

## The Quest for Selfhood through Motherhood: Semiotic Approaches to Atwood's *Surfacing* and Chopin's *The Awakening*

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The role of motherhood in quests for self accomplishment by fictional heroines has been a topical issue in literary criticism, and this is one of the reasons why feminist literary criticism has not yet lost critics' attention, even amidst strong criticism emerging from new perspectives such as queer theory<sup>41</sup>. In particular, French feminism has offered a key to investigating the linguistic and/or psychoanalytic approaches to literary texts featuring women's selfhood. Furthering Lacanian theory, Julia Kristeva pursues the unformulated linguistic domain of the 'semiotic', which is not yet repressed by the patriarchal system and emphasises the bond between mother and child. The following pages represent an experimental approach to analysing fictional heroines, by employing theoretical methods to literary texts, and focusing on aspects of motherhood and semiotic difference, especially the ways in which the heroines in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) search for their 'self'. Above all, the relationships between the heroines and their sons and between the heroines and their mothers are distinctive features of both, and merit exploration from the perspective of the mother-child bond advocated by Kristeva (who is, incidentally, herself the mother of a son). Furthermore, the ambiguous ending of *The Awakening* is reconsidered, suggesting that, although Edna's suicide is prompted by her inability to recall her mother, leaving her bereft of a model on which to base her own motherhood, her entry into the sea, which is a transparent allusion to fertility and reincarnation, signifies her transformation into a mother and it is the crucial medium to achieve her own selfhood.

### I

French feminism, so commentators affirm, was already flourishing in the early 1970s, as a consequence of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s, especially as an after-effect of 'May 68' in Paris. Although generalisations always contain exceptions and there is a danger of making stereotypical assumptions, it is fair to say that whilst the majority of Anglo-American

feminism has focused on the representation of women's lives or experiences in the context of their historical background, that of French feminism has explored literary texts from a linguistic and psychoanalytic perspective. A brief recap of the theory relevant to 'selfhood' is necessary here. A well-known and important concept in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is the 'mirror stage', where the primary child-mother relationship takes the form of a 'symbiotic' attachment in which the two figures are intimately united. The next stage, the 'imaginary' stage is the state in which the child misrecognises its mother as itself, as if it sees its own image in the mirror. Here the mother is at the same time 'the Other' whom the child encounters for the first time: we can describe this figure as the 'm/other'. When the child enters the structure of social relations, an intervention by the father takes place. In order to adjust to the world of Law, the child is assimilated into language and finally becomes a social subject. In this 'symbolic' stage, the world is clearly ordered, gendered and patriarchal, so that language can be defined as 'masculine'. However, there also remains the question concerning the identification of the subject and the other. In Lacanian theory, the subject is developed through language, and the only way an individual can achieve subjecthood is through a permanent rupture with his/her mother. As Lacan sees women as not only the object but also the Other of men, in male-defined society, women are always posited in the negative position as images created by men.

Whilst inspired by Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, Kristeva criticises and modifies certain aspects of Lacanian thought, which is hypothesised on the assumption of the 'transcendental signifier' of the phallus, by focusing on the potentiality of a linguistically free dimension, the 'semiotic'. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore define it as follows:

[A] domain which precedes the subject's entry into the symbolic order. It is pre-oedipal, pre-imaginary, and characterised by a rhythmic babble, that is, a language which is unformulated in terms of the rules of the symbolic. Although the semiotic is cited as the place of a repressed femininity, it is not inherently female: it is also present in, and challenges, the symbolic. This is evident in moments when language becomes unstable and meanings are ruptured. (248)

Kristeva thus shows her interest in discussing the problem of language, which exists on the boundary between the symbolic and semiotic: that is what she calls 'poetic language'. Moreover, Mary Eagleton suggests that 'The semiotic is not obliterated by entry into the

Symbolic Order. On the contrary, the semiotic retains the potential to erupt and disrupt the meanings and norms of the dominant order' (228). Here we can see the possibility of the semiotic displays to deconstruct the Law of the Father or, as Jacques Derrida calls it, 'phallogocentrism'. Since the semiotic is an asexual dimension, this theory applies to both sexes, and indeed, Kristeva's literary concern is primarily devoted to analysing the texts of male writers, though, as the semiotic originally derives from the Pre-Oedipal stage and the infant's relationship with the mother, it functions particularly in relation to the 'feminine' which involves such characteristics as chaos, plurality and fluidity. To quote Terry Eagleton, if we see the semiotic as a process '*within* our conventional sign-systems, which questions and transgresses their limits' and as 'a kind of internal limit or borderline of the symbolic order', in this sense 'the "feminine" could be seen as existing on such a border. For the feminine is at once constructed within the symbolic order, like any gender, and yet is relegated to its margin, judged inferior to masculine power' (190). In the following discussion, I will employ the semiotic as a key to interpreting the psychologies of the heroines, who possess 'feminine' attributes in the two novels.

## II

*Surfacing* is a novel of self-discovery in terms of both the spiritual and the social quest.<sup>(2)</sup> The action of this novel is set in Quebec, a French-speaking province of Canada. On leaving the city where the narrator usually lives, she and her three companions visit the lakeside cabin, in which she spent her childhood, to search for her long lost father. She assumes him to be dead. From the beginning, readers are alerted to the fact that they/we are living in a flood of language, the symbolic world. Reference is made to signs, markers, signposts and so on. In addition, the slogans of advertising items and fragmentary words on signboards and boxes which are 'burnt out'<sup>(3)</sup> attract the reader's attention. Similarly, the district where she arrives alienates the English-speaking narrator, who has grown up in a family which 'was, by reputation, peculiar as well as *anglais*' (S, 14). For her, the incomprehensible French language resembles the scattered words on advertisements and is meaningless. This situation makes her feel more isolated, with the result that she hesitates to use her smattering of French words and even regrets having revealed her identity, thinking that 'I should have pretended to be an American' (S, 20).

In addition, throughout the story, the narrator remains unnamed, whilst she calls her friends by name. Even her boyfriend Joe is not allowed to call her by name in the text,

although we assume he would do so in real life. From a feminist perspective, 'naming' works according to a patriarchal language system, and it can be argued that Atwood intentionally omits the narrator's name from the text in order to prevent her from being bound by the world of language. In this sense, it is possible to say that the narrator is positioned as a subversive agent in relation to the 'symbolic'; for she notices that language dominates society and restricts her free imagination. As language is identifiable with male-defined society and the narrator is restricted by the symbolic order, especially by Joe's inquisitiveness, she suffers from the fact that she cannot find her real self.

Although she has to confront such a language, the narrator displays, from the start, a desire to pursue the unintelligible linguistic dimension. She thinks of 'a rudimentary language'—'Linguistics, I should have studied that instead of art' (S, 35). This 'rudimentary language' can be related to the Kristevan concept of the semiotic. For Kristeva, language is a potential revolution. By destroying the male-controlled language (prose) and by exploring a fragmentary poetic one, she believes that women acquire their own voice. Only through this language, she insists, 'can we hope to bring about the multiple and necessary "sublations of the unnameable, the unrepresentable, the void"' (Sellers, 15). The narrator's interest culminates in exploring another linguistic dimension in the latter stages of the novel, rejecting conventional language and turning to a form of expression associated with the rhythms of nature and the 'imaginary'. This movement is reflected in the linguistic development of the novel from realism to a style similar to the rhythms of poetry.

The narrator's attitude towards the conventional idea of marriage, or more precisely, the relationship between men and women, is worth noting, too. In the story, in order to cope with an unhappy relationship, it is revealed that she constructs for herself a false memory of a marriage. After an affair with a married man, she undergoes an abortion, which he persuades her to have. Explaining her need to construct for herself an imaginary marriage, she comments, 'It was all real enough, it was enough reality for ever, I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version' (S, 137). The word 'mutilation' here corresponds with the word 'amputation' when she describes her image of divorce; it also relates to her abortion. Now, however, she distrusts marriage, and, though Joe is eager to marry her, she cannot accept his proposal. She compares her situation with that of the married couple Anna and David. Anna is the victim of the relationship, whilst David engages in sadistic games and, like the narrator, does not know 'how to love' (S, 130-31). Nevertheless Anna tries to get along with him and manages to keep the marital life together. The narrator concludes:

'Maybe that was why I failed, because I didn't know what I had to let go of' (S, 41). She rejects Joe's marriage proposal, regarding it as absurd and resenting it as related to the masculine, 'logical' scheme of values:

'We should get married,' Joe said.

.... I wanted to laugh, it was incongruous, it wasn't what he would call his trip, the legal phrases and the paperwork and the vows, especially the finality; and he'd got the order wrong, he'd never asked whether I loved him, that was supposed to come first, I would have been prepared for that. 'Why?' I said. 'We're living together anyway. We don't need a certificate for that.'

'I think we should,' he said, 'we might as well.'

.... He had moved closer, he was being logical, he was threatening me with something....

'No,' I said, the only answer to logic. (my emphasis; S, 80)

Note how logical 'she' is. On another occasion, in addition, whilst Joe eagerly tries to ascertain whether the narrator loves him or not, she cannot express her affection towards him using conventional words:

'Do you love me, that's all,' he said. 'That's the only thing that matters.'

It was the language again, I couldn't use it because it wasn't mine. He must have known what he meant but it was an imprecise word; the Eskimoes [*sic.*] had fifty-two names for snow because it was important to them, there ought to be as many as for love. (S, 100)

To borrow Luce Irigaray's phrase, 'language and the systems of representation cannot "translate" [women's] desire' (quoted from Robinson, 109). Joe tries to confirm her affection towards him, but for her the language of mundane life is meaningless. Her firm rejection of his proposal of marriage can also be interpreted in Kristevan terms. Kristeva refers to women's desire for freedom, stating that women are finally 'set free of our identification papers and names' (quoted from Sellers, 109). The narrator's refusal not only involves a rejection of legal formalities but also rejects a compromise with true love. At this moment, she has already gone beyond the conventions of language.

Water signifies 'a kind of meditation' (S, 58), and it seems to help the narrator achieve her semiotic experiences, and by returning to childhood scenes, she gradually succeeds in finding

her true self. The surroundings of the lake remind the narrator of her vanished father, her deceased mother, and her brother who nearly drowned. Unlike her three companions who have little regard for their parents ('Joe never mentions his mother and father, Anna says hers were nothing people and David calls his The Pigs.' *S*, 11), the narrator cherishes her past, admitting that 'I had a good childhood' (*S*, 12). Like a figure in a thriller, following the hints furnished by a series of unintelligible drawings by her father and tracing his marks on maps, the narrator decides to dive into the lake to search for a painting. Her submergence in the lake carries symbolic significance since it represents her descent into the illogical, unrestricted and speechless sphere of the unconscious: the semiotic. The narrator fails to recognise that this is potential death, which is suddenly demonstrated by the fact that she unwittingly discovers the floating corpse of her father, a representative of the world of Law. Yet, as if she is provided with nutritious sustenance inside her mother's womb, beneath the water (amniotic fluid), the narrator attains the power of life:

I didn't love him [= Joe], I was far away from him, it was as though I was seeing him through a smeared window or glossy paper; he didn't belong here.... I was wishing I could tell him how to change so he could get there, the place where I was.... Language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole. (*S*, 140)

The narrator's desire for 'wholeness' or 'plenitude' suggests the symbiotic bond between infant and mother, which is related to Lacan's mirror theory. He calls this the 'real' of this specific sphere in which the mother-child relationship is sustained. According to Toril Moi, the *chora* ('womb' in Greek), 'a rhythmic pulsion rather than a new language', constitutes 'the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language, that which can never be caught up in the closure of traditional linguistic theory' (162). The narrator wishes to invite Joe into this dimension, despite the fact that, on occasion, he is described as a symbolic figure of logic and reason like the narrator's father. However, Joe is not a dominating man, in that when the narrator acts curtly towards him, he appears uneasy and quickly surrenders to the narrator, the usually 'more logical' subversive agent (see the above quotation, *S*, 80). Joe eventually surrenders saying that 'I give up, you win. We'll forget everything I said and do it like you want, back to the way it was before, right?' (*S*, 118). Because he does not embody the Law of the Father, she feels like saving him ('I was wishing I could tell him how to change so he could get there, the place where I was.' *S*, 140), and finally chooses him as her life partner.

After diving into the lake, the narrator begins to experience a primitive transformation. She loses the use of language and enters the world of the 'imaginary'. She then learns the secret animal language, which is unintelligible to human beings who live in the symbolic dimension of culture. This experience, as well as involving a linguistic dimension, is also marked by a focus on primitive religion. Refusing to go back to the city, the human sphere, the narrator remains by the lake and lives in seclusion as if a wild animal, lacking the power of speech. She takes off her clothes and wraps herself with a blanket 'until the fur grows' (*S*, 171). Furthermore, the narrator escapes from Christianity, which 'limited the understanding of sacrificial death to Christ's death for the sins of humankind' (Christ: 1976, 327), and searches for an indigenous religion such as Indian Shamanism. In this sense, the power that she desires also seems related to wonders of nature beyond human thought. This provides her with the vitality necessary to survive male-centred society. She descends, in imagination, lower than the scale of creation to the world of nature. As she remarks:

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning ....

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place (*S*, 175)

The narrator, as she hoped to be a linguist, succeeds in identifying herself with place, to quote David Ward, by experiencing 'the poetic evocation of flux, of process, of change' (116). In addition, the text turns from prose to a form of poetry; and now she, a poet, is located 'on the borderline between nature and culture' (Sellers, 101). Here, the poetic language exists in the semiotic dimension — even though it takes components of letters — which have slipped out of the controlled language (prose) and is no longer conventional social discourse. Moi explains that Julia Kristeva 'stresses the necessity of "establishing *poetic language* as the object of linguistics' attention"' (156). The subsequent description of the emerging fish in the novel, without punctuation ('From the lake a fish jumps/An idea of a fish jumps' *S*, 181) can be regarded as an image of 'the nourishing, maternal *chora* across the thetic boundary, into protean symbol, icon, hieroglyph, specular image, language, but eventually into an unexpected fulfilment' (Ward, 116). After all, at the end of the story, she returns to the society where she belongs, the controversial ending to the novel discussed later.

## III

Searching for the self or individual freedom is one of the main themes in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899)<sup>10</sup>. As well as the case of *Surfacing*, therefore, interpreting this novel in the light of the semiotic — despite the novel's existence antedating the theory itself — has its own meaning, especially when one looks at the representation of motherhood and the use of water imagery — this time, though, not the lake but the sea.

The action of *The Awakening* is set in the late nineteenth century on a Creole resort island called Grand Isle, located to the South of the Louisiana coast. The heroine Edna Pontellier, who is aged twenty-eight, has a Creole husband and two small sons. However, she is, as the saying goes, 'not a mother-woman'<sup>61</sup>, and 'her habitual neglect of the children' (A, 7) is well-known amongst her neighbours. As it is said that 'the Creole husband is never jealous' (A, 12), Mr Léonce Pontellier usually ignores his wife's rather intimate association with Robert Lebrun. On the other hand, Léonce treats her as 'a valuable piece of personal property' (A, 4) and 'the sole object of his existence' (A, 7), with the result that Edna, who has grown up in Kentucky, is 'not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles':

They [= Creoles] all knew each other, and felt like one large family, among whom existed the most amicable relations. A characteristic which distinguished them and which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery. Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable. (A, 10)

Thus, despite the difference in historical setting, Edna's circumstances resemble those of the narrator in *Surfacing*. Both are alienated from the predominantly French-speaking society which is unfamiliar to them. Even though Edna has become used to the French-mixed conversation with the others and understands 'French imperfectly unless directly addressed' (A, 36), there is something which she feels 'very French, very foreign, about their whole manner of living' (A, 52). Indeed, the author distinguishes Edna as 'Mrs.' Pontellier, rather than referring to her as 'Madame' like the other women, and she plays the role of the Other in the society. For example, her situation is represented by the mocking bird, the parrot in the opening scene since her marital status is, to quote Ivy Schweitzer, a 'parroting/parody of self-

possession' (166). Here, it can be argued that the mocking bird represents the tension between the symbolic and the semiotic. The parrot repeats several phrases like '*Allez Vous-en!* [French: 'Get away!'] *Sapristi!* [a Creole dialect: 'For God's sake!'] That's all right!' It not only 'speaks a little Spanish', but 'also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird' (A, 3). This 'language which nobody understood', the world of fragmentariness and rudimentariness, represents the circumstances to which Edna is reduced.

Although Creole society is quite tolerant of friendships with the opposite sex, in the late nineteenth century it was also a fact that an illicit love affair was regarded as a sensational and grievous fault. However, Edna is not content with her present position as a housewife and even regrets her marriage: 'Her marriage to Léonce Pontellier was purely an accident, in this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate' (A, 18). This is because her situation is not a sphere in which she can live as an individual human being but resembles a cage that limits and restricts her. Similarly, she refuses to attend her younger sister's wedding ceremony, asserting in front of her husband that 'a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth' (A, 63). However, the ethos of this period inhibits Edna from behaving as she pleases. Dr Mandelet, when asked for some advice, tells Mr Pontellier that 'Woman ... is a very peculiar and delicate organism — a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar' (A, 64). He also admonishes Mr Pontellier that 'You are too lenient, too lenient by far, Léonce.... Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife. Take my word for it' (A, 68). It is assumed by this typically patronising view of women that they should be obedient, and if their behaviour is unconventional, they are regarded as 'peculiar'. Indeed, when Edna quarrels with Léonce, in a fit of passion, she takes off her wedding ring, flings it on the carpet and stamps her feet, trying to crush it (see A, 50). Yet, even if her view of marriage is extremely negative and she sees marriage as an obstacle, symbolically enough, she eventually picks up the ring and slips it on her finger, regretting the fact that she has got away with it: 'it was very foolish, very childish' (A, 54). Unlike the narrator of *Surfacing*, Edna remains restricted in her married life. Relinquishing her married status would result in her being ostracised by society.

In contrast to the rather superficial friendship amongst the characters in *Surfacing*, Edna's relationship with other women also emphasises her peculiarity in this period. The ideal nineteenth-century image of womanhood is embodied by Edna's close friend Adèle Ratignolle. She respects her husband and is happy being a mother. Whilst Edna is described as 'rather handsome than beautiful', her face 'captivating by reason of a certain frankness of expression

and a contradictory subtle play of features' (A, 5), Adèle is portrayed as more than beautiful, since there were 'no words to describe her save the old ones that have served so often to picture the bygone heroine of romance and the fair lady of our dreams' (A, 9). Whilst Edna often neglects her children, Adèle is a model of motherhood and plays a maternal, sensuous role in the story. Even the fact that she is growing stout, because of her fourth pregnancy, enhances her maternal charms. For Adèle, Edna's indifference towards her family and her close connection with Robert are unimaginable, and she sometimes tries to persuade her to reconsider her situation, but in vain. Another of Edna's friends, who is contrasted with Madame Ratignolle, is a pianist called Mademoiselle Reisz. In a different sense from Edna, she is an eccentric. She is a middle-aged, sceptical and strong-willed artist; a 'homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed' (A, 25). Interestingly, despite her rejection of society, Reisz is attracted to Edna, as if feeling that they share a common spiritual and artistic dimension. This seems to be because Reisz senses that there is something common with her in Edna. She plays the piano just for her, saying 'You are the only one worth playing for' (A, 26) and this incident triggers off the first stage of her 'awakening' of Edna. If Reisz's piano-playing suggests the languageless semiotic phase, it is no wonder that Edna, who is also attaining to that dimension by painting a picture, sympathises with her music. Piano-playing and painting are expressions of the semiotic in the sense that they both are ways of expressing and evoking one's spiritual element, transcending conventional language. However, unlike Reisz, Edna's skill in painting is immature, as if suggesting that she cannot be an artist whilst still involved in society. Therefore, Mademoiselle Reisz admonishes Edna in regard to her mental attitude as an artist, and points out the weakness of a would-be painter, by warning her: 'the artist must possess the courageous soul.... The brave soul' (A, 61).

Edna's 'awakening' is more strongly prompted by the power of natural elements, particularly the sea. From the beginning of the narrative, the voice of the sea ceaselessly allures her whenever she views the beach. Whereas in *Surfacing* the 'voice' is always treated as an organ which utters 'language', here the author uses this word as a metaphor for speechless nature. Along with Reisz's piano-playing and Edna's painting, the sea becomes an image of the semiotic, disruptive dimension of language. Edna gradually comes to realise the existence of her own self:

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her.

This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight — perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman. (A, 14)

The second stage of her awakening comes the moment when she has mastered the art of swimming. Inspired by the spiritual voice from the gulf, Edna finally succeeds in swimming, and the first time her body floats on the surface of the water:

A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (A, 27)

Immediately afterwards she almost drowns, due to the fact that she is so absorbed in swimming. However, this incident also evokes a sense of spiritual enlightenment which she has never felt before. To borrow Katherine Joslin's phrase, 'Being in the water evokes in Edna the memory of a time when her body essentially belonged to her and not to her husband and children' (176). Unlike *Surfacing*, although the description of Edna's self-consciousness is obscure, by mastering swimming, she has perceived the existence of her adored sphere. One day she recognises that 'she herself — her present self — was in some way different from the other self' (A, 39) and during moments of her consciousness of individualism this sensation becomes stronger and selfhood seems to be attainable. For that reason, the fact that Robert has left for Mexico shocks the emotionally unstable Edna. She loses interest in everyday life and begins to behave as she pleases; and she is deeply impressed by the actual sense of aloneness for which she has longed. A manic-depressive state of mind possesses her and only at the moment of meditation can she feel at ease: 'she found it good to dream and to be alone and unmolested' (A, 56).

Edna's final awakening — if it can be called so — occurs during the episode of Adèle's childbirth. Edna gives little assistance but merely witnesses the scene of physical agony. Adèle is anxious about Edna's reckless act and wishes to remind her of her children. She implores her, in her pain, to 'Think of the children. Edna. Oh think of the children! Remember them!' (A, 104). However, Edna does not surrender her integrity by conceding to society; she insists that 'I don't want anything but my own way' (A, 105). In contrast to the ending of *Surfacing* where the narrator returns to the city, Edna chooses to enter the sea. The

sea appears to her the only realm in which she can achieve her own selfhood. This is an unknown, mysterious dimension and simultaneously involves entry into death.

#### IV

Having outlined the key points in each novel, let us now extend our observations to encompass the degree of self-achievement and motherhood of the heroines in the two novels. The most obvious difference between the narrator in *Surfacing* and Edna in *The Awakening* is the former's self-awareness. From the beginning of the story, the narrator is critically minded and self-conscious; she is also speculative and self-analytical. As we have seen, although she criticises Joe's way of thinking as 'logical', she herself, since she analyses him concretely and precisely, is also logical enough. She often employs 'reason' to trace the place where her father is supposed to be. Furthermore, on finding the scrapbook she made in her younger days, she 'searched through it carefully, looking for something [she] could recognize as [herself]'. After finding them, she is surprised at her Easter egg filled drawings, and concludes: 'I must have been a hedonistic child, I thought, and quite stodgy also...' (my emphasis; *S*, 84, 85). In this way, she reaches a decisive conclusion in terms of her own characteristics. On the other hand, from the beginning of *The Awakening*, Edna is less self-motivated and does not understand her own potential and desires. One of the reasons for this is not hard to see: it is that Edna's status and her social background in the nineteenth century are entirely different from the situation of the narrator in *Surfacing* in the 1960s. As illustrated by the conversation between Léonce and Edna's father or Dr Mandélet, the cultural attitude towards women and constructs of femininity in the nineteenth century are not the same as the permissive attitudes towards sexuality in the 60s. In the latter period, woman had achieved a considerably greater degree of social and economic freedom and personal awareness of selfhood, with the result that the narrator in *Surfacing* has higher aspirations. It is thus convincing that her rather too determined character, representative of the 60s self-assertive woman, helps her find her true self. In contrast, women in the nineteenth century were generally oppressed by constructs of motherhood and the institution of the family and marriage. Edna escapes from the restrictions of her situation by losing herself in contemplation: 'She had a way of turning them [= her eyes] swiftly upon an object and holding them there as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought' (*A*, 5). When she and her husband are out of harmony with each other, she sometimes cries, as she cannot bear such an experience:

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. (my emphasis; *A*, 8)

Edna thus suffers in her daily life with her husband without knowing why, although she does 'intend' to analyse herself. She tells Alc e Arobin, her lover:

'One of these days', she said, 'I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think — try to determine what character of a woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know. By all the codes which I am acquainted with, I am a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex. But some way I can't convince myself that I am. I must think about it.' (*A*, 79)

After her sudden removal into her spiritual refuge 'the pigeon-house', she has the time to consider her individual 'self': 'She began to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life' (*A*, 89).

However, does this mean that the narrator in *Surfacing* is totally content with her achievement of self quest, and Edna in *The Awakening* comes to a standstill? This principal question leads us to the argument concerning motherhood. As illustrated above, *Surfacing* takes the form of a detective story in which the narrator searches for her lost father. However, parallel with this explicit plot, there is another detective story implied: her quest for her dead mother. Throughout the story, there is no physical description of the narrator's mother, and her memory of her is patchy. As Sherrill E. Grace suggests, it is mementoes like a jacket, seeds and birds that remind her of her mother (see 39). In her case, by unearthing the memory of her mother, the narrator finds herself; she achieves a personal transformation and perceives the importance of mothers. One of the scrapbooks which contains a picture in which she recognises the baby as herself, is also her 'mother's gift'. She comments: 'They [= The pictures] were my guides, she [= her mother] had saved them for me, pictographs, I had to read their new meaning with the help of the power' (*S*, 152). The important point to note is that the gift her mother leaves her is all non-linguistic material. Whilst the narrator's father employs logical explanations, her mother does not, as she observes: 'My father explained everything but my mother never did, which only convinced me that she had the answers but wouldn't tell' (*S*, 68). The narrator has grown up observing this contrast between her two parents. Her

mother's behaviour is the ideal model of a woman. Her mother helps her accomplish her true self by leaving her gifts such as pictographs which contain an implicit message without making an explicit statement. Hélène Cixous also comments on the mother-daughter bond. Sellers describes Cixous's reference to the daughter's relation to the mother as 'the memory of an other love, which functions as a nourishing and vital force capable of overcoming the father's law of castration' (58). This is the mother's speechless 'voice' which survives as love. The narrator of *Surfacing* thus shares an emotional bond with her mother. She maintains that she remembers the state before she was born and senses her mother's shock when her brother was drowned in the lake:

It was before I was born but I can remember it as clearly as if I saw it, and perhaps I did see it: I believe that an unborn baby has its eyes open and can look out through the walls of the mother's stomach, like a frog in a jar. (S, 26)

The narrator sees the accident through her mother's eyes, because she envisages herself and her mother as a single being.

In respect to the female subject being delivered of a child/poem, Sellers summarises Kristeva's explanation of 'the physical transformations of pregnancy, as well as the sensations carrying a foetus can give':

During pregnancy, she [= Kristeva] suggests, there is an increased awareness of feeling and biological rhythm, which presents women with a strange dilemma. Whilst pregnancy makes women intensely aware of biology, this experience is not included within the symbolic sphere of social exchange.... She believes the act of giving birth presents a vivid connection with the poetic writer's struggle, since in the West childbirth remains at the threshold between biology and language, the semiotic and the symbolic. Childbirth, she suggests, like poetic writing explodes the dividing line between self and other. (107)

In *Surfacing*, the narrator as a potential mother describes the vision she sees at the moment of conception: '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...' (S, 155-56). Here, the enclosed lake symbolises a womb, her Pre-Oedipal *chora*, contains her-self/own child. She experiences a symbiotic bond with her unborn baby: 'My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-

animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply' (S, 162). In this state of mother-child continuum she feels, what Kristeva calls, 'jouissance'. For the narrator, in order to achieve her supreme self, she needs to have this 'first true human', who is now 'allowed' to come into being (S, 185).

On the contrary, in *The Awakening*, there is little reference to Edna's mother: Chopin merely informs us that she died some time ago (see A, 6, 7). Or rather, it can be said that the figure of the mother is, in fact, inscribed in the text as an 'absence'. Edna's father's oppressive treatment of her mother shortened her life ('The Colonel was perhaps unaware that he had coerced his own wife into her grave.' A, 68); and the strict nineteenth-century patriarchal system in Kentucky may repress the description of her in the text. This can be related perhaps to Kristeva's comment that 'it is not *woman* as such who is repressed in patriarchal society, but *motherhood*' (quoted from Moi, 167). However, there is a scene where Edna remembers childhood along with her mother's death in her infant days. It is significant that she recalls her past prompted by Adèle Ratignolle: the ideal representation of motherhood in the story. The first scene Edna visualises is the day she walked through the green meadow in Kentucky; she remembers:

[A] summer day in Kentucky... a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist. She threw out her arms as if swimming when she walked, beating the tall grass as one strikes out in the water. Oh, I see the connection now! (A, 17)

This imagery directly corresponds to her current mental element, the semiotic imagery of the sea. She admits that 'sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided' (A, 17). Hearing Edna's reminiscence, Adèle lays her hand on hers, but at first, Edna is surprised at her behaviour. It is implied that, because of the lack of physical contact with her mother, Edna 'was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others' (A, 17). However, although Edna may be relieved by this gentle caress, this relationship is temporary or hollow, and it is apparent that Edna misses a mother's care. Adèle in no way knows Edna's experience, and is nothing but a kind listener. As Adrienne Rich comments, referring to the importance of bodily contact with the mother, a woman acquires her first knowledge or sentiments of 'warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality,

mutuality' from her mother (218). To be sure, she could learn how a mother should behave through observing the life of Madame Ratignolle and how a single woman can survive as an artist (or like a hermit), lacking a maternal role, through her contact with Mademoiselle Reisz. However, even if these polarised figures present her with examples, they do not compensate for Edna's lack of her *mother's* presence. It is this absence of her mother as a medium to lead her to the semiotic dimension that consequently puts her at a loss. Edna's cold attitude towards her sons may also be due to this. Since she has no memory of having been brought up by her mother, she does not actually know how to treat her own children. Before she moves to the pigeon-house, her two sons were sent to Léonce's relative in Iberville. Although she sometimes visits them, she 'would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for any one'; she flatly affirms that 'I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself' (A, 46). For Edna, her 'self', which is, she assumes, situated beyond the socially structured world of marriage and family life, is more important than her life. Therefore, at the conclusion of the novel, she is not afraid of death.

The protagonists of the two novels are further linked by the image of water. However, the transformations in water which the two heroines experience are notably different. In *Surfacing*, the world of the lake is, after all, unsuited to the narrator and her new-born baby, because it is also the world of death: the lake contains resonances of both life and death. This is the actual place where her brother was nearly drowned and her father actually died. The imagery of the lake as the womb also reminds us of the narrator's abortion: the womb thus can signify both the cradle and coffin. Even if she transforms herself through the power of the water, this is only a temporary submergence. After finding her self in the lake, she has to re-emerge from it and to give up the pastoral existence, because she realises that 'withdrawing [from the society] is no longer possible and the alternative is death' (S, 185). In *The Awakening*, on the other hand, Edna's quest for the self is directed towards the sea of nature, where she departs from the gulf, leading to the ocean. The novel ends with the following description, after she has swum too far to swim back to the shore:

She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again. Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. (A, 109)

The language of the human voice is gradually dispersed and then sounds of living things begin to disappear. Furthermore, the 'incompatible' voice of the mother is not voiced by the text. Finally, there is no more language: only fragments of natural sounds or noises left. Chopin consciously, or unconsciously, seems to try to express mysterious elements beyond description.

Edna attempts to find her true self in the Gulf, 'where no woman had swum before' (A, 27). Since she has no mother, the only way to achieve her revival has to be conducted by herself. As Schweitzer suggests, 'she gives birth to herself as a creature which has become its own mother' (163). In addition, Edna does not know what jouissance of the mother's 'body rejoicing ... through their experiences of giving birth' is like:

Edna does not yet recognize her own marginal experience through which she might 'hear meaning' (Kristeva puns on 'jouissance' as 'j'ouis sens', 'I hear meaning'), but finally ... recognizes and responds to something kindred in the seductive, maternal voice of the sea. She has repressed her own experience of giving birth, a process by which, Kristeva claims, woman can return to the body of her own mother, a reunion Edna achieves metaphorically when she swims into the gulf. (Ibid., 175)

The sea signifies fertility — the symbol of 'mother' and 'rebirth' — so that her death may imply her spiritual revival like the image of Aphrodite (see Gilbert, 271-81). Even symbolically enough, her name Edna in Hebrew means 'renewal'. For the first time in her life, she stands naked under the sky on the shore, feeling like 'some new-born creature' (A, 109); she then sets out for her final swim out to sea.

In searching for the self, or the ultimate state of jouissance, the two heroines are groping in a symbolic world: one then dives into the closed, encircled lake and comes back; the other swims far out to sea but never returns. The ending of *Surfacing* may only be a compromise, however; for whilst the narrator has achieved a sense of selfhood, she would end up with the life of the mundane world, the order of the symbolic. Yet, if the quintessence, or 'a single unifying and informing symbol' of Canadian literature is 'Survival' (Atwood, 32), this ending is convincing. As Atwood herself in her criticism of Canadian literature *Survival*, published in the same year as *Surfacing*, claims: 'Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience.... The survivor has no triumph or victory but

the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life' (33). On the other hand, in *The Awakening* — an early feminist novel in America, for which, in passing, according to Atwood, the central symbol is 'The Frontier' (31) — even if Edna commits suicide and cannot survive in her conventional society, her resolute refusal to compromise and her preservation of personal integrity can be said to be a conquest, particularly in that historical period.

In her observation 'Woman Can Never Be Defined', Julia Kristeva remarks, 'In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies' (137). This is relevant to the narrator of *Surfacing* and her compromise decision to return to the city and to Edna's suicide. It can be argued that both the heroines in the two novels are seeking a 'poetic' language in the non-English (pseudo-French) speaking community. Kristeva may have similarly struggled with furthering her own theory in an academic world, in the paradoxical role of being regarded as a leading critic in 'French' feminism, despite being a Bulgarian. It may be amidst such suffering and contradictions that women explore the semiotic dimension. Without suffering (such as giving birth to a child), no one can be delivered, no writing can be undertaken, and nothing can be done.

### Notes

- (1) For arguments particularly relevant to this paper, albeit liberal humanistic, see Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
- (2) Besides the above-mentioned individual quest, the text expresses another motif of the nationalistic independence, distinguished from metropolitan nations such as Britain and the United States. In this respect, Americanism, related to commercialism or technology, is another obstacle. Nowadays, as American culture has become powerful, its influence over Canada threatens the people as if they were colonised or exploited: that is, Canadian identity is menaced by American modernity. According to Elleke Boehmer, even if they are not 'severely marginalized, settler writers experienced in their own way anxieties about the cultural mimicry produced by metropolitan domination' (Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 213). American imperialism is the power to kill. The author exemplifies the fact that wild Canadian nature is violated by Americans. By facing the matter of Americanism and the slipping away from the language and religion, the narrator in *Surfacing* gains her true identity in both ways.
- (3) Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (London: Virago, 1979; repr. 1994), p. 1. Further references to the novel will be indicated in the text in parentheses by the abbreviation *S*, followed by a page number.
- (4) See for example, Barbara C. Ewell, 'Kate Chopin and the Dream of Female Selfhood', in *Kate Chopin Reconsidered: Beyond the Bayou*, ed. by Lynda S. Boren and Sara deSaussure Davis (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), pp. 157-65; Katherine Joslin, 'Finding the Self at Home:

Chopin's *The Awakening* and Cather's *The Professor's House*, in *Ibid.*, pp. 166-79; Ivy Schweitzer, 'Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*', *Boundary-2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture*, 17, 1 (1990), 158-86.

- (5) Kate Chopin, *Kate Chopin: 'The Awakening': An Authoritative Text Biographical and Historical Contents Criticism*, ed. by Margo Culley, 2nd edn, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 9. Further references to this novel will be indicated in the text in parentheses by the abbreviation *A*, followed by a page number.

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