

Diving into the Subconscious of Women and Nature: Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* as an Ecofeminist Novel

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Abstract

Woman and nature can be considered the best creations of god. Both together keep the earth alive and balanced through the process of creation. The male dominated practices have destroyed the nature as well as women. This paper deals with the different aspects of Eco-feminism through the novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood. The narrator's quest to the wilderness of Canada in search for her father which leads to a quest of self-discovery in the lap of nature becomes the major focus of this paper. The unknown protagonist becomes a representative of the entire female community. The realization that women are just an object to be conquered and violated by men is what leads to the 'surfacing' of the protagonist. In complete harmony with nature excluding clothes, language, food etc. the protagonist goes crazy which gives her more happiness than with her other relationships. The paper also tries to analyse the close relationship between women and nature and how the virgin nature and woman are destroyed by the invasion of the male community. Repressed gender roles, submissiveness, self-realization through nature and the challenges faced by women that are

presented. The concept of women and nature as both victims of the male dominated society is also emphasized. This novel is the perfect literary example of an Eco-feminist work that portrays the destruction of women and nature even in the minutest episodes in the novel. Nature is a treasure-house of many myths that lay hidden in the beliefs, rights and rituals of the aboriginals which are passed from one generation to another. In the same manner women also are the sustainer's of many myths that the male society has made upon her. The mother i.e. both woman and nature is examined here. In a vast country like Canada, nature comprises to its majority through its wilderness. This wilderness hides many priceless virtues and knowledge that can be learnt only in complete harmony with nature. *Surfacing* is not just the journey of a woman but it is the quest that the female gender thrives for. This paper combines the theories of eco-criticism, eco-feminism and to analyse the novel *Surfacing* into a biological whole that merges nature, man and the beliefs of man that make existence meaningful and life worth living. In an era of rapid industrialization and materialism, it is necessary to go on a quest back to nature and learn how life was easier in the lap of nature. Great writers like Shakespeare, Chaucer and Wordsworth were able to carve out such master pieces only because of their relationship with the purest and virgin nature which is the greatest teacher for mankind of all times.

Keywords: Eco-Criticism, Eco-Feminism, Self-Realization, Wilderness, Victimization

From the beginning of the world, man has started composing works of literature, first in the oral form and then in the written form. It is no wonder that the major themes were always nature and women as nature and women are believed to be the most beautiful creations of God. The Creator has tied women and nature through an invisible thread which makes them share many of their features with each other. Both can be called as 'mother' due to their ability to give, nourish and sustain life. Nature is always presented as feminine and this is why it is called Mother Nature. But the patriarchal society approach both nature and

women as those creations created to meet his needs. He recklessly utilizes and destroys nature and women for his pleasure not realizing the austerity and vitality of their existence. Man sees them only as objects to be conquered rather than entities to be sustained and this lead to the emergence of 'ecofeminism'. Writers adopted this theory to educate the society about the sufferings of women and nature by the so called 'superior' race. Margaret Atwood, the Canadian author explores the aspect of ecofeminism through her novel *Surfacing*.

Ecofeminism embraces the theories of ecology and feminism and projects the suppression of nature and women by the capitalist and patriarchal society. Greta Gaard in her work *Living Interconnections* describes the basic premise of ecofeminism as, "ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature"(20).The term ecofeminism is assumed to be coined by the French author Francoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*(1974).In this theory a link is created between women and nature by employing similar attributes to them. Both women and nature are considered pure and virgin, the patriarchal world invade and conquer them and finally destroy them. Vanda Shiva, Greta Gaard, Chris Cuomo, Alice Walker, Arundhati Roy, Margaret Atwood and Nandini Sahu are some of the ecofeminist writers who tried to bring out the exploitation of women and nature through their writing.

The East and the West have different viewpoints towards land. Land has a sacred essence in the East whereas the West view land as an entity to be conquered and bestowed. In India, nature is worshipped in the form of sacred groves from ancient times. The great epics, Vedas and *puranas* are filled with insights about women and nature. According to *Manusmriti*,

Yatra naaryastu puujante ramante tatra devataah

Yatraitaastu na puujyante sarvastratraaphalaah kriyaah (3.56)

This means that, ‘in the place where women are respected the divinity will be extremely pleased, all actions and *kriyas* becomes fruitless where they are not respected’. In the same manner nature should also be respected and preserved for the existence of life. This can be called the basic principle of ecofeminism. The patriarchal society demarcates and tapers things based on their desirability and productivity. In the work *Ecofeminism* Vanda Shiva states that, “Reductionist science is at the root of the growing ecological crisis, because it entails a transformation of nature that destroys its organic processes and rhythms and regenerative capacities” (25).

Margaret Atwood’s novels *Surfacing*, *The Edible Woman* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* are all based on the ecofeminist perspectives. Male control over the right of women’s procreation is depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The reproductive skill of nature is also controlled by man through technology, Atwood writes in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,

We are for breeding purposes [...]

We are two-legged wombs,

That’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (128)

This shows the pure agony faced by women as well as nature when they play the mere role of producers and victims to the capitalist patriarchy who gains profits from them. In her novel *The Edible Woman*, Atwood explains how nature and women are creations to be consumed and enjoyed by men like beautifully iced cake. As a contemporary Canadian writer, Atwood mainly focuses on nature and women thus creating symbols, instances and ideas that reveal the injustice done to both nature and women.

Surfacing is a novel that is set in an inchoate island in Northern Quebec of Canada. The vast landscape of Canada is known for its 'wilderness' and this creates an identity crisis and fear in the mind of its inhabitants. It is the quest of a twenty-eight year old unnamed protagonist in search for her father (who has disappeared without a word) as well as her inner self (which she has lost years ago) into the lap of nature. She is accompanied by a couple (David and Anna) and her boyfriend Joe. Atwood does not name the protagonist as she is the archetype of the whole feminine world. The narrator has left this island years ago and went to the city. She had a happy childhood in the island which was spoiled by her city life. This itself indicates how life in harmony with nature provides all joys compared to the mechanical and conservative life in the cities. The physical and mental rape of women and the environmental rape of our nature is portrayed by Atwood here. "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, 236).

In this novel, woman is accorded to Canada and jeopardy to female body is accorded to jeopardy to Canada from the nation of America. As women are under the constant threat of bodily conquer by men, the frontiers of Canada is under the constant threat of its neighbour America. America is given male attributes of destruction and is presented as the male intruder. The plutocrat patriarchy equally abuses the fertile land and fertile woman. This depletes the land and the woman and degrades them into victims of suppression, oppression, domination and male power. According to the narrator, female body is like a territory to be conquered by man and this makes women a 'natural resource' like nature. Mankind share the view that any resource is to be consumed and exhausted.

The whole novel is the result of the journey that the narrator undertakes with her friends. During the journey in the car, Anna sings 'House of the Rising Sun' which indicates her inner passion to free herself from the patriarchal setting and to rise like a sun with all its glory. Women always attribute their moods and wishes to the occurrences of nature; this

makes women and nature psychologically as well as spiritually connected. As they progress further to the narrators parents cabin on the island, the first view of the lake to the narrator is “blue and cool like redemption” (16). From this point, the narrator starts her transformation from a totally torn woman to become one with nature. The narrator knows that her companions cannot understand her quest in search of her father as all of them has disowned their parents. David calls his parents ‘The Pigs’ which throws light into his character. Like a typical male he has no respect for the beings in nature. Usually pigs are animals considered to have excellent sense of smell, listening and communication. David does not realize their positive sides as he has no benefit from them. When they reach the old bridge, the narrator observes that the dam controls the lake now. The patriarchal society is trying to control nature like they control women with the use of science and technology.

As they approach the village a heavy fog raises which indicates the confused state of mind of the protagonist. Here she sees herself in nature and this makes her say, “what stayed in my head was only the misty whiteness, the hush of moving water and the rocking motion, total safety” (19). She feels totally calm and secure when she is close to nature. The reference to the cushions with the embroidery of Niagara Falls that Paul’s wife Madame gives her (as well as her mother) is symbolic of the intense aspiration to be free, powerful and cool like the Niagara Falls that cannot be controlled by man. Images from nature keep repeating in the novel to compare nature and women. The narrator remembers how her mother put her “hands on the sheet curled like bird claws clinging to a perch” in her death bed as she wanted to save herself from death. The only records that her mother kept in the diary was weather (she displayed her emotions through seasons) and works done on that day. This shows how nature had become a companion for her mother with whom she could identify herself with.

The restrictions imposed on the female gender restricts her from being immersing herself into nature and thus makes them lose their identity. The narrator says, “shorts were

against the law, and many of them lived all their lives beside the lake without learning to swim because they were ashamed to put on bathing suits”(27).Men create rules on their own and impose them on nature as well as women. The Cabin in which her father lived is a place full of natural harmony, it is built with logs of wood and is in the bank of the lake. Here the natural environment extends into the house. The garden and the lake near the house itself bring freshness and purity to the inhabitants of the cabin. It can be termed as a panorama where human and nature are bonded by versatility and knowledge of inner self. The garden is a place of activity according to the narrator,

“The blossoms were redder than anything else in the garden, the hummingbirds went into them, hovering, their wings a blur. The beans that were left too long would yellow after the first frost and split open. Inside were pebbles, purple-black and frightening” (40).

The garden maintains its vitality as it was not intruded upon by the patriarchy for a long time. This made the beings of nature rejoice in the garden as structure and pattern has already vanished from there.

The only terrific incident that the narrator remembers while living in the cabin was her brother almost drowning. She was an unborn child when the incident occurred but she has watched the incident from her mother’s womb like a frog trapped in a jar. Here both the body and jar becomes an obstacle to the sight of the narrator and the frogs were they are trapped in. Ecofeminists attempt to showcase the symbols and metaphors that bind nature, women and animals and presenting how all of them are the victims of suppression. They also use various images that relate the body with different organisms of nature. The narrators love for Joe’s body filled with hairs like that of an animal is the best example for this. It is not Joe’s

character that attracts the woman in the narrator but his resemblance to an animal in the lap of nature.

There is a mixing of past and present in the novel. Past keep appearing in the form of memories of the narrator. The narrators past life and her bitter experiences through her relationship with her teacher are known to the readers through her reminiscences. He was the person who compelled her to abort their child to save his marital life. This is the murderous deed that haunts her and leads to her emotional death. As the nature of Canada is victimized by the Americans (the killed heron and dead bodies of animals), the female body and mind is victimized and destroyed by the patriarchal society. At first the narrator believes that Anna and David were a happily married couple but during their stay in the cabin she realizes that Anna is just a puppet in the hands of David. He even hates her without makeup as he thinks her natural self is incomplete without the artificiality of makeup. She is a toy in his hands when it comes to sex and contraception. David even forces Anna to strip in front of Joe for taking pictures. This clearly indicates men's view of women as objects rather than fellow beings. In the same manner men fail to realize that the nature is alive and regards it as a non-living being and thus depleting it. The living world and the non-living world share a symbiotic relationship with each other. In Atwood's novels the non-living schemata and the living world comprising of humans, birds, trees, lake, rain etc. are very much a part of her inner world as her choices and feelings. The vista of the region where her novels are set becomes an integral and imminent part of her writing.

The mystical vision of her life arises when she dives into the lake in search of her father. The old caves that she discovers give her the vision of a dead child that she assumes to be her aborted child. This dive helps her to merge with nature and reclaim her identity. This can be compared to the mystic experience that Mrs. Moore experiences when she enters the Marabar Caves in E.M.Foster's *A Passage to India*. In close association with nature both the

narrator and Mrs. Moore experiences a moment of realization. This realization makes the narrator leave everyone and she starts a new life in the island in complete harmony with nature. She discards language, clothes and food which are the inventions of the capitalist patriarchy.

Ecofeminist writers Carolyn Merchant emphasises on the significance of celebration of body. She refers to the body as the 'primary environment'. When the narrator becomes aware of the life that is sprouting in her womb she decides to embrace her body in the naked form and to grow her child away from the corruption of artificiality and cruel patriarchy. She frees herself from the rules set upon her by the patriarchy and becomes a child of nature. She immerses herself into nature up to the point she goes insane. In different mythologies women and nature share a common bond. In Greek Mythology, Artemis is called the goddess of wildlife and Demeter the goddess of harvest and fertility. In Baltic Mythology, Zeme is the goddess of the earth and Medeina the goddess of forests, trees and animals. In Hindu Mythology, Sita is termed as the daughter of nature and even fire was not able to hurt her as she is nature personified.

The patriarchy has an attitude to commoditize women as the 'other' and himself as the 'self' and the ecofeminist writer's questions this. These writers believe that this distinction results in hierarchy and oppression of the female race. The patriarchy also classifies the nature as the other because nature is also been imagined as feminine. In the conclusion of the novel, the protagonist realizes that leading a hidden life in the island makes her a fugitive rather than a survivor. She decided to free herself from the clutches of patriarchal cruelty and become an active member of the society and thus emerging as a powerful woman. She says,

“This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do

will ever hurt anyone...withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death”(206).

Here the narrator can be compared to *Shakthi*, the goddess of power and strength in the Indian mythology who is unstoppable by any force of the universe. Nature itself is unstoppable when it comes to natural disasters. In the ability of destruction also women and nature are at par with each other.

Atwood has created *Surfacing* as a perfect example of ecofeminism and as a ‘master narrative’. She structures the reality of this novel according to experience as well as landscape. Any narrative gains power through the landscape of its existence. The great poet Puran Singh in his poem *Ghar ki Gahal Changi* (How Wonderful is the Woman in Home) does not portray woman as a Freudian sign and as an object of suppression rather treats her as having the cosmic ability and aesthetic power to convert a red earthen pot to an intoxicated object going under the water like a sufi saint. He says that ‘she listens to the music of morning birds, but it is not just the music of Pythagorean numbers, it is *Kirtan*, the music in which the wonder and beauty of this universe is sung. When she gives water to drink or cooks food to eat, it tastes like Nam, the meditative remembrance of the most beautiful’. This is how Atwood wants women and nature to be treated. Atwood hopes for a society that is devoid of differences and that respects women and nature rather than exploiting it. *Surfacing* is not only quest of a woman for her inner self but also a narrative on the land use patterns by the capitalist society.

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