

Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood's Novel *Surfacing*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood being the most significant Canadian novelist, poet and critic is chiefly popular for her writing about several social problems. This research paper chiefly analyses the depiction of ecological consciousness and its resemblance with women's condition in Margaret Atwood's widespread novel *Surfacing*. It is one of the most influential and pioneering novels of Margaret Atwood. It is observed that throughout the book, she tries to convey her concern about the planet earth. The novel primarily focuses on the negative effect of so called modern and advance technological development and human centered world on mother earth. Simultaneously, the novel also portrays the struggle of an unnamed protagonist and the narrator against the brutality of modern world. In the novel Atwood effectively tries to build the strong connection between women and nature.

Keywords: *Margaret Atwood, Ecological consciousness, Women's condition, Conservation, Surfacing.*

Introduction

Canada is not only the second largest country in the world but also it has the long history of colonial powers on it. The country which is invaded as well as ruled by the French, English colonies and the native Americans. They all left the permanent impression on Canada's aboriginal culture. Canada got its independence from British empire at the end of world war after almost one hundred and fifteen years of enslavement. The famous quote of Ezra Pound is justly relevant to contemporary Canadian literature. She says, "Literature does not exist in a vacuum". Modern Canadian literature also addresses the foremost problems such as identity crises, environmental disruption and gender role etc.

The term ecofeminism is a amalgamation of ecology and feminism. To understand ecofeminism, we need to first understand the term 'feminism'. It is nothing but cultural, social,

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legal freedom and equality of women. Within patriarchal society which have hampered women from recognizing their productive and creative opportunities. For instance, most of women are allowed to go and work in order to earn their livelihood. The man in the society always allow a woman to accomplish her desires and dreams. Nevertheless, the concept of allowing someone to do something shows once superiority over a person. Feminism speaks against this ideology; the feminist says a woman should do something only if she wants to do it not because a man in the family allows her to do or doesn't allow her to do. But unfortunately, women are taught the presuppositions about the male superiority. In the great Epic Paradise lost Milton says that Eve was created from the rib of Adam which shows that even in literature women are represented as inferior and submissive. Feminist writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Virginia Woolf speaks against all such stereotypes which are forced upon women from centuries.

On the other hand, the tremendously crucial issue that human being faces today is the environmental crises and degradation of land which is nothing but the result of human activities. Based on this, the term ecofeminism becomes highly pertinent to study in this current scenario. In this paper the researcher tries to take an detailed study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) from an ecofeminist viewpoint. It's been observed that the novel shows the true picture of how power and domination subjugate both women and nature equally.

The World War II has completely changed the entire world. It has reached to the summit of success and development. Industrialization and capitalism were the reason which made the human being more self-centered and money oriented. The association of man with nature is replaced by technological advancement which eventually resulted into environmental disruption. Man has been continuously exploiting nature in the name of progress. M.H Abrams in his book *Glossary of Literary Terms* seeks to throw some light relating to environmental crisis has appropriately remarked as:

“By the later part of the century there was a widespread realization that the earth was in an environmental crisis, brought on by the industrial and chemical pollution of the biosphere, [...] the depletion of forests and of natural resources, the relentless extinction of plants and animal species, and the exploitation of the human population beyond the capacity of the earth sustain it.” (72)

According to Abrams, modernization results in misuse of nature. The inconsiderate research and unkind experimentations in science and technology is the main reason of disastrous climate change. However, there are few writers and critic, especially in Canadian literature who try to

express and convey through their writing about the alarming reality of ecological deterioration. They also fight against the devastation of the nature in the name of growth.

Margaret Atwood is one of those revolutionary writers who give voice to environmental concerns in her writings. In her works, she talks about various significant matters such as, the condition of women, Canadian wilderness and picture of native lives effectively. In most of her works, the characters show their closeness with natural world rather than modern life. Atwood describes the condition of women and nature in a single parameter. It is pertinently observed in her works that, the way men exploit women, the advancement in science and technology exploits nature. Many of her novels represent the difference in city and rural lifestyle. Her novel *Surfacing* can be studied with many different approaches, such as, feminism and post colonialism. However, in this paper the researcher tries to explore it with the ecologist perspective.

Ecofeminism

“Ecofeminism suggests that an end to the oppression of women is bound up with ecological values, and that women should be centrally concerned with ending the exploitation of the ecosystem (Collard, 1988). Ecofeminism has been particularly strong within radical feminism and within the Green Movement.”
(Collins Dictionary of Sociology)

The feminist movement is divided into different waves it is a struggle of more than two centuries for the recognition of women's social and political rights. The first wave of feminism was mainly about women right to vote and the basic legal rights. The second wave feminism expanded the struggle to include the issues like sexuality, familial issues, the workplace and reproductive rights etc. Now, ecofeminism is a branch of feminism which arouse with third wave feminism. Ecofeminist speaks about the relation between women and nature as well as culture and nature. The similarities between oppression of nature and women, the way men dominate women and human beings dominate Nature. One can witness and compare William Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem ‘Nutting’ in which the boy relishes in the beauty of hazelnuts in the forest and suddenly rebels against the peace and tears down the branches cruelly. This can be compared with the rape of virgin woman. The ecofeminist equates nature and women as they both share same feminine attributes such as caring, nurturing and reproducing etc. and that's why we all call it ‘Mother Nature’. This all created intimate relationship between women and environment and have major role in protecting it.

Depiction of Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood's Novel *Surfacing*

Margaret Atwood is celebrated as the most significant writers of contemporary literature. She has written more than fifty books of different genres. She was born in Ottawa, Ontario, and spent most of her life in northern Ontario and Quebec. *The Handmaids Tale*, *The edible woman* and *Surfacing* are some of the widely read novels which gave her international recognition. The unnamed heroine of the story is a young girl who returns to the island, Northern Quebec, where she has spent most of her childhood year. Even though she came back to the natural world in search of her missing father, the journey helped her to realizes the difference between her true self and her fake construct as soon as she re come across this natural world.

The impact of nature on human lives is observed in the novel by the protagonist 's return to the natural world. Being close to nature, she realizes the victimization of women and she decides to accept her real self and spend her remaining life in the diversity of natural world. Francoise d'Eaubonne is the French writer and critic who has coined the term 'ecofeminism in 1974 in her book 'Le Feminisme ou La Mort'. Throughout the book, she tries to speak the women to pave the way to save the planet called earth. Ecofeminism says that the subjugation of women and nature as similar. According to ecofeminists the patriarchal culture is responsible for any kind of oppression imposed on the earth, whether it is women's or nature's exploitation. Ecofeminist raise their voice to remove all kind of discrimination on the earth. "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, and I am a place." - (*Surfacing*, 236)

Surfacing is one of the most influential and pioneering novels of Margaret Atwood. The protagonist of the novel is a young woman who attracts towards the city life and runs away from the simple and peaceful island where she was living with her parents. However, she realizes the city life is not as beautiful as she was thinking and it is full of betrayals and fake relationships. When she got the news of her missing father she returns to her island and while searching for her father she realizes that the way she was violated the sacred mother earth is also violated by human being. She finds similarities in her own condition and the condition of ecosystem around her which is expressed in the very first line of the novel: "I can't believe me'm on the same 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 sea-planes for hire." (*Surfacing*, 3)

In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood tries to establish her deep concern about environmental predicaments originated by American power companies. The protagonist of the novel observes and relates her own oppressed condition with Canadian wilderness. Her assimilation with nature is the source of her contemplation and transformation. All the major characters in *Surfacing* explores the journey of an island which is set in Quebec in order to find the protagonist's missing father. Her father was a botanist. After her mother's death he kept himself aloof from the outside world and started living alone in remote island. While in search of father, the protagonist revisits the lake which is her native land. The purity and tranquility of nature made her recall the remembrances of childhood. And the search of father soon transformed into the internal quest. In the company of nature, she finds all the inner feelings she has suppressed in her urban lifestyle. In this expedition she also contemplates on her broken marriage and her aborted child, the reason she was separated from her parents. She could not explain her decision to them due to their conservative opinions about marriage. Therefore, the protagonist has painfully remarked as:

“Their own innocence, the reason I couldn't tell them; perilous innocence, closing them in glass, their artificial garden, greenhouse. They didn't teach us about evil, they didn't understand about it, how could I describe it to them? They were from another age, prehistoric, when everyone got married and had a family, children growing in the yard like sunflowers; remote as Eskimos or mastodons.” (184)

The protagonist was accompanied by her friends David and Anna, a married couple and Joe and her Boyfriend. Even though the protagonist is familiar with the land, it is completely different experience for her partners. The ecological destruction is observed in various events such as, David taking pictures of dead heron hanging on the tree is a symbol of cruelty against birds and animals. David also display his insensitivity towards nature by taking pictures of destructed nature. Whereas, the protagonist who has spent her childhood is stunned to see the same place in such an annihilation. She observes the adverse effects of the technological development and tourism industries on the natural environment of her native place. She takes her first step against this degradation by breaking David's camera and films. She also decides to stay back in the island alienation herself from the city life. The protagonist sees a likeness of her own tragedy in the Canadian wilderness. She shows an alarming concern for nature and makes the reader develop the women-nature correlation. The dying of birches is a result of disease caused by technological enhancement which Atwood compares with 'Americanism'. The protagonist's feeling of pity for those birches signifying that for Canadian, nature is considered as their trait and this is contrasted with those Americans who brutally killed the

heron. But when they turned out to be Canadians, Atwood remarks promptly that: “if you look like them and think like them then you are them.” (Surfacing, 165).

There are some more finest reactions of protagonist after visiting the land after a break of several years which expresses her deep-rooted melancholy:

“The white birches are dying” (1); “dead elm skeletons’ (5); “cuttings dynamited in pink and grey granite” (5); “Nothing is the same. I don’t know the way anymore” (10); “the two roads joining here but widened – rock blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air, needles reddening” (13); “...business is bad this year ...on account a word is around the lake’s fished out. They’re going to other lakes...” (30).

Throughout the novel Atwood is trying to make her reader understand that any kind of environmental destruction, be it controlling dams or cutting trees, it disturbs the ecological settings.

That protagonist soon becomes disappointed and made her realize that she could acquire identity only with the nature. The novel portrays the picture of relation between the exploitation of the protagonist by her lover with the exploitation of nature by human being. This changes the whole perspective of her life and she becomes more concerned not only for women’s liberation but her duties towards nature too. American industries in the novel play the role of hegemonic power causing destruction of nature. The industries cause the contamination and pollution due to garbage and machineries which eventually invades wilderness. According to Atwood, Americans use Canadian wilderness to satisfy their selfish needs of hunting and fishing. This is the chief reason that Atwood dislikes the American modernity which is another way of colonizing nature. Atwood’s protagonist reminiscences her childhood spent on the land which was not even affected by war effects. It was extremely tranquil and peaceful period to live in. she expressed her madness and transformation by refusing modernization and choosing to live like birds and animals in the forest, close to natural world.

The condition of the protagonist can be clearly compared with the condition of environmental destruction in many ways. The abortion, her relation with parents and husband display her the emotional and artistic death. Being powerless she was exploited and abused by the men in her life. Which eventually makes her realize that nature offers no individuality, and she affirms herself to re-emerge and recuperate into society. She reveals the dichotomies and conflicts in both her own life and the male dominating society around her. To take this journey towards self-realization and to regain her identity, she moves forward towards the natural world

Atwood strongly emphasizes the point that one can realize the space between one's natural self and the materialistic structure only in the company of nature. Likewise, while seeking her absent father, in the wilderness and under the lake, she identifies the disastrous amount to which the natural world is victimized by modern world. The feeling of awareness evolves in her when she compares her own circumstances with this devastation. She recognizes the truth that Men destroy nature as well as women just for their own fulfilment. She understands that the way she has been dishonored, the holiness of this planet is also violated and the natural environment is completely ruined. Atwood demonstrates the difference between the treatment men and women offers to mother nature.

Fishing in the lake is a symbolic representation of trap. the protagonist realizes that she is not different from those fish who is entrapped in her own situation. She also remembers the game in her childhood, stabbing the doll which actually could be demonstrated as her abortion. Preying and hunting done by men just for their fun is the symbol of violation against the environment. Gradually, the narrator feels the pain by the tribulations are done to the environment, birds and animals. She is also offended by Joe and David's recording of the fish's innards. And she decides not to kill fish again: "I couldn't anymore, I had no right to, we don't need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, this act. Violation, for pleasure, recreation they call it." (*Surfacing*, 153).

Another incident is when she releases frogs into the lake, recalls her memories from childhood when she released the frogs caught by her brother. It reminds her to the aborted child which subsequently helps to construct the anger against the patriarchal brutality. She also remembers her childhood drawing which has everything green and colorful. On the contrary to that her brother used to draw pictures of war and death which symbolizes the violation of nature.

The protagonist is also annoyed with the relationship of her companions David and Anna. She finds David dominating over Anna in various ways. She observes Anna humiliated and oppressed by her partner David. There are incidents in the novel which draws the attention of protagonist towards the similarity between nature and female body which are equally seen as a source to be colonized and dominated. Anna's act of running around the lake naked, reminds her of burnt leeches swarming to the lake. David forces Anna to remove her cloths for clicking her pictures besides the dead heron. Anna's nude photograph with dead bird symbolizes women's inferior status in patriarchal society. The protagonist attempts her first protest against such humiliation of women and nature by breaking David's camera. She tries to give justice to

the female body by destroying the camera film. The camera which represented the phallic power used to rape Anna's image. It effects on Anna like, "bazooka or strange instrument of torture." (173)

The protagonist feels profound compassion for the environment when she recalls the memories of her abortion. She realizes that rejuvenation in the company of nature is the only way to recover from the breakdown: "Human beings are not radically separate from nature; that the fulfilment of our humanity is profoundly linked with learning to appreciate the nature within us and without." (43)

She eventually regrets that she abandoned nature and accepted materialistic city life. She actually disrupted nature by killing her foetus. However, she tries to recompense for this act. She resolves to bear a child which will be born and grow up in the natural world, far away from the modern lifestyle:

"This time I will do it myself . . . 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, as god, I will never teach it any words." (209)

In order to be one with nature she decides to give away her clothes and live like animals. She tries to connect her life with the other creatures in the environment. She starts eating mushrooms, plants and fruits for survival. She unites with forest and finds that her life has completely transformed. She feels:

"Through the trees the sun glances; the swamp around me smolders, energy of decay turning to growth, green fire. I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish and other herons. 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." (217)

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* is the true depiction of ecological feminism as the incidents and the characters of the novel represent oppression of women and nature equally. However, the unnamed protagonist of the novel is not standing against the patriarchy and she does not want to replace it with women power. She just wants a place where every part of nature lives in harmony and equality. Atwood highlights the unfortunate reality that men exploit women bodies for their selfish desires. They even control the natural process of childbirth which affect adversely on women's body. The protagonist also reflects over the

extreme use of reproductive technologies making women forget her true strength. Hence, she compares her abortion with the pickle taken out of the jar: “like a pickle out of a pickle jar.” (101). The protagonist’s blurred vision is also the result of contraception pills. Atwood here tries to create the relationship between protagonist’s damaged body with the Quebec Landscape. Throughout the journey the protagonist is shaken by the cruelty to nature and she gets away from all her companions as well as human world. In the end, she understands that human world could not help her in learning her true self. consequently, she turns to nature. It is paradoxical that though late, she finally finds herself with the spoiled landscape. She converts herself to the part of the nature by removing her marriage ring which was her superficial identity. In this process of transformation, the protagonist relates herself with the dead heron. The pitiless and cruel murder of the heron portrays a direct relativeness to the protagonist’s condition. The inhumane slaughter of the bird is equivalent to subjugation and harassment of women: “Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn’t they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill, otherwise, it was valueless. . . the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy.” (149)

As the novel presents problems relating to feminism and ecological disruption, it establishes a demonstrative representation of ecological feminism. Everything including the language, incidents and characters portrays a world that tyrannizes and rules over women as well as nature. However. The protagonist does not want to change the situation by replacing it with female dominance. She just desires the world where men and women live with peace and harmony. Moving away from so called developed world and returning to the wilderness around her, the protagonist submerges and unites with the natural world through a transformation into almost pure natural state. The borders between herself and the nature slowly diminishes: “I lean against a tree; I am a tree-leaning.” (*Surfacing*, 236)

Her closeness with nature increases her awareness of oppression of women. When she realizes the feminine consciousness, she rebels against the subjugation. Finally, she decides to acknowledge her own power and refuses to be a victim again. Being a faithful ecologist, she makes the nature her home as she recognizes that in this world everything becomes as pure as the nature itself. Here, in this world she doesn’t have to be scared of anything and anyone. There is no one to dominate her body as well as mind. She is the master of her own life. She decides to spend her remaining life under the wings of mother earth. Changing her own lifestyle becomes her a small step for recreating the new world that respect the serenity of nature.

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