

The Linguistic Alienation in the Novel *Surfacing*

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Abstract—This article explores the theme of linguistic alienation in Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing*. Existentialist thinkers have examined various forms of alienation, and Atwood extends this concern by presenting language as a barrier rather than a bridge to communication. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist experiences a profound disconnection from her identity and environment, which is reflected through fragmented language and the deliberate avoidance of naming characters. These linguistic strategies reveal the narrator’s inner psychological struggle and her growing sense of isolation. Furthermore, linguistic alienation in the novel reflects broader concerns of identity crisis and postcolonial dislocation, symbolizing the difficulty of communication in a fragmented world. By examining Atwood’s use of language in *Surfacing*, this article highlights how linguistic alienation functions as a powerful tool to explore deeper psychological and social themes.

Index Terms—*Surfacing*, Atwood, Psychology, Linguistic Alienation, Alienation.

The narrator returns to her hometown after nearly nine years, feeling anxious about facing her parents after her failed marriage and abortion. She no longer recognizes the place and reflects on how much it has changed. The town feels foreign to her, partly because people in Quebec speak French instead of English. She says, “Words that would go into my ears, meaning nothing” (*Surfacing* 9), and thinks being “deaf and dumb would be easier.” (*Surfacing* 9) Ludwig Wittgenstein’s language theory says, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 68), which connects to this feeling of alienation. He suggests language shapes how we see the world, and when language fails to capture certain emotions or experiences, it creates a sense of disconnection. The narrator’s inner turmoil reflects her troubled state of mind, and her self-destructiveness grows as she becomes more detached from her

surroundings. She calls it her ‘home ground’, yet mortality fills the air. She feels like an exile, struggling to recognize her own hometown because of her dislocation and her search for identity.

Jacques Lacan’s view that “the unconscious, which tells the truth about truth, is structured like a language” (*Ecrits* 737) adds another layer to this alienation. He believes that language shapes our unconscious desires, and when we feel disconnected from language or societal norms, we lose touch with ourselves. The narrator rejects modern life and turns to a simpler past, hoping to untangle the complicated events of her life. The surrounding landscape reflects her inner world, symbolizing both her lost sense of identity and her isolation while representing the tension between change and permanence.

The narrator says, “The trouble some people have being German, I have being human.” (*Surfacing* 167) She compares the difficulties people might face with their national or cultural identity, like being German, with her own struggle of just being human. Being German could bring up feelings of guilt or isolation related to history and culture. But for the narrator, her discomfort isn’t about nationality, it’s about her own humanity. This shows her deep sense of feeling disconnected from society, other people, and even herself. She doesn’t understand who she is or how she fits into the world, just like someone might struggle with a complicated cultural identity. Her problem is bigger than just culture or nationality; it’s about her whole existence. It reflects her feeling that her struggle is about what it means to be human in a world where she feels lost.

The narrator uses symbolism to reject the civilized world and embrace the natural one, although she recognizes that the natural world also has its limits.

Her search for self-identity allows her to explore the constraints of societal categories like nationality and gender as well as the limitations of conventional concepts like logic, language, and the self. In *The Sane Society* (1955), Erich Fromm addresses the alienation that humans face in modern society, particularly how language and societal structures contribute to this feeling. He says, “Man is the only animal who finds his own existence a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape.” (Fromm 23) Language, while meant to connect, often distances us from our authentic selves and others by imposing norms and expectations.

The narrator feels powerless due to her inability to use language effectively. Language has become a source of her disconnection. She thinks she has removed society from her life and now wants to eliminate language as well. She feels a special connection with animals because they don't communicate with words. As she says, “In one of the languages there are no nouns, only verbs that hold a longer moment. The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word.” (*Surfacing* 236) Noam Chomsky's famous sentence, “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.” (*Syntactic Structure* 15), demonstrates the generative capabilities of language but also highlights the alienation that can arise from its structural limitations. Words can be arranged grammatically but still fail to convey meaningful or coherent thoughts, leading to a disconnection between the speaker's intentions and the listener's understanding. Atwood also prefers figurative language to literal words. The narrator focuses more on objects than on words because she believes the meaning of words does not match their sound. Consequently, she removes language from her life, seeing it as useless. Language is not just a way to reflect the world; it shapes a person's understanding of it. While language can create emotional connections and provide solace through its use, it also constructs and erases boundaries. It helps build imagined borders, but also struggles with seemingly solid, immovable ones.

The narrator distrusts language because it often results in misunderstandings. When she feels overwhelmed, she decides not to teach language to her children. Her struggles with fragmented language lead her to understand that she cannot discover her identity

through imposed language, which has its limits and rules. Therefore, the narrator says, “Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole.” (*Surfacing* 187) “Words are the source of misunderstandings.” (*The Little Prince* Antoine de Saint Exupéry 47) She suggests that language often leads to miscommunication rather than understanding, alienating individuals from one another through their inability to fully convey meaning. In *Surfacing*, the narrator sees language as an artificial way of communication created by humans. The narrator's desire to merge with the total power of nature is deeply connected to her need to feel complete. By seeking this connection, she challenges the idea that the self is the main way to determine what is real.

According to Atwood, language isn't a necessary tool for self-expression. The narrator isn't disconnected from language itself but from the structure and words used in it, as they don't reflect her ideologies, values, and experiences. William Beckett's characters in *Happy Days* frequently encounter the limitations of language, revealing how words often fail to express the depth of human experience, leaving them isolated and confused. He says, “Words fail. There are times when even they fail.” (Beckett 24) In *Surfacing*, the protagonist says it isn't her: “It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine.” (*Surfacing* 135) When David asks her to have sex with him, the narrator rejects, and she looks for “a vocabulary that would work.” (*Surfacing* 194) She always tries to speak her language, not others. George Orwell addresses linguistic alienation through the concept of ‘Newspeak’, a controlled language designed to eliminate personal freedom and independent thought. He argues, “But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.” (*The Orwell Foundation*) The manipulation of language is a powerful tool for alienating people from their own beliefs and reality. At one point, the narrator says, “If you look like them, talk like them and think like them, then you are them, I was saying, you speak their language, a language is everything you do”. (*Surfacing* 165)

In *Surfacing*, the narrator divides her body and mind into two different things, and she says language relates to the mind. The way the mind controls the body, language controls people. The narrator emphasizes the

idea that language, instead of bridging these two worlds, actually exacerbates the division. For the narrator, language fails to express or unify her fragmented thoughts and feelings accurately. It creates a barrier between her inner experiences and the outside world, as well as between different aspects of herself. Language, which is supposed to communicate and connect, instead becomes a tool of separation, reinforcing the narrator's sense of alienation and disconnection.

Finally, the narrator can go beyond the confines of his or her own conventional identity and open up to the wisdom that may be found in nature. She transcends her limited viewpoint by merging with the natural world: "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (*Surfacing* 193). The narrator can finally cure herself via the process of fusing with nature and accepting the vision that it may provide her. The narrator can overcome these barriers by connecting with nature, which frees her from the limitations of reason and language, allowing her to focus on a deeper truth. In *Surfacing*, nature provides a space where she can feel complete, even while navigating across different boundaries.

CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* uses linguistic alienation to deepen the exploration of the protagonist's identity and social disconnection. Through fragmented language, silence, and the avoidance of names, Atwood effectively portrays the protagonist's internal and external struggles. This analysis reveals how linguistic alienation serves as a critical tool for understanding the novel's broader themes and offers insights into Atwood's critique of societal structures. Future research could further explore how linguistic alienation appears in Atwood's other works and the broader context of postcolonial literature.

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