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Women Unwriting Patriarchy: Abortion, Memory, and Female Identity in Two Canadian Novels- Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and Marian Engel's *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* (1974)

Anjali Manhas[1] & Sresha Yadav Nee Ghosh[2]

[1] Research Scholar, Department of Humanities, IIIT Naya Raipur, India
[2] Associate Professor, Department of Humanities, IIIT Naya Raipur, India
Correspondence: Anjali Manhas, IIIT Naya Raipur, India
Email: anjali@iiitnr.edu.in

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Abstract

In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Marian Engel's *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*, the protagonists' journeys become conduits for exploring the intersections of female identity, embodied trauma, and memory. The patriarchal expectations and traditional roles of women are subverted as these narratives sketch modern women navigating the quiet shifts of a changing Canada set against the backdrop of the 1970s, where abortion was still a taboo and largely inaccessible, hinting at deeper shifts in societal norms. Through abortion's unspoken memory, both novels expose the subliminal spaces where women's bodies become sites of power, silence, and resilience. This analysis explores how Atwood and Engel map the evolution of female selfhood beyond marriage, tradition, and societal taboo into uncharted territories of desire and autonomy. By centering women's inner lives, these novels underscore the power of storytelling in reshaping cultural conversations around identity and choice. The article reviews how Atwood and Engel critique the erasure of women's narratives, positioning embodied experience as a site of resistance against patriarchal structures.

Keywords: *Surfacing, Sarah Bastard's Notebook,* Canadian Literature, Abortion, Memory, Patriarchy

Introduction

The worldwide wave of feminist resistance and female selfhood in the 1960s is ubiquitously reflected in Canadian literature, with authors like Margaret Atwood, Marian Engel, Alice Munro, and Margaret Laurence shaping narratives that probed the complexities of women's lives. The time period was notable for its impact on social and cultural changes within the feminist episteme. The literary movement was characterised by

a surge in women's writing, which explored themes of identity, autonomy, and social justice, reflecting the broader feminist movement sweeping North America. In legislative terms, Canadian women demanded greater control over their bodies and reproductive rights, one example being the Abortion Caravan, a cross-country protest led by the Vancouver Women's Caucus in 1970 (Palmer, 2011). Several women chained themselves to the parliamentary gallery, shutting down the House of Commons and drawing national attention to the issue (Cattapan, 2021). The converging lines of art and activism, blended with emerging ideas of Canadian nationalism, challenged traditional societal norms and contributed to a shift in power and politics. This shift was centred upon women's autonomy, echoing the raw, unflinching portrayals of female experience in the literature of the time.

This literary phenomenon became part of a broader cultural shift, riveting from the women's liberation movement and concepts like Simone de Beauvoir's "the Other." As Canada navigated its own identity crisis, grappling with the Quiet Revolution and the rise of Quebecois nationalism, women's writing became a powerful tool for exploring and subverting traditional notions of femininity and nationhood. These writers explored themes of alienation, identity, and autonomy, challenging the patriarchal constructs that relegated women to secondary status and created literary works where women's voices challenged patriarchal norms and forged new paths for Canadian identity. In the works of Marian Engel and Margaret Atwood, the threads of ecofeminism, Canadian nature, and feminism intertwine, reflecting the connection between the exploitation of the natural world and the oppression of women. In Canadian literature, the vast, unyielding landscape serves as a backdrop for exploring these themes. The country's rugged wilderness becomes a symbol of the untamed feminine, echoing the ecofeminist idea that women's liberation is tied to the liberation of the natural world. Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976) explores the unconventional relationship between a woman and a bear, questioning the human-animal divide, and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) probes the interconnectedness of nature and female identity.

Both novels are deep dives into identity, power dynamics, and the natural world. *Surfacing* follows a woman's journey back to her childhood home in Quebec, grappling with her past and art, whereas *Bear* centers on Lou, a librarian who forms an intense connection with a bear in Ontario. Through *Bear*, Engel critiques the patriarchal society that seeks to dominate and control both women and nature. The bear, a symbol of the untamed natural world, represents a source of power and freedom for the protagonist, highlighting the interconnectedness of women's liberation and environmentalism. *Bear* is a radical exploration of female desire, through their unorthodox bond, Engel challenges traditional narratives, inscribing female sexuality onto the wilderness and subverting male-oriented norms (Howells, 1986). The novel presents a powerful, unapologetic portrayal of female sexual fantasy, untethered from societal constraints. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) also explores the connection between nature and female identity. The novel's

unnamed protagonist embarks on a journey of self-discovery and resistance against societal expectations, Atwood's depiction of the natural world as a source of power and healing for women reflects the ecofeminist idea that women's experiences are deeply tied to the land. Both novels are often compared for their voyages of female identity, sexuality, and the natural world, yet they diverge in their approaches to reconciling the human-nature dichotomy, with *Surfacing* focusing on the protagonist's psychological journey and *Bear* embracing a more embodied, primordial connection.

Women's relationship with themselves, divorced from the bounds of moral and social objectification, leads them astray in the works of Marian Engel and Margaret Atwood. Their heroines capture the psychological turmoil as equally vital to the physical and inner-life challenges of becoming, embracing the discomfort of uncertainty as a necessary step toward self-discovery. Engel's heroine, Sarah Porlock, in *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*, is an expatriate navigating her path within the dominant patriarchal narratives of the time, her experiences in two places, Europe and Canada, serving as the basis for her decision to remain non-submissive to her locale (Ogrizek, 1991). Her emotions, her family, and her experiences in the Canadian terrain catalyze her need for autonomy and self-definition. She lacks the mannerisms to survive in society with her alcoholism, her expressive sexuality, and her failed relationships. Her oscillations between the two cultural contexts invigorates the constructedness of the identity and place, but also the embedded nature of one's identity in their own psyche. The biased literary scene in Canada towards women, as lived by Marian Engel, is reflected in Sarah Porlock's failed academic career, especially after her interview with the Toronto Star in an inebriated state, which led to her downfall. Engel's own life contrasts with Sarah's, showcasing her determination and success as a writer and feminist icon. As Engel's journals reveal, she was aware of the challenges she faced as a talented woman writer, with men expecting her to conform to traditional roles (Borden, 2008). Engel's daughter describes Sarah as "a vehicle for my mother's frustrations with Toronto" (Verduyn, 2004), hinting at the privilege of male writers and the struggles of a woman writer in Canada's patriarchal literary scene.

For Sarah, Europe is her escape from the wreckage of her personal and professional life, but the novel hints that her memory is the catalyst for her voyage to the past, making her elope paradoxical. Her journey to varied places is a continuous confrontation with her past and her failed relationships. Her insecurities layer her unresolved narratives from a vantage point she abhors, especially the trauma and regret of her abortion, her affair with her sister's husband, too scandalous for her society, or perhaps anywhere else. The incessant memory of her abortion highlights the limitations of women's bodies and choices at that time in a patriarchal society. Memory of Antonio (her almost child) is a parallel journey from which there is no outrunning or outdistancing in her life, her longing for it increasing every time there are setbacks, comparisons with her married sisters, or the sadness weighs on her. For Sarah, Europe is not just a destination, but a detour into the

reverberations of her own history, where the past and present converge in unexpected ways. Her travels may alter her surroundings, but they also excavate the buried landscapes of her past, forcing her to navigate the labyrinthine corridors of trauma and longing.

In both *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* and *Surfacing*, the protagonists' journeys are a form of self-exile, a deliberate withdrawal from the suffocating grip of patriarchal society. This seclusion allows them to confront the loneliness that often accompanies female desire and autonomy. Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) is a quintessential example of the Canadian scape of feminist literature with an unnamed, unreliable female protagonist and her complex relationship with her past experiences and memories. Setting down her own narrative, the protagonist not only rejects patriarchal metanarratives but also the foreign forces she thought of as intrusive (such as America) in her country and its land. Her rebellion symbolizes feminist resistance as well as opposition to colonialism and cultural imperialism. There is a collective voice resonating with the struggles of women in reclaiming their space and bodies, as manifested in *Surfacing's* protagonist's desire to run to nature to embrace solitude, and in her deeming everyone a foreign intruder or an American (Atwood, 1972, 219). The protagonists in both novels are governed by patriarchal norms, have had fragile and unfulfilled relationships, and are seeking control of their lives whilst entangled in their memories and guilt of the past. Their memories are like spectres following them everywhere with remnants of trauma, regret, and longing.

Their embattled endeavour to assert agency in the face of oppression and moral coercion is elementary to their feminine identity and consequential isolation. The bodies written by the two women writers reflect women's psychological tension between their bodies and their experiences in society. Both women tried to deal with their personal loss after abortion and have deeply ingrained sequelae of the episode in their minds. So and so, reflected in their relationships and their outlook towards other people's relationships and the outside world. Atwood's heroine is unreliable in the narration of her abortion and the relationship she had, but her grief is pertinent throughout the text, also hinting at the coercive nature of her relationship, where women's bodies are objects of desire and anything else is unwanted, removable. In *Surfacing*, Atwood also parallels the protagonist's abortion and individual victimization with Canada's exploitation by American economic imperialism (Gault, 2007). The female and national identities in the novel are shown suffering and trying to resist. Atwood's work reflects the broader cultural context of Canada's quest for identity and independence, as well as the feminist movement's push for women's rights and autonomy. The novel's exploration of these themes continues to resonate today, especially amid contemporary debates over reproductive rights.

Canadian literature has been a powerful platform for feminist voices, exploring themes of identity, resistance, and embodiment. Both Engel and Atwood subvert traditional expectations of women's roles and explore their sexuality and identity, untethered from societal constraints. The 1960s and 1970s saw a surge in feminist activism in Canada, with

women demanding greater control over their bodies, lives, and narratives. The backstreet abortions were lethal and dehumanizing to women. It is estimated that backstreet abortions in the 1970s were 120,000 annually, with countless deaths (Gray, 2003). Despite facing stigma, surveillance, and pushback, the women persisted and struggled to earn their rights. *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* and *Surfacing* are emblematic of the feminist wave in Canadian literature, focusing on the complexities of inner self, societal taboo, unavailability, and memory related to abortion.

Mapping the Exploited Body: Nationalism and Reproductive Trauma in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Atwood's works often link Canada's struggle for cultural autonomy from the US to feminist issues, portraying Canada as a victimized entity, similar to women under patriarchy. In *Surfacing*, she parallels the exploitation of Canada's wilderness by American forces with the abuse of the female narrator's body (Tomc, 1993), a theme she continues in later works, such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Atwood's views on Canada's relationship with the US are an essential reading of feminism and nationalism, and an understanding of women's experiences under patriarchal oppression.

In her non-fiction work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), Atwood frames Canada's identity as that of "the exploited victim", a notion she's later tied to feminine constructs. She argues that Canadian literature is defined by a central theme of survival in a harsh environment against powerful forces such as nature, history, and the U.S. (Tomc, 1993). Keeping her protagonist unnamed in *Surfacing*, Atwood tries to parallel her issues as universal and victimized like Canada, with a tendency to conflate national and gender issues where both are barred from autonomy. The familiarity of feminine exploitation with Canada in *Surfacing* is that the procedure was illegal at that time and also coercive in the protagonist's case. Later, it also presents the subdued impact of the experience on her memory, where she tries to forget it or rewrite it from memory altogether.

Whether reproductive choice is denied to the protagonist by her country or by her people is debatable. What Atwood succinctly highlights is that ultimately, both fail her; she is burdened by the illegality and judgment of the state in the medical and legislative purview, compounded by her then partner's abandonment and the societal stigma that surrounds her. Ultimately forcing her towards a back-alley abortion, which cost many women their lives in those times. Historians Angus McLaren and Arlene Tigar McLaren (1989) record that between 50,000 and 100,000 illegal abortions occurred annually in Canada during the 1960s, resulting in dozens of deaths and countless complications. In the wider Canadian context, they remark that, "For the vast majority of women, abortion was a recourse turned to only in desperation, and one that was fraught with danger." The

narrator has the same fate, where her choices are hardly her own, and she is merely pushed towards them by others, resulting in isolation and guilt. The absence of state-protected rights adds to the misery of self-afflicting sabotage in the protagonist's case. Cinda Gault (2007) states that, "In a society where women have sexual and reproductive autonomy, this protagonist would not have had to face such a distinction."

The dual guilt is enforced by the criminal statute of abortion and her own disapproval of the act; she portrays herself as carrying death all along after the procedure, seeking redemption from it, "I was emptied, amputated; I stank of salt and antiseptic, they had planted death in me like a seed" (p.184). The protagonist is victimized both as a woman and a Canadian, emphasizing the lack of reproductive autonomy, also fearing that her own family would not understand because they are "prehistoric" and believed in family structures, circling the guilt back towards her. Other than the inner guilt, the novel also emphasises the reductionism faced by women by patriarchal forces, sexually and psychologically violated, their bodies reduced to mere vessels for pleasure and oppression, something accentuated by Atwood in the feminist ideology of her novels, such as *The Handmaid's Tale, The Edible Woman,* and others. Here also, her ideas were juxtaposed by the desires of her partner to which she unwillingly obliged, "He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal" (p.185). Such dismissive language portrays the circumfluence of patriarchal gaze around women all the time, stripping their agency, autonomy, and desires.

The relationship between men and women mirrors the relationship between men and nature in *Surfacing*. The same capitalist patriarchal structures that exploit and objectify women's bodies also perpetuate environmental degradation, illustrating the need for a more holistic understanding of power and oppression. Vandana Shiva (1988) states that "the violence against nature is intimately connected with the violence against women", it is systemic and pervasive. Women, on the other hand, are more empathetic and interconnected with nature. The protagonist of *Surfacing* has a more intrinsic and interdependent relationship with nature; she relates to both the sense of abandonment and loss she feels and the objectifying gaze turned on herself and her Quebec surroundings. They both are prodded open and used for the benefit of others, the protagonist experiencing this in her medical encounter. The women's uterus is reduced to a sight of power, and the medical tools which should have been used for helping them become tools of inflicting persistent trauma (Vadilla et al., 2020).

> They want you to believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practising on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. After that they fill your veins up

> with red plastic, I saw it running down through the tube. I won't let them do that to me ever again (p. 101).

Vandana Shiva (1988) states that women and nature share a common trait - they are both creators and sustainers of life. The guilt of her abortion encompasses the protagonist so much so that it can be studied as a cardinal sin in the imagery and symbols Atwood used; her feelings were complex for life, death, sacrifice, and God. She states that anything that dies other than humans is Christ-like, like animals dying as substitutes for humans, somewhere representing her aborted child as the Christ-like sacrifice, and herself as the sinner who consumed it, "we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life" (p.179). Nature's abundance is usurped by capitalist patriarchal forces with their insatiable greed and overconsumption. In the novel, American imperialists seized the land and resources for pleasure and capitalist gains. Their ambition and destruction make them relentless in their pursuits and thankless towards nature, "But we refuse to worship; the body worships with blood and muscle, but the thing in the knob head will not, will not to, the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks" (p.179). The protagonist looks for the connection and mercy with nature in her past memories, the wilderness around her, and the unnamed gods in the novel.

The protagonist's redemption arc takes her closer to nature and self-acceptance, the diving into the lake a metaphor for recalling buried memories in her subconscious (Feldman-Kołodziejuk, 2021). Her final act is submitting, she submits to the wilderness to overcome her loss, grief, and embark on a primaeval journey, one that strips away the layers of societal conditioning and reveals her true, wild self. Her roaming around naked, living off the things found in nature only, guided by the spirits of nature gods and her dead parents is the ultimate rebellion towards the power struggles and control she has been subjected to throughout her life, "The rules are over. I can go anywhere now ... .I am the only one left alive on the island" (p.245). Her new primal existence underscores her disillusionment with the oppressive structures that governed her past life, and her embracing of a raw, unmediated existence.

The protagonist concludes her journey with the profound, though medically unconfirmed, belief that she is pregnant. This assumed pregnancy is the culmination of a psychological breakdown and a subsequent spiritual "surfacing" in the wilderness. After confronting the long-repressed trauma of a previous forced abortion, the experience that left her emotionally numb and fragmented, she makes the deliberate choice to conceive with her partner, Joe. By timing this encounter to her fertile period and viewing the child as a replacement for the one she lost, she transforms the act of procreation into a self-directed ritual of healing. This decision represents a radical reclamation of agency over her body and her life narrative. Throughout the novel, she has been haunted by a sense of "loss" and a persistent guilt that stemmed from being subjected to patriarchal control, where her

body was treated as a mere "incubator" or a "dead pig" by a medical system and a partner that devalued her humanity. By inducing this new pregnancy on her own terms, she wanted to rewrite her history of victimhood. The "shape of a goldfish" she perceives within her becomes a powerful symbol of rebirth, signifying her refusal to be further subdued by the "patriarchal shackles" of her past and present relationships.

This act is not merely biological but a self-directed ritual of healing. As she experiences this internal shift, she describes the sensation of the past and present merging, the "lost child" symbolically resurrected, allowing her to move past the trauma that had previously defined her. This time, she wants to safeguard herself and her child from any suffering, envisioning a solitary, natural birth, refusing to be further subdued by the medical or social systems that previously victimized her. She is no longer a passive victim of a "civilized" world; instead, she envisions a primal connection to the earth where her "lost child" finally resurfaces:

> He trembles and then I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been imprisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphorescent; the two halves clasp, interlocking like fingers, it buds, it sends out fronds. This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words. (p.209)

Memory of Abortion and Processing Grief in *Surfacing* and *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*

I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said - Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972)

In both *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* and *Surfacing*, memory emerges as a complex and contested site of identity formation. The protagonists' memories of trauma, loss, and desire are fragmented and sometimes unreliable, reflecting the instability of female experience in a patriarchal society. Their memories of abortion are confrontational, painful, and reminiscent of surveillance and policing of women's bodies even in contemporary times. Through their narratives, Engel and Atwood tried to cite both the pain and resistance associated with memory. Memory in these works functions as a progressive correction of patriarchal lies. For Atwood's unnamed protagonist, her initial memories of a 'lost husband' are revealed to be a 'disguise' meant to shield her from the trauma of an abortion coerced by a lover who viewed the fetus as a mere 'animal'. The unreliability is not a character flaw but a trauma response; by rewriting her own history, she temporarily survives an

environment that denies her agency. Similarly, Engel's Sarah Porlock reminisces about her aborted child in the form of an almost mother when she navigates the everyday realities of feminine life and compares her life to that of her sisters, "Leah's sons are sturdy, blond, and affectionate. Multilingual. As soon as I saw them I started wanting Antonio" (Engel, 1974, p.86). Her child is an "abject" identity she cannot reconcile with, but only remembers.

Both characters keep their memory of abortion hidden and a secret, which can be evinced as a psychological response to trauma, taboo, and the personal nature of the experience, rendering it too intimate and vulnerable to be shared. For both women, memory is not a passive record but an active, messy negotiation with the past, their choice to hide the memory a response to the dismissive or clinical language used by the men in their lives. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist's unreliable narration is a defence mechanism against the trauma embedded in her subconscious; she hides her abortion behind an elaborate, fabricated memory of a failed marriage and child she gave up. She keeps her memories bottled (to keep the death away), she keeps the truth hidden even from herself to avoid the "amputation" of her own sense of self. She argues that she is unsure of her own memories, whether they are true or a retelling by someone else (p.90), highlighting the internalized patriarchal gaze leading to deep psychological sequelae. She was able to gain redemption only when she refused to keep her memory hidden and allowed the "lost child" to resurface from the "lake" of her subconscious. In *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*, Sarah Porlock's secret is complicated by social and familial dynamics, including her affair with her sister's husband. She keeps her abortion a secret to maintain her professional and social standing in a society that views unmarried, childless, or abortive women as anomalies.

Their memory of abortion and loss can also be observed as a reaction to the linguistic violence inflicted on them. In *Surfacing*, the narrator's lover dismisses her reaction and emotions of abortion by calling it "simple, like getting a wart removed" and "animal-like" (p.185). She tries to reclaim her memory to reject his clinical, dismissive language and replace it with her own visceral truth of "amputation" and "death-like" (pp.184-185) experience before further being mechanized or minimized by patriarchal logic. Conversely, Sarah Porlock's secret act of naming her aborted fetus "Antonio" is a private rebellion. This allows her to reclaim a sense of identity as an "almost-mother" in a world where her reproductive choices are otherwise policed or reduced to "self-sabotage." Sociological research on abortion stigma describes that women are allowed to grieve for their miscarriages but are frequently forced to conceal their abortion stories to avoid selective social exclusion (Kumar et al., 2009). This dichotomy underscores the pervasive abortion stigma that polices women's reproductive choices and narratives. The heroines of these novels transition their victim memory to agentic memory, especially in *Surfacing*, where she corrects her memory that there was no wedding, only an abortion performed on his instructions. By "surfacing" these buried, suppressed truths, she moves from being a

"dead pig" (a body acted upon by "technicians and mechanics") to a "god" with "shining fur," reclaiming her reproductive history as a primal, self-directed experience rather than a state-regulated medical failure.

In the broader Canadian cultural context of the 1970s, hiding an abortion was a matter of legal survival; illegal abortions carried heavy criminal consequences for women and social penalties, thus “not telling" was the only way to avoid state intervention and total social ruin. By keeping their abortions secret, women like these protagonists were protecting themselves from a system that viewed them as criminals. In *Sarah Bastard’s Notebook*, Sarah chose abortion because of her lifestyle and her unwed status, she understands that Canada is not a place where she could have given birth, she regards herself and Antonio (her unborn child) both as outcast, “Say that here, you’re in the loony bin. This town’s a party, no room, no room” (p.88). Sarah was seeking autonomy and creative expression by escaping Canada, but there were “no clouds of glory” in her wake.

Joanne Hedenstrom (1978) states that the heroines in Canadian novels often undergo symbolic transformation by shedding physical attributes like weight, skin, or clothes, to break free from traditional domestic roles and societal expectations. The radical shedding of identity as a means of liberation helps them evade patriarchal norms and traditional domesticity and find a sense of rebirth and freedom. She gives examples of protagonists from works by authors like Margaret Atwood, Marian Engel, and Margaret Laurence, where they strip away their old “ladylike behaviour. As Hedenstorm puts it, “These heroines do not go from the frying pan into the fire; they leave the frying pan and get off the stove” (Hedenstorm, 1978, p.6). Sarah Porlock describes it as “giving up the competition to see who will become the best lady Jesus” (Hedenstorm, 1978). They're choosing to be alone and different, rather than conform to roles that suffocate them. Hedenstrom's analysis highlights the themes of female resistance, self-discovery, and transformation in Canadian literature. These heroines are shedding their old selves and embracing their true desires to opt out of the impossible standards of femininity.

The memories of abortion are charged with the trauma and pain inflicted upon women's bodies. Through fragmented narratives, both novels showcase how societal silences shape women's relationships with their bodies and selves. Atwood and Engel both use memory and narrative form to unravel the 'unspeakable,' revealing the power dynamics shaping women's lives. For Sarah, the abortion represents a painful reminder of her failed relationships and the societal pressure, where Atwood’s narrator suppressed her memory of her lost child and rewired the experience as something else. Sarah Bastard imagines her child everywhere, keeping her company, sharing her worries:

> Two years have confirmed my stubborn optimism, I still want my Antonio. He would have been like Sandro—another reason for squelching him—he would be strong to smile, and loving and—oh, unborn. I wanted someone to share the sadness of what I know. I wanted someone to show the world to. I wanted my

> Antonio. I still want him. Sometimes, I tell myself, I am saving up for him, he and I will grow up on some island together, like Durrell and his perpetual girl infant under the olives, serious but carefree. I want him to be a dark, knowing little boy, big-boned and gracious. This male image of myself would comfort me, give me a shred of the future. But what would I give him? (Engel, 1974 p.87).

Sandra has unspoken guilt towards her abortion, she explains the removal as some kind of pathological diagnosis and tries detachment and trivialization to overpower the horrors of the abortion procedure, "O would-be child who could not grow up to be his mother, after the visit to Barbados and Sandro, I went to Montreal and had you, like my tonsils, out" (p.87). But after her abortion, the trivialized fetus became a manifestation of her guilt, and memory and the potential of love and possibilities she had lost, "But poor Antonio went into a basin after the universal mechanical screw. Me retching yellow morphine. What's the better part?" (p.88). Her sense of loss was twofold in nature; she missed the opportunity to become a mother to Antonio, so that she had someone to care for and share her knowledge with. In the wider cultural context, it was also a failure of her womanhood, as the society at the time was harsh towards women who had illegitimate children and abortions.

Sarah Bastard's Notebook, being "told exclusively from Sarah's point of view", can be read as a series of her inner monologues about everything, her contemporary society, her experiences, and her failed academic career and relationships. Even after exploring numerous "terrains," the most important remains her psyche, and her "attempts to repatriate herself" (Ogrizek, 1991). Her psychological state was dominated by her memories and the emotional weight of her decisions. Sarah's doubts about her ability to have a successful academic and writing career underscore the cultural and individual anxieties women face when thinking in public and navigating academic institutions that have historically excluded them (Pinder, 2024). Sarah's feelings of academic inadequacy and phoniness come from imposter syndrome, which is a common experience for women in academia, highlighting the tension between their identities as women and intellectuals and how the psychological forces shape Sarah's perceptions of herself and her place in the world.

The memory of her abortion was lingering in both her life and her psyche; for her, Antonio was everywhere; it was also a medium of comforting the harsh realities of her life and absolving her grief. He soon became an escape from the travesties of her outside world, a secluded space for expression. In her memory of Antonio, he was a reflection of her own persona, free and spirited, but also a reminder of her failures both as a woman and a mother, and the impending nothingness.

> Every alley would be exalted with Antonio. Though Alex and Lorenzo go nowhere without their nanny, my Antonio would run free and shouting like the

> kids who soar round the corner shouting "That whole wide wooooooorld." Look at me, everything was ordered and organized: nothing (p.88).

She touts herself as the almost mother who will share her knowledge and wisdom with her child, where she lacks all other sorts of connections in her life anymore, "If I had my Antonio I would go and live in a cave with him and teach him all the rhymes and all the ways of being" (p.102). This idealized vision of motherhood contrasts with the isolation and disconnection she feels in her current life. With Antonio, she imagines a deep, meaningful relationship, one that would bring purpose and fulfillment to her existence. The cave, a symbol of simplicity and solitude, represents a desire to strip away the complexities and expectations of the outside world and focus on the pure, unconditional bond between mother and child.

Both the protagonists of *Surfacing* and *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* embrace the alternate or fabricated memory of their child to overcome their grief and sense of longing. The loss of a child reverberates in the narratives of these women and also resonates with the women who underwent similar experiences. The alternate memories serve as a coping mechanism for the protagonists who feel overwhelmed by their choices in the past and also act as a tool to reshape their identity and trauma. Both these women are trying to process their emotions and find ways to move forward with their memories. For Atwood's protagonist, the fabricated memory of a failed marriage and a child she gave up serves as a shield against the trauma of the abortion. Similarly, Sarah Porlock's memories of Antonio, her aborted child, are a way for her to hold onto a sense of motherhood and identity.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Marian Engel's *Sarah Bastard's Notebook* both provide critical insights into female identity, memory, and resistance against patriarchal oppression. Both writers highlight the societal pressures and taboos surrounding abortion with their protagonists' journeys. Even though their memories of abortion are fragmented and sometimes unreliable, they serve as a testament to the trauma and pain inflicted upon women. In these novels, memory emerges as a contested site of identity formation, and the protagonists' recollections of trauma, loss, and desire are shaped by the societal and cultural contexts in which they live. Such experiences of abortion are confrontational, painful, and reminiscent of the surveillance and policing of women's bodies, even in contemporary times.

The works of Atwood and Engel emphasize the importance of storytelling in reconfiguring the cultural debate on issues of identity, choice, and autonomy. In *Surfacing* and *Sarah Bastard's Notebook*, there is an emphasis on the fact that women's narratives are not merely individualistic; rather, they are political narratives, and the practice of

narrating and retelling them becomes a significant practice of resistance against patriarchal oppression. By voicing their stories and accepting their pasts and grief, there can be a better understanding of female identity, one that recognizes the complexities, contradictions, and multiplicities of women's existence. These narratives are a testament to women's attempts at "unwriting" and writing their own narratives of existence, which were not allowed to be expressed within the dominant patriarchal metanarratives. These counter-narratives demarginalize the taboos that are associated with abortion, reproduction, and the female body.

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