone that took part in her traumatic experience. The narrator reaches the second stage during a diving expedition when she remembers and comes to terms with her act – the abortion. When it comes to the third stage, readers are left with an ambiguous ending that does not provide answers to whether the narrator reconnected with her former life or not.

Since the central trauma discussed in the novel is the trauma of abortion, it is significant to understand the concept of abortion, that Vivien K. Burt and Victoria C. Hendrick define in the following manner: "Induced abortion is the deliberate termination of pregnancy" (2005: 101). In the discussion of the novel, the protagonist of *Surfacing* was coerced into terminating the pregnancy by the man whom she was seeing. However, as he was having an affair with her while being married and raising children of his own, he found abortion as the logical and necessary step for her to take. While he did compel her to get an abortion using persuasive arguments, she agreed to it, unaware of the power of "postabortion psychological distress" (Burt and Hendrick, 2005: 104). Considering the fact that the male figure was the one making the final decision regarding abortion, the novel suggests that patriarchy still has a strong influence on women's lives. Speaking of the patriarchal influence on women, feminist essayist and poet Adrienne Rich makes a distinction between "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to

children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (1986: 13). Despite his many reasons to terminate the pregnancy, some of which being completely justified, the impression lingers that the decision was made against the narrator’s will and without the consideration of her feelings and psychological damage this act may cause.

Given the protagonist’s irrational behavior and hallucinations, it can be argued that she suffers from mental illness, which Nada L. Stotland considers as a natural repercussion when “decision to terminate a pregnancy was made under duress” (1991: 3). However, the decision to terminate a pregnancy is far from easy for either of the parties included in the decision-making process and there are various factors that are taken into consideration. Stotland mentions some of them: “...reproductive behavior is interwoven into a dense fabric of cultural traditions, social circumstances, family expectations, and individual medical and psychological needs. Reproduction is fraught with tremendous psychological meaning for members of both sexes” (1991: 6). The man the narrator was involved with considered his family, his wife, and children, and the pain and suffering he would impose on them. However, by focusing on social and familial circumstances, he completely neglected the narrator’s pain and distress over that decision.

It is noteworthy to observe that readers do not find out about the real cause of trauma until the second part of the novel. The protagonist conceals the truth and shares the untrue version of events: that she was married and had a child that now stays with her ex-husband. In the interpretation of the protagonist’s reasons for hiding the truth, it is relevant to take into consideration Sigmund Freud’s comments on people’s inclination to hide the real events: “But it is a predisposition of human nature to consider an unpleasant idea untrue, and then it is easy to find arguments against it” (1920: 9). Freud considers people’s tendency to be silent about particular distressing events to be completely natural. Therefore, it can be concluded that the truth is so unbearable for the narrator that she keeps it in repressed memory, trying to convince herself of the altered version of events. Regarding people’s reactions to traumatic events, Herman remarks: “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable” (1992: 1). For the narrator, her experience is unspeakable, too painful and too difficult to talk about, and by refusing to discuss it, she hopes to eliminate it from her memory and consciousness.

Due to the narrator’s inability to accept and come to terms with the traumatic experience, she finds the trauma impacting all other aspects of her life. Discussing the powerful impact of traumatic events, Laurie Vickroy insightfully observes: “Despite the human capacity to survive and adapt,

traumatic experiences can alter people's psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present" (2002: 11). Vickroy implies that the consequences of the traumatic experiences may be severe and may affect the traumatized individual's life negatively. In Atwood's novel, the protagonist finds herself unable to feel love in her relationship, to sustain meaningful friendships, to attend her mother's funeral, and to keep in touch with her family members. Trauma colors her life to the extent that it seems impossible for her to find happiness in any aspect of her life.

Additionally, it is noteworthy to explore the narrative strategies Atwood employs when writing about trauma. Vickroy wrote extensively on the subject of presenting trauma in fiction: "Writers have created a number of narrative strategies to represent a conflicted or incomplete relation to memory, including textual gaps (both in the page layout and content), repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states" (2002: 29). In *Surfacing*, Atwood uses powerful narrative techniques to both represent the narrator's trauma and engage readers' interest. Atwood includes many textual gaps in the first part of the novel, when the protagonist offers only partial insight into her past and the painful events. In addition to this, the plot is not presented in a linear manner, but it follows the narrator's quest for her father with many flashbacks depicting her past memories. The protagonist repeats the events that she appears to be fixated on, but each time she repeats them, she alters crucial details of the story, showing that she was embellishing the truth. Atwood also incorporates powerful visual images depicting grotesque details regarding the abortion, the murdered heron, etc. thus demonstrating the narrator's state of mind and bringing her trauma closer to the readers' experience.

3. The traumatized female characters in *Surfacing*

3.1. The protagonist

The unnamed narrator embarks on a journey with her boyfriend and her friends with a particular purpose – to find her missing father. However, coming back to the place where she spent her childhood awakens some painful repressed memories, turning her quest into self-discovery. Nevertheless, in her analysis of the protagonist's journey, Fiona Tolan emphasizes that it is relevant to notice that self-discovery and coming to terms with trauma were not the protagonist's intentions: "However, as she journeys into the wildness, it becomes apparent that the narrator's quest was never intended as an active quest for self-definition, but was instead an attempt to escape into isolation and innocence" (2007: 52). Tolan notes that the protagonist recognizes the peace

and quiet of the wilderness as the ideal shelter from her present worries and traumas. Initially, when she and her friends reach her hometown, the narrator feels uncomfortable and she is trying to rush them into leaving. Later on, when she decides to stay after they leave, her wish is to escape from the world, judgment, and people, and completely delve into social alienation and the natural world. Commenting on the protagonist's social relationships, Vickroy observes: "At the outset of her journey, the deeply traumatized Surfacer is unable to trust or bond with others" (Vickroy as cited in Brooks Bouson, 2013: 267). The narrator is unable to form meaningful so she forms superficial friendships and relationships after her traumatic experience, admitting that she does not feel love toward the boyfriend she lives with, that her best friend is the person she has only known for two months, and that she did not keep in touch with her parents, and especially, that none of the people from her life are aware of the most painful event that has happened to her.

The narrator often appears cold, distant, and emotionless, as she does not seem to be too disturbed about hurting her boyfriend's feelings or witnessing David's abuse of Anna. Her relationship with Joe seems strange, as she admits that she agreed on moving in with him without much contemplation. The narrator is not able to respond to Joe when he declares his love for her. She feels emotional numbness, and inability to express, show and feel love. While he thinks she does not feel the same way about him, the narrator's thoughts reveal that the word "love" tricked her into agreeing on abortion, "He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again" (Atwood 2009: 56). Due to her traumatic experience, she is incapable of closeness with anyone in her life. Taking the protagonist's attitude toward emotions into consideration, Barbara Hill Rigney notably remarks: "The protagonist cannot say to Joe that she loves him because that would be a capitulation, and he would be the victor, waving a flag, a 'parade' in his head" (1987: 48). Rigney suggests that feelings of love are associated with the power struggle in the novel. For the protagonist, "love" is associated with power, and she feels reluctant to allow anyone to ever have so much power over her mind and body again. She is even afraid to be powerful herself: "...if I'd turn out like the others with power I would have been evil" (Atwood 2009: 42). It appears that the narrator associates power with evil, as all the powerful people she has known ("Americans" who killed the heron, David, the man she got pregnant with) acted cruelly without taking other people's feelings into consideration.

Nevertheless, as the novel progresses, she starts expressing intense and genuine emotions toward the natural world. Vickroy sheds light on the changes in the protagonist's behavior and feelings:

As her repression weakens, the Surfacer responds to the physical environment and the people around her in intensely emotional ways because of her traumatic

history. Her descriptions of land and nature focus on death, disease, and the decline of the natural world, reflecting her own tainted sense of life”.

(Vickroy as cited in Brooks Bouson, 2013: 267)

Vickroy suggests that the nature she is surrounded by reminds the protagonist of her painful past. For instance, the narrator seems extremely upset over killing the fish, even though she went on a fishing expedition with that particular aim in mind. She admits that her behavior is “...irrational, killing certain things is all right, food and enemies, fish and mosquitoes;” (Atwood, 2009: 80), but she still feels disturbed at the very sight and thought of death. However, as the novel continues and the real cause of her trauma is revealed, the conclusion can be drawn that the narrator has difficulties accepting death in any form. She gets perturbed over the death of fish and heron, but she also refuses to accept the death of her father, even when sustainable evidence is provided. She is in denial about her baby and her father, and she invents stories to cover up her pain. When she notices the dead bird, she feels shaken and distressed, even though her consciousness insists that her behavior is irrational:

In a way it was stupid to be more disturbed by a dead bird than by those other things, the wars and riots and the massacres in the newspapers. But for the wars and riots there was always an explanation, people wrote books about them saying why they happened: the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted”.

(Atwood 2009: 167)

Here the narrator seems to associate the death of the heron with the death of her child, as she realizes that both deaths happened without an explanation and justifiable reason, and in both cases, the victims did nothing to deserve an ending like this.

When it comes to the narrator’s worldview, she observes and perceives all the people and things around her in terms of binary oppositions. Discussing the reasons for the narrator’s viewpoints, Alice M. Palumbo commented: “An unvoiced, but lurking, anxiety is the source of the narrator’s need to order things in neat binaries; for her, leeches are “good” or “bad,” humans are bad, animals good, and the mind and the body are two separate things” (Palumbo as cited in Bloom, 2009: 23). Palumbo implies that the protagonist’s inner distress forces the narrator to establish order in her thoughts and emotions. Therefore, it seems that the narrator’s whole perception of the world is based on dualism: she makes a distinction between now and then, good and bad, Americans and Canadians, and city and nature. In her unintended quest for self-discovery she attempts to run away from the present moment, Americans, the city, and what she considers to be bad hoping to completely emerge herself in the natural world.

Nevertheless, the diving expedition reveals the real source of her trauma. According to Laura Wright, "The three instances of diving down mark the narrator's encounter with three losses, one national (Native Americans), one familial (her father), and one personal (her unborn child)" (Wright as cited in Brooks Bouson, 2013: 218). These instances are illustrated in the protagonist's separation: from her hometown and the people she knew as a child, from her parents, and her unborn baby.

It is evident that the narrator is deeply concerned over issues of nationalism and that she shows strong animosity towards everyone and everything that she considers American. In her view, the term "American" is not solely related to the people from the United States of America, but to the pattern of behavior: "But they'd kill the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they're from, my head said, they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into" (2009: 165). For the narrator, the term "American" equals to the act of killing, disrespect for human life, and destruction of nature. Simultaneously, the narrator feels ashamed that she forgot the path to her parents' house, that she cannot speak French, and that she feels like an outsider in the town where she spent her childhood.

When it comes to the narrator's acceptance of the deaths of both her father and her unborn child, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson notes: "The narrator is only able to confront the reality that her fake past covered over once she accidentally comes across her father's body, submerged in the water where he was looking for rock paintings; his camera had kept him trapped and invisible" (2010: 33). Macpherson suggests that the narrator is ready to accept the reality of her traumatic experiences once she discovers the substantial evidence for her father's death. The revelation of the death of her father finally brings to the surface her concealed and repressed trauma – the deliberate termination of pregnancy. The abortion was both physically and psychologically traumatizing for the protagonist. She vividly remembers the act: "... they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar" (Atwood 2009: 101), explaining her feelings "I was emptied, amputated" (Atwood, 2009: 184). In the first moments of remembrance of trauma, the narrator puts the total blame on the man she got pregnant with: "He wasn't there with me, I couldn't remember why; he should have been, since it was his idea, his fault" (Atwood 2009: 101). The narrator represents herself as a victim, even though she was also partially responsible, as she did agree to an abortion. It is easier for her to blame the man and the people who performed the surgery, saying: "I won't let them do that to me ever again" (Atwood 2009: 101). The verb that she used "let" indicates that she was physically forced to agree to abortion when that was not the case. Upon the revelation of the trauma, the narrator decides to stay in nature, and abandon the city life and her friends and Joe, wishing to live among and as an animal. Discussing the narrator's behavior and estrangement from urban life, Macpherson succinctly comments:

“...the unnamed protagonist shrugs off human identity altogether by the end of the novel, preferring to seek the resolution to her problems by refusing to speak altogether” (2010: 30). Macpherson suggests that the narrator’s behavior is an attempt to overcome her trauma. The narrator desires to strip off her human identity, imitating an animal lifestyle, eating the fruit and vegetables available in nature, covering her traces, and giving in to hallucinations. Her behavior mirrors her mental state. She is aware of the dangerous nature of words and chooses complete silence which ultimately brings her to a situation where she is not able to decipher the meanings of other people’s words. Perhaps the reason why the narrator wanted to mimic the animal lifestyle so much is due to the man’s comparison of their unborn baby to the animal: “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” (Atwood 2009: 185). By psychologically “turning into” an animal, the narrator might have had the impression she was closer to her unborn baby.

Other aspects worthy of critical attention are motherhood and mothering, as the protagonist opts for total repression of these concepts from her conscious thoughts and actions. She does not attend her mother’s funeral, and she never speaks of her traumatic ending of pregnancy with anyone, including her mother. However, in order to overcome trauma, she needs to reconnect with her mother, which happens when she discovers the picture her mother left her which shows a pregnant woman. In her analysis of the picture the narrator comes across, Tolan provides her interpretation:

“The unborn child is herself, but it is also her aborted child, and it is also the child that she is about to conceive; life and death merge and flow in a manner more comprehensible to the narrator than the division and rationalisation that epitomise the culture from which she is escaping” (2007: 51).

It appears that the image of a pregnant woman carries a strong symbolism for the narrator, as it brings memories of her mother and her unborn baby, but it also gives her something to look forward to – the new pregnancy. Continuing the discussion, Vickroy further explains: “Driven to undo her earlier mistake by trying to become pregnant with Joe, she continues an unfinished process of trying to refashion an identity that rejects the gender indoctrination and female submissiveness that left her vulnerable to exploitation and trauma” (Vickroy as cited in Brooks Bouson 2013: 269). Vickroy suggests that the protagonist comes to learn from her mistakes. This time, the protagonist takes control of the situation, she is the powerful one, as she decides to get pregnant and stay isolated from the urban life and the father of the baby, in order to have full control over her body and her child. She believes that the act of getting pregnant grants her forgiveness from the aborted baby: “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" (Atwood 2009: 209). With the aborted baby's forgiveness, the narrator is finally able to forgive herself and accept the reality of the traumatic experience.

However, it seems that it was necessary for the narrator to reach rock bottom, complete social alienation and return to nature in order to face the trauma, and come to terms with her responsibility. When it comes to the narrator's resolution of trauma, Wright concludes: "And yet her near breakdown leads to a breakthrough" (Wright as cited in Brooks Bouson 2013: 226). Moreover, it appears that her breakthrough finally leads her to the acceptance of blame: "Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it" (Atwood: 2009: 183). She admits that she perceives abortion as murder and that she was the one who committed it. She decides to take her life into her own hands, to continue living in spite of her trauma and to stop victimizing herself, finally realizing that "withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death" (Atwood 2009: 249). She manages to confront her past and face her reality, which might lead to the resolution of the trauma.

At the end of the novel, Joe returns to look for her, calls her name, but readers do not get the information whether the narrator responds to his call or not. Atwood ends the novel optimistically, creating the impression that the narrator might be able to move on with her life. Discussing the novel's ending, Philip Stratford insightfully observes: "What it will be remains uncertain, but at least hitherto unformulated questions have now been asked. Progress has been made" (Stratford as cited in Grace and Weir, 1983: 122). Stratford perceives the ending of the novel positively, emphasizing that the narrator has improved on her pathway to recovery from trauma. Her progress is also evident in the protagonist's acknowledgment of the love she feels for Joe: "I watch him, my love for him useless as a third eye or a possibility" (Atwood 2009: 250). Although she describes it as "useless", the fact is that she started expressing her emotions and stopped concealing them.

As a narrator, the protagonist is "unreliable and untrustworthy" (Vickroy as cited in Brooks Bouson 2013: 266). She conceals a lot of information, and tells untruthful versions of events, all in an attempt to repress the painful memories from her consciousness. Atwood switches between the narration of real events and the stream-of-consciousness technique to offer insight into the narrator's deepest feelings and thoughts. In this way, readers appear to follow the narrator through the self-discovery process. Regarding the narrator's physical and psychological journeys, Rigney makes an interesting comparison: "Her immersion in the wilderness as well as her religious ecstasies are metaphors for her journey through her own subconscious mind, that place in which she can

discover her past and affirm her identity, much as in a process of psychoanalysis” (1987: 53). Rigney perceives the narrator’s journey to wilderness and nature to symbolize the psychological journey that allowed her to come to terms with her trauma. In this way, the narrator progresses from the complete trauma-induced annihilation of the self to the optimistic rediscovery that brings hope for the future.

3.2. Anna

Anna is the second prominent female character in *Surfacing*. Her abusive husband and unhappy marriage account for the traumatic environment that causes severe consequences for Anna’s well-being. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator shares her conceptions of Anna, that the two of them are best friends, and that Anna and her husband David have the perfect marriage. However, throughout the novel, both of these conceptions prove to be false. Anna and the narrator have known each other for two months only and the trip reveals that both of them have very limited knowledge of the other person’s life and feelings.

Anna endures both physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her husband David who exhibits selfish and sexist behaviors. It is evident from their conversations that David conveys a condescending attitude toward Anna, dismissing her opinions and disregarding her wishes and preferences, such as her desire to shorten their stay in the cabin. David’s misconduct extends to sexually harassing the narrator and making inappropriate comments about her in the presence of his wife. Moreover, he consistently criticizes Anna’s physical appearance and even forces her to wear makeup constantly: “He doesn’t like to see me without it,’ and then, contradicting herself, ‘He doesn’t know I wear it” (Atwood 2009: 52). It seems that Anna is unable to confide in her best friend about the reality of her marriage, as she provides contradicting comments regarding the state of her marriage. Additionally, she constantly does her best to fulfill David’s expectations, because of which she develops an inferiority complex, frantically applying make-up even when she is sunbathing. However, even though Anna is perfectly aware of all this, she chooses to stay with him. Anna is victimized, but she agrees to remain in an abusive dysfunctional marriage. In her interpretation of Anna and David’s marriage, Rigney shares her viewpoint:

“So David and Anna, as the protagonist sees them, are divided and separated, he the criminal and she the victim, balanced forever in some terrible polarity of opposition, she hiding behind her make-up and the screen from her cigarette smoke, reading murder mysteries but never realising that she herself is the victim of another kind of murder” (1987: 48).

Rigney perceives Anna and David's marriage as dysfunctional and potentially dangerous, especially if Anna's mental well-being is taken into consideration. Rigney implies that David occupies the position of the criminal in their relationship, as he is the one who psychologically abuses Anna, whom herself occupies the position of a victim who willingly remains in such a relationship. Anna fails to comprehend that her husband's abusive behavior is unhealthy, as she completely alters her identity to suit his expectations. In the process, she fails to do anything that makes her happy and content, deciding instead to play the victim role. Gloria Onley describes the consequences of such a role: "Anna's compulsive need to conform to male expectations makes it impossible for her, despite a degree of self-knowledge, to view other women as friends and fills with unconscious self-loathing" (Onley as cited in McCombs, 1988: 77). Onley's comment suggests that Anna's dysfunctional marriage does not allow her to form meaningful friendships and social relationships. As evident in the novel, Anna resents the protagonist for refusing to have an affair with David, as she finds it easier to agree with her husband regarding all matters than to confront him. In this way, she destroys a rare opportunity for friendship. Additionally, she develops an inferiority complex due to David's negative comments regarding her physical appearance, desperately reapplying make-up and observing the flaws on her body.

At the rare opportunity of confiding in the protagonist, Anna describes her marriage to David: "He's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I'm never sure. He's crazy, there's something missing in him, you know what I mean? He likes to make me cry because he can't do it himself" (Atwood 2009: 156). Anna's portrayal of her marriage gives an impression of a very dysfunctional union, where David enjoys his patriarchal supremacy imposing rules on his wife and punishing her when she does not comply. Additionally, it seems that he enjoys inflicting pain upon her, as evident by his insistence that she strips naked so that he can record her. When she refuses, he physically and psychologically tortures her until she agrees.

Interestingly enough, while Anna tries her best to please her husband, she is also unfaithful to him and makes sure that he knows it. When she discusses him cheating on her and bragging about it, she says: "'David is a schmuck. He's one of the schmuckiest people I know'" (2009: 125). Nevertheless, even though she is aware of his characteristics and personality and does not have any problem talking about it behind his back, when they are together she has a tendency to agree with him and take his side, even apologizing to him for expressing her opinion, succumbing to a totally subordinate position.

The narrator draws a conclusion regarding David and Anna's marriage:

They know everything about each other, I thought, that's why they're so sad; but Anna was more than sad, she was desperate, her body her only weapon and she

was fighting for her life, he was her life, her life was the fight: she was fighting him because if she ever surrendered the balance of power would be broken and he would go elsewhere. To continue the war”.

(Atwood 2009: 196)

As dysfunctional as David and Anna’s marriage is, they are both aware of each other’s flaws and they both consensually stay married. However, one major distinction between them can be made; while he seems to enjoy himself and be perfectly satisfied with their marriage, she appears to be unhappy and suffering greatly. Still, unlike the protagonist who has managed to reach some sort of a happy ending in the form of the hope for better future by coming to terms with her trauma, Anna does not do the same. As it has already been mentioned in the discussion of Judith Herman’s three stages of recovery from trauma (1992: 155), it is of paramount importance for an individual to create a safe environment in order to come to terms with traumatic events. It appears that Anna refuses to do so, as she does not accept how traumatized she is by her marriage and her husband, and by willingly remaining in a traumatic environment, she does not stand a chance at overcoming her trauma.

4. National trauma

In addition to individual traumas that the characters suffer through, *Surfacing* also explores the scope and intensity of national trauma that refers to historical events and past conflicts that imposed psychological consequences and collective wounds on Canadians. The consequences of national trauma might be quite severe, as they might impact an individual’s national sense of belonging and the cultural and national identity. According to Hill Rigney, “One sees the self in the context of a national history...” (1987: 60), suggesting that the individual’s identity is inextricably linked to the nation they belong to, which includes its history and culture. In *Surfacing*, the narrator’s personal journey to her hometown draws attention to the important questions of the loss of cultural heritage and the suppression of national identity. The protagonist admits that she forgot her native language, and that she never comes to visit her hometown and its residents, illustrating an important loss when it comes to her cultural heritage and traditions.

In the context of the importance of national identity, Rigney further elaborates: “Identity and sanity, at least for the protagonist of *Surfacing*, ultimately lie in the confrontation with the outer duality of Canada reflected in the inner duality of the self” (1987: 60). Rigney suggests that the protagonist’s personal trauma sheds light on Canada’s national trauma. It appears that the narrator’s relationship with both of these traumas is marked by loss and

intentional suppression; she does not wish to remember the sad event of losing her child and she does not want to acknowledge that she lost the connection with her hometown and forgot important aspects of her culture and tradition. Toward the end of the novel, the protagonist's immersion in nature and estrangement from urban life seems to become the metaphor for uncovering hidden traumas, confronting them, and possibly overcoming them, both in terms of her personal trauma of abortion and national trauma. In this way, the novel warns of the dangers of national amnesia and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and tackling past traumas, as they might have a relevant influence on one's national identity.

Another interpretation could be that Atwood wishes to suggest that the outer duality of Canada represented by the strange relationship between Canadians and Americans, and among Canadians themselves, between Anglophones and Francophones, can be overcome in the same way as the protagonist's trauma – by refusing to be the victim. By intertwining personal and national traumas, it appears that Atwood wishes to draw attention to the interconnectedness between individual experiences and the historical context, demonstrating that national traumas and historical events might have a profound impact on individuals' lives.

In her discussion of Canada's national trauma in *Surfacing*, Laura Wright makes a shrewd observation:

Through its careful deconstruction of power politics – imperial, gendered, national – *Surfacing* furthers Atwood's supposition, which is stated and codified in *Survival*, that Canada is a victim, that Canada is a colony, and that it is possible to imagine Canada as, therefore, a postcolonial survivor, a country, like Atwood's narrator in *Surfacing*, seeking to articulate and map the unspeakable and liminal space of the border".

(Wright as cited in Brooks Bouson 2013: 226)

In other words, in a broader sense, Canada and the protagonist's trauma can be compared. Wright suggests that both the Canadians and the narrator prefer the victim status, as it is easier not to blame themselves for the traumas they experienced. The novel demonstrates that the father of the narrator's unborn baby in the case of the narrator's trauma of abortion, and that colonizers and the Americans in the case of the Canadian national trauma of colonization and strained relationship with Americans, might be primarily responsible for these traumas. However, the novel also suggests that simply blaming those who are responsible for inflicting traumas will not bring about their resolutions. Therefore, it seems that Atwood wishes to suggest that the Canadians, in the same manner as the protagonist, have to let go of the past, get rid of their victimized status in order to overcome traumatic events and

move forward. Atwood exemplifies her stance in the novel by illustrating the narrator's insistence that the Americans were the ones who killed a heron for sport; she assumes the nationality of the men because of something that she considers to be an act of unnecessary violence. However, the protagonist turns out to be mistaken, as the men are Canadians. In this way, Atwood warns of potential dangers when falsely attributing negative qualities to a whole nation, but she also presents this mode of behavior as a consequence of national trauma.

Discussing the subject matter of *Surfacing*, Fiona Tolan believes that Atwood wants to deliver the following message:

In the novel, she begins to examine the implications of identifying one's self as an innocent individual within a framework of collective guilt, and Atwood charges both feminists and Canadians with perpetuating their victim status, yet struggles to reconcile her instinctual liberalism with a simultaneous belief in communal guilt and mutual responsibility" (2007: 35).

Tolan suggests that Atwood's novel can be seen as a criticism of any individual or group of people who assume the position of a victim. Atwood illustrates in the novel that the victim status prolongs the consequences of traumatic experiences, and suggests that it is necessary for individuals to break free from their victimized status and take steps toward recovery from traumas.

5. Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* tells a story about traumas – individual, familial, and national. Atwood depicts the physical and psychological consequences of traumatic events, and the female characters' potential solutions to them. Observed from a broader perspective, female characters' traumas can be associated with and compared to the national trauma of the Canadians, offering two different possibilities to tackle it.

The protagonist, severely traumatized by the deliberate termination of her pregnancy, goes through a painful process of self-discovery and learns the hard way that she needs to face the past and accept responsibility for her actions in order to move on with her life. Anna, on the other hand, deeply traumatized by the abusive marriage and her husband, despite the realization of her unfortunate situation, decides to stay in a dysfunctional marriage without any indication of a happy ending.

According to Laurie Vickroy, "Atwood particularly examines how her women characters are psychologically overwhelmed by personal relations that reinscribe dominance and submission in particularly gendered behavior codes. She explores the personal ramifications of the political in the broad sense" (Vickroy as cited in Brooks Bouson 2013: 255). Vickroy implies that

patriarchy exerts a strong influence on female characters' lives. Instead of defying patriarchal tradition, both female characters blame the men in their lives for the ordeals they suffered through, at first failing to accept their own responsibility. By juxtaposing two different personalities and perspectives on life, Atwood illustrates different mechanisms for dealing with traumatic events.

Atwood suggests that living with trauma, dealing with it, and accepting it is a distressing and extremely difficult process, as evident by both female characters. However, she also implies that resolution of the trauma is not possible without coming to terms with painful events, ceasing to blame others, and taking responsibility for personal choices. Atwood considers this to be a necessary and unavoidable process, whether the trauma is individual, familial, or national, emphasizing the importance of self-discovery and rediscovering one's true self.

References

- Atwood, M. (2009). *Surfacing*. London: Virago Press.
- Bloom, H. (2009). *Margaret Atwood*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
- Brooks Bouson, J. (2013). *Critical Insights: Margaret Atwood*. Pasadena: Salem Press.
- Burt, V.K. and Hendrick V.C. (2005). *Clinical Manual of Women's Mental Health*. Washington: American Psychiatric Publishing, Inc.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Freud, S. (1920). *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. New York: Horace Liveright.
- Grace, S.E. and Weir, L. (1983). *Margaret Atwood: Language, Text, and System*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery: the Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hill Rigney, B. (1987). *Margaret Atwood*. London: Macmillan.
- Howells, C.A. (2006). *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Macpherson, H.S. (2010). *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McCombs, J. (1988). *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*. Boston: G.K.Hall & Co.
- Nicholson, C. (1994). *Margaret Atwood: Writing and Subjectivity*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Rich, A. (1986). *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company.
- Stein, K.F. (1999). *Margaret Atwood Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Stotland, N.L. (1991). *Psychiatric Aspects of Abortion*. Washington: American Psychiatric Press.
- Tolan, F. (2007). *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Vickroy, L. (2002). *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

ISTRAŽIVANJE UTICAJA TRAUME NA RAZVOJ ŽENSKOG IDENTITETA U ROMANU *IZRANJANJE* MARGARET ATVUD

S a ž e t a k

Rad predstavlja istraživanje uticaja traumatičnih iskustava na razvoj ženskog identiteta u romanu *Izranjanje* Margaret Atvud, sa namerom da se razotkrije uticaj trauma na ponašanje i psihi ženskih likova. *Izranjanje*, drugi roman spisateljice Margaret Atvud, objavljen 1972. godine, bavi se složenim temama abortusa, traumatičnih iskustava i fizičkog i psihičkog nasilja nad ženama. Roman govori o životima ženskih likova koji doživljavaju krizu identiteta zbog traumatičnih iskustava koja su ih zadesila i načinima na koje ženski likovi pokušavaju da ta iskustva prevaziđu. Traume koje su ženski likovi doživeli dovode do njihove društvene i porodične izolovanosti, stvaranja kompleksa niže vrednosti, potisnutih sećanja i skrivanja njihovih najintimnijih tajni koje su u velikoj meri doprinele razvoju identiteta.

Cilj ovog rada je razmatranje krize identiteta koja se dešava kod ženskih likova i ispitivanje okolnosti koje usmeravaju razvoj njihovog identiteta. Posebna pažnja se posvećuje psihološkoj analizi ženskih likova u pokušaju da se razotkrije uticaj traume. Problem uticaja trauma kada je u pitanju identitet posmatra se i kroz naratološku analizu. Kroz književni korpus i relevantnu teorijsku građu, rad nastoji da otkrije uticaj trauma na nastanak krize ženskog identiteta kroz interdisciplinarno istraživanje koje će uključiti oblasti feminističke kritike, naratologije, psihologije, psihoanalize i studija traume.

Ključne reči: ženski identitet, feminizam, studije traume.