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The Depiction of The Exploitation of Nature through Literature: A Case Study of Margaret
Atwood's *surfacing*

Abstract

During the last few decades the nature has undergone various kinds of threats and issues as a result of the excessive human interventions. Ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between the environment and human beings and it also describes how the connection between man and nature is depicted in literature. Ecocriticism helps to protect the rights of nature and also promotes a better understanding of nature and its problems. Ecocriticism has a significant role in literature because it aims to present how the writers concern about the environmental crisis through their writings. Literature tries to generate a positive approach towards the environment and to build a society with strong environmental attitudes. The relationship between literature and nature has been radiated through various writers and their writings. Many writers discuss the connections between man and nature through literature. The development and the industrialization pave the way to change the attitude of man towards nature. This paper is an attempt to analyse the relationship between the nature issues and the literature through the eyes of Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*. This novel points out the human interaction with nature and presents the nature which is exploited and oppressed by the modern society.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environment, Literature, Patriarchal society.

Nature and literature are closely related to each other and many natural elements are seen in the writings of Ralph Waldo, Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. As an interdisciplinary study of environment and literature, Ecocriticism analyses the mentality and attitude of mankind towards environment. The connection between nature and literature is reflected through the writings of various writers who try to establish the relevance of the preservation of nature and its impact on the society. Ecocriticism deals with the study of the relationship between environment and literature. Mrs. Suka Joshua in her essay “Atwood’s Abysmal World and its Vanished Visionary Gleam (An Ecocritical Investigation of Margaret Atwood’s Futuristic Novels)” expresses that “Eco-concerned writers often give disturbing description of nature and its decline, intended to impugn both our ignorance and our developmental greed” (102).

Ecocriticism or ecological criticism is a movement which arises as a reaction against human being’s dominating attitude towards nature. In the present age, the degradation of nature plays a critical role in the development of human society. Ecocriticism, the combination of both ecology and criticism, was coined in 1970s which throws light into the relationship between literature and the environment. Ecocriticism tries to evoke the awareness of environmental problems in the minds of human beings. Kate Rigby in his essay Ecocriticism, says,

For environmentally committed literary critics and culturally theorists, attempting to reconcile their love for the more-than-human natural world with their professional engagement with works of human culture, this has meant that critique has often taken a back seat to recuperation. (159)

Ecocriticism is not only the study about the interdependence between nature and human beings but also the interrelationship with each other. Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm,

William Rueckert, Lawrence Buell and Glen A. Love are some of the renowned ecocritics. The term 'Ecocriticism' is first seen in the essay of William Rueckert "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Literature" in 1978. The presentation of the non human environment through the lens of literature is one of the major aspects of Ecocriticism. The present day issues such as deforestation, global warming, population explosion and environmental pollution are clearly depicted in Ecocriticism. Ecocritical writers try to explain the description about the destruction of the nature and the consequences of the declination of the environment and the natural resources. Avik Gangopadhyay shows the relationship between nature and human beings through his book, *Literary theories and Criticism Beyond Modernism*,

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subjects the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of languages and literature. (282)

Canadian literature reflects the notions on frontier life, nature and the issues related to Canada. The natural images and the problems related to the nature and human beings are the main topics related to the writings of Atwood. Margaret Atwood, a Canadian feminist writer and novelist describes the conflicting relationship between the technology and nature and also the exploitation of nature by the patriarchal society through her novel *Surfacing*. Margaret Atwood uses her famous novel *Surfacing* as a powerful weapon against the destruction of environment in the name of development and urbanization. One of the major themes of the novel is that how human beings treat the nature and the natural resources in the technological society. Many technical experiments and innovations and also the use of the industrial wastes

pave way to the decline of the ecology. She also portrays the after effects of the misuse of the radioactive substances and pesticides which are the part of industrialization.

Surfacing is the novel in which she describes the changing ecological situation through the eyes of the nameless protagonist and she portrays nature as the real life giver of the society. In *Surfacing* the protagonist returns to her motherland after a long period to search for her missing father. In the novel, the protagonist goes away from the city way of life and tries to be one with the natural way of life. She wants to live in the natural atmosphere rather than in the city which is the male constructed artificial one. She expressed her hatred towards the Americans who destroy the nature and exploit the natural resources of Canada. Through this novel the writer tries to express that the Americans invade the Canadian land, exploit the natural resources and spread diseases and violence throughout their land. The protagonist reveals, "I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have seaplanes for heir"(1).

The novel gives the picture of how people spoil environment in the name of progresses and developments. Her observations are seen through her words, "the white birches are dying" (1). She observes the changes occurred in her village, "the two roads joining here but widened-rock blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air, needles reddening" (9). The novel deals with many natural damages such as cutting of trees and pollution of nature. Though the protagonist leads a city life which is far away from natural relationship, she tries to create an affinity with nature and also to protect nature from all human exploitations and oppressions.

One of the major themes of the novel is the exploitation of the animals for the satisfaction of the greed of the human beings. David gives the picture, "This country is founded on the bodies of dead animals. Dead fish, dead seals, and historically dead beavers,

the beaver is this country what the black man is to the United State” (33-34). The hanged heron is the symbol of the American destruction of the Canadian environment. The description of the heron reveals the oppression and over exploitation of the nature by the male dominated society. “A blue heron lifts from a bay where it’s been fishing and flaps overhead, neck and beak craning forward and long legs stretched back, winged snake” (57).

Her empathy for nature and the living things can be revealed through her attempt to release the frogs that she had caught to trap the fish. She recollected her school days in which how each frog was dissected for the educational purposes. Many living creatures have to sacrifice their life for the sake of science and technology. “Anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: We practiced on them first” (115). The protagonist projects her concern for the environment and the importance of the conservation of the nature from all types of exploitation and oppression. The process of destruction can be compensated or reconciled through the power of degeneration and creation of the nature and the natural resources. In order to unite with nature, the protagonist decides to go away from the city life which is always against the preservation of nature. *Surfacing* depicts the clear picture of the concern and sensitivity of women and the cruelty of men towards nature. From the novel it is clear that men exploit environment not to satisfy his needs but to fulfill his greed. “They’re the kind who catches more than they can eat and they’d do it with dynamite if they could get away with it” (60).

Ecocriticism wants to dismantle the Anthropocentrism in which human beings are considered as the central figure and tries to keep nature as the centre in which all living beings are given equal position in the society. This concept of nature writing is clearly portrayed by Margaret Atwood in her novel *Surfacing*. The novel starts with the journey of the nameless protagonist who is going back to her motherland after many years. This novel is a warning against the consequences of the exploitation of nature which results in the

disappearance of the life from the earth. Through her writings Atwood shows her responsibility to make aware of the people about the negative impact of the environmental exploitation.

Surfacing is a novel which has given the idea of how men treat and destroy the nature for their satisfaction and interests. In this novel, the protagonist identifies herself with nature, landscape and the animals. In the beginning of the novel she feels disappointment when she noticed the changes such as the concrete bridge and the paved roads. She finds that the people who have great position and power in the society destroy the nature in the name of development. "The garden would go but the cabin would survive, the hill would become an eroding sand island surrounded by dead trees" (107).

Surfacing reflects the importance of the preservation and protection of the ecosystem. The protagonist undergoes a journey through nature and meditates on the changing situation of the modern society. Atwood tries to establish a connection between nature of Canada and the protagonist both are oppressed and ill treated by the patriarchal society. In the first part of the novel, the protagonist comes to the point that the environment that surrounds the Canadian people is exploited and disregarded by the human greed, pollution and technology. Throughout the novel the protagonist reveals the truth that human beings are the parts of the nature in which they live and the separation between nature and men is impossible.

Nature is the real factor behind the existence of the human society. The sustainability and preservation of the nature are inevitable to the real development and the welfare of the modern society. The human beings cannot uphold themselves without the support of the nature. So the preservation of the nature and the protection of the natural resources play a vital role in the present age. Kulwant Singh in his essay "Ecocritical Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*" says,

Ecocriticism is not only the application of ecology and ecological principles but also the study of literature and theoretical approach to the interrelations of nature, culture and sometimes even supernatural elements in nature. It attempts to explore the expressions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse (18).

Since the over exploitation of the natural resources question the stability of the earth, the relevance of Ecocriticism has a prominent place in the literary studies. Margaret Atwood's novels always picture the atrocities upon nature and women and also convey the image of nature. The novels of Atwood make clear that how the industrialization and development swallow up the natural resources and destroy the balance of the earth through their various inventions. Ecocriticism invites the people to concentrate on the after effects of the advent of various technologies. She identifies herself with the lifeless logged woods, the frog and the hanged heron. *Surfacing* deals with Atwood's complaint against the abuse of the technologies which lead to the domination, alienation and dehumanization.

Modern way of culture and the industrialization pave way for the ecological issues and environmental problems. The protagonist is depicted as the true lover of the nature who collects the branches of the trees and uses it in a useful way without exploiting the nature. The mother of the protagonist is portrayed as the nature lover who has a great intimacy with birds and other natural elements. The women in the novel are more associated with nature than men in the society. Her mother says, "Don't bother them and they won't bother you" (59). Though women are more associated with nature, the cruelties of men are clearly depicted in the novel. The brother of the protagonist imprisons the insects and the men of America use to kill the animals. They kill the animals not to satisfy their necessity but to satisfy their greed. In this novel both nature and women are trapped and oppressed by the male dominated society. The heron, frog and fish which are killed by men reveal the victimization and the pathetic situation of the animals under the patriarchal system. The

relationship of exploitation between nature and Americans hurts the mind of the protagonist.

She says,

Further in the trees they didn't cut before, the flood are marooned, broken and gray white tipped on their sides, their giant contorted roots bleached and skinless, on the sodden trunks are colonies of plants, feeding on disintegration, laurel, sundew the insect eater, its toe nail-sized leaves sticky with red hairs. Out of the leaf nests the flowers rise, pure white, flesh of gnats and midges petals now, metamorphosis (161).

The novel begins with the explanation of the degradation of the environment. The water pollution, threatening of the marine creatures, dumping of wastes and the oil spills from the huge tankers are the main threats of the nature in the novel. People extract the natural resources without any considerations to the consequences of this ill treatment. In *Surfacing*, the protagonist reacts against the cutting of huge amount of trees by using new instruments. "The trees will never be allowed to grow that tall again, they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scarce as whales" (40). The new technologies become instruments for the destruction of nature. Neeru Tandon and Anshul Chandra in *Margaret Atwood: A Jewel in Canadian Writing* says, "She survives on mushrooms, plants and berries. She merges with the forest, descending even further along the phylogenetic scale to the level of plants" (57). The protagonist says about her mother "Sometimes she would take breadcrumbs or seeds out from the bird feeder tray and wait for the jays, standing quiet as a tree, or she would pull weeds in the garden; but on some days she would simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest" (46). The protagonist's mother considers that the nature is the inevitable factor of her life and happiness. The protagonist of the novel says against the anthropocentric approach "...there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience or pity; for them the only things worthy of life were human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks,

laminated. It would have been different in those countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor or the child of a god, at least they would have felt guilt” (122).

Ecocriticism attempts to raise the consciousness of the people regarding nature. Ecocriticism is an inevitable field of literary study which always helps the readers to establish a close relationship with nature. It makes people aware of the fact that the changes in the style of human life affect the sustainability of environment also. So the Anthropocentric concept should be changed and the concept of non human world should be considered. Modern man must recognize that the technological development and industrialization result in the destruction of the nature and all these pattern of growth do not support the sustainability of the environment.

The environmental degradation has a crucial role in the present modern society. The interventions of human beings have a vital role in the devaluation and the degradation of the environmental hazards and other natural problems and issues. Margaret Atwood has a keen observation and ecological consciousness on the present situation of the environment. *Surfacing* deals with the connection between human beings and nature and the importance of the preservation of nature in the human society. Margaret Atwood strongly opposes the human centered attitude of the patriarchal society and the ill treatment of nature by the male centered society. The narrator tries to express her fear and anxieties about the development of various kinds of modern technologies and the after effect of all these inventions and developments. The modern culture tries to steal the inner peace of the common people through the destruction of the environment and the over exploitation of the natural resources in the name of the welfare and development of society. Literature has shown great affinity with nature and Ecocriticism always explicit the idea of the earth centered aspects in the literature.

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