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Exploring Mindscape and Landscape in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is globally acclaimed as one of the most significant Canadian novelists, poets, and critics. She is also best known for addressing a range of social issues in her writing. One of her notable novels, 'Surfacing,' published in 1972, examines the dominance of Western civilization as a patriarchal ideology that affects both nature and women. The novel illustrates how the foundational principles of rationalism and progress deteriorate into forces of domination, colonization, and a deepening divide between nature and women's culture. She offers a sharp critique of the rampant consumerism and capitalism present in modern society, particularly how American culture influences Canada and its natural landscape. The story also addresses concerns about this cultural impact on Canada and its environment, highlighting a force that aligns with patriarchal logic, which seeks to suppress the novel's central symbol of "surfacing." This metaphor illustrates the emergence of a suppressed feminine perspective. The paper explores the tension between the physical environment and psychological experience through several key dualities in the novel, ultimately emphasizing its ecofeminist themes.

Keywords: *Margaret Atwood, Surfacing, Women and Nature, Landscape, Mindscape.*

> *Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings"*
>
> (Prologue Margaret Atwood)

The writing and publication of Margaret Atwood's groundbreaking novel, 'Surfacing,' overlapped with the rise of both the feminist and ecological movements. This novel effectively captures many of the key social and political issues of its era. 'Surfacing' explores themes related to feminism and environmentalism, positioning itself as a significant literary example

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of ecofeminism. It can be regarded as a foundational or "prototypical" text within the ecofeminist tradition. According to Patrick Murphy's argument in "Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought," ‘Surfacing’ is among the earliest instances of the new generation of ecofeminist novels (98). Similar to this, Ariel Salleh asserts in "Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern" that the core idea of ecofeminism is acknowledging the similarities between men's conceptions of their "right" to manipulate nature and how they treat women (75). Karen J. Warren’s definition of ecofeminism clearly emphasizes the connection between the misappropriation of nature and the plight of women. She claims in her book “Ecological Feminist Philosophies” that ecofeminism addresses the relationship between the inferiority of nature to culture and the inferiority of women to men (122). However, in his book “Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason,” Plumwood remarks that nature differs from reason in that it encompasses feelings, the physical body, animality, the primal, non-human world, and even illogical states like faith and insanity. Nature emphasizes how these elements have historically been devalued in opposition to reasoned thought. The concept of nature frequently appears in social and philosophical theories. Dualistic thinking, which views reason and nature as distinct and conflicting forces, is frequently linked to it. This duality has been used to defend a number of oppressions, such as the dominance of women, non-human animals, and the environment (19).

In an essay, "How Did We Get Bad?: The Lessons of Surfacing" Jaidev evaluates Surfacing, a book by Margaret Atwood. He investigates issues of alienation, identity, and the decline in ties to the natural world. A past trauma left the unidentified female protagonist dealing with its aftereffects. He looks at how the protagonist struggles to confront these problems and eventually figure out how to reestablish a connection with herself and her surroundings in order to move on her path to self-discovery and recovery. He claims that it is a romantic novel with an anti-romantic edge, a feminist work that also goes beyond feminism, and a book that speaks to pagan and ecological sensibilities, especially for individuals who value nature. A romantic novel that presents romantic subjects like nature in a harsh and anti-romantic manner; a feminist text that goes beyond all "isms," even feminism. Many Indians, particularly those who consider fire, water, birds, trees, and animals to be sacred, will be influenced by this book's ecological and iconoclastic themes. Among the most significant and influential books of our time is Surfacing.

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"Surfacing" vividly illustrates the ecofeminist contrast between a masculine-dominated culture and a more feminine way of thinking. According to Fiona Tolan, ecofeminism is rooted in the belief that "nature is fragile and threatened" (43). An illustration of environmental deterioration at the start of the book "Surfacing" serves as a clear introduction to this issue:" the white birches are dying; the disease is spreading up from the south" (Atwood 1). The reference to "the south" subtly suggests that America is the source of this harm. The destruction of nature is highlighted throughout the narrative with descriptions such as "rocks blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air" (Atwood 10). Over time, the protagonist builds a strong bond with nature and starts to fight against the damage the "Americans" have created, despite her initial feelings of alienation from her environment. Her experiences reflect this developing sense of connection to nature. According to Fiona Tolan, the narrator connects herself as a woman with ecology and hence feels endangered and oppressed, which is consistent with ecofeminism. In Chapter 14, this alignment is most evident when she declines David's request to murder a fish. He stated, “the fish is whole, I couldn’t any more, I had no right to… these were no longer the right reasons” (Atwood 12). She finds the conventional justifications for acting violently toward nature no longer acceptable. The protagonist begins to connect her own wounded body—affected by a past abortion—to the unharmed body of a fish, which she has come to value and refuses to harm. As the novel progresses, her identification with nature deepens to the point where she no longer sees herself as human: “They mistake me for a human being… If they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me… and hang me up by the feet from the tree” (Atwood 190). She envisions being treated like other animals, particularly recalling the image of a disfigured heron hanging from a tree.

She and her mother, according to the narrator, are victims of a ratiocination-based culture. She stated, “She [the mother] hated hospitals and doctors; she must have been afraid they would experiment on her, keep her alive as long as they could with tubes and needles even though it was what they call terminal, in the head it always is; and in fact, that’s what they did” (Atwood 17). When she finds a corpse swinging upside down, she immediately recognizes her sense of victimhood. She says, “why had they strung it up like a lynch victim…to prove they could do it, they had the power to kill” (Atwood 118). An additional symbolic opposition is the link between men and culture or landscape, and women with intuition and the natural world. This division is clearly illustrated through the contrasting personalities of the narrator’s parents. Her mother becomes a key figure in shaping the narrator’s early sense of identification with nature. Although the narrator initially conforms to the values of society and “the law of the father,”

she recalls how her mother would often retreat into nature, “on some days she would simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest” (Atwood 49). Another clear vision has her mother standing beside a plate for the birds, holding something out; the blue jays were also present, and she was teaching them, one perched on her wrist with its wings partially showing, and another on her shoulder, both of them staring at her with astute thumb-like eyes (108). According to Carolyn Merchant, this imagery is consistent with "the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother" (Merchant 43).

In contrast to the narrator’s mother, the psychological and emotional traits associated with her father paint a vivid picture of a man grounded in logic and reason. The narrator describes him as an “eighteenth-century rationalist” (Atwood 34), emphasizing his unwavering belief in practicality and empirical knowledge. To him, the world operates like a complex machine, where, armed with the right manuals and instructions, one could achieve anything independently. He is depicted as a “Robinson Crusoe figure,” emblematic of self-reliance and mastery over one's surroundings. He views nature with a scientific prism that is often linked to colonial concepts, which is comparable to the viewpoint of intellectuals from the Enlightenment. The narrator comments, "Our father had gone on a long trip as he often did to investigate trees for the paper company or the government" (Atwood 78). This uncertainty raises doubts regarding the genuine nature of his work. Is he performing a government study, or is he a hidden operative for American interests? His portrayal represents a patriarchal, predatory, and imperialist attitude toward the natural environment. Through this lens, the parent emerges as a complicated person who embodies the conflict between knowledge and domination.

In the novel, the brother is heavily impacted by their father's viewpoint. He opens a kiddie laboratory and does studies on insects and other animals. The narrator recounts the scene as follows: “He kept them in jars and tins on a board shelf back in the forest, one of snakes was dead and several of frogs, their skin dry and their yellow Stomach much puffed up, and the crayfish was floating in the clouded water with its legs uppermost like a spider’s”(Atwood 132). This graphic represents an attempt to implant the father's scientific and emotionless viewpoint in his son. The father's rigid and analytical attitude to life resonates strongly within the family, casting a shadow over their interactions, particularly with his wife. As the emotional gap between them widens, she withdraws into a shell of reserve, her warmth progressively fading. In her mother's diary, the narrator discovers a heartbreaking insight: “All she put in it

was a record of the weather and the work done that day: no reflections, no emotions. She would refer to it when she wanted to compare the years, decide whether the spring had been late or early, whether it had been a wet summer" (Atwood 18). The depiction of this impersonal notebook, placed on a bedside table alongside decaying flowers and chrysanthemums, generates a deep sensation of grief. It demonstrates how even someone who is intimately connected to nature might struggle to find joy in life when limited to the sterile, mechanical existence enforced by her husband.

Anna is another important female character in the narrative, representing the ideal woman within a patriarchal system. Eleonora Rao remarks that Anna in Surfacing adopts 'masculine' ideas of view and interest. However, in her husband's opinion, she is still barred from the masculine intellectual realm and is perceived as a 'dumb' talking doll in connection to her body (Rao 138). Atwood presents Anna as completely confined: "locked in, she isn't allowed to eat, shit, cry, or give birth" (Atwood 169). She is not a whole person, but rather a passive extension of her spouse, David—a lifeless doll or robot. Despite David's ongoing maltreatment, Anna remains faithful to him, deliberately choosing society over nature, even if the choice dehumanizes her: "I'll be glad to hit the city" (Atwood 168). Her dependency on makeup, which her spouse insists on, demonstrates her alienation from the natural world and her conformity to artificial beauty standards. The narrator recalls her mother's disapproval of her childhood cosmetics attempt and advises Anna, "You don't need it here…there is no one to look at you" (Atwood 41). However, Anna seemed to have completely absorbed the male gaze, building her identity around it.

Aligned with the broader themes of postmodernism and ecofeminism, Atwood's novel emphasizes the theme of representation in both nature and art. Several characters, including the narrator, David, and Joe, are either artists or have creative ambitions, reflecting the novel's critical view of art as a possible instrument of male dominance. For instance, the camera serves as a powerful symbol of this control, representing the urge to capture and contain both nature and women. David and his crew attempt to create a film for an educational channel, capturing "samples" of Canadian nature and life, yet their so-called documentary, meant to offer an authentic view, is itself a distortion—an artificial, commercialized fragment of reality. This is evident in their treatment of the dead heron, which becomes merely another scene in their film, reducing a genuine environmental tragedy to a commodified spectacle. David says: "We need that; we can put it next to the fish guts" "Shit," Joe said "it really stinks." "That won't show in

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the movie," David said, "you can stand it for five minutes, it looks so great, you have to admit it" (Atwood 117). This is further illustrated when Anna is forced to strip off by David and Joe so that her naked body can be captured on camera for the movie; they demand that Anna appear in their way. They ask her to stand next to the hero who has passed away: "You will go in beside the dead bird, it's your chance for stardom, you've always wanted fame. You'll get to be on Educational TV" (Atwood 135). For leisure "education," which is a key idea in the patriarchal mindscape, both women and nature are represented. As Alice Ridout notes, they wish to do the same to the narrator, but she declines to be represented by David and Joe in the same manner as they did for Anna (79). Curiously, the narrator throws the movie into the lake, destroying it in a defiant gesture. Consequently, the masculinist mentality is opposed. The narrator is an artist as well, as was previously mentioned. According to him, he is what they refer to as a commercial artist, or an illustrator when the position is more pretentious. He works on magazines, posters, covers, and even advertising (9). Reflecting his role as a voice for patriarchal attitudes, the narrator's ex-husband dismisses women's artistic potential, insisting that she should pursue something practical instead, as he believes no significant work has ever been created by a female artist. What her Canadian employer finds most appealing is something they hope will also catch the attention of the English and American publishers. The monetization of art in the modern and postmodern periods, the marginalization of women artists, and the inferiority of Canadian art to the prevailing cultural mainstream in the United States and England are so highlighted. She makes an effort to be as close to nature as possible, much like an animal, and to avoid anything created during civilization. She keeps a blanket on hand to shield herself from the cold "until the fur grows" (182). She "crawls" back into the embrace of mother nature toward the end of the novel, much like a kid or animal would. The patriarchal order—the system of law and reason—designates the narrator as "mad" because she flees civilization.

Modern theorists such as Michel Foucault refer to language as discourse, which is utilized to exercise authority and foster logical thought. Power is important to civilizational language, politics, economics, and social interactions. "VOTEZ GODET, VOTEZ OBRIEN…THE SALAD, BLUE MOON COTTAGES ½ MILE, QUEBEC LIBRE… BUVEZ COCA-COLA

GLACÉ" (Atwood 11). These phrases and their referents are "symptomatic of the 'American' world …: recyclables,"(135) according to André Brink in his book 'The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino.'

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Through the narrator's final embracing of nature and return to it, the story offers a deeper understanding of ecofeminism. Linda Hutcheon highlights in his work “The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction” that the narrator's exploration of nature, particularly the island's actual and symbolic scenery, is a voyage for both an artist and a woman. Her objectives are to identify her identity, both personally and professionally connected to nature, to reestablish a connection with her gendered and personal past, and to learn more about herself on a moral and mental level(142). As a kind of atonement, she withdraws to the wooded lake area: "The wilderness becomes the place of her exile, where she becomes a creator" (Atwood 147). As she reconnects with the environment of her upbringing, she realizes how male-dominated social structures have separated her from her actual identity. Exploring familiar places—the land, the garden, and the old wooden cabin—she begins to rediscover lost pieces of her personality. She travels the same trails, works in her father's garden, and looks at her reflection on the lake's surface. Furthermore, she agrees with Indigenous beliefs on the land, realizing that their relationship with nature is not just spiritual but also vital to their sense of self. This worldview honors the intrinsic value of the Earth and acknowledges the profound human dependence on it. Hutcheon goes on to say: The protagonist's realization of the symbolic significance of her parents' marriage, a union that brought together... her mother, typically seen as the instinctive, intuitive compel whose legacy to her daughter is a picture of a child in her womb, and her father, the man of reason, the photographer/scientist, challenges but never erases our all too familiar separation of mind and body, intellect and emotion. Her father's endeavor to photograph—to fix life—has paradoxically resulted in death (physical and spiritual) and defeat by the forces of nature, much like the damaging 'American' hunters who reverse out to be Canadian and her friend's naughty play at filmmaking.

However, she recognizes that "To immerse oneself in nature is... to accept the natural within" (Atwood 147). Finally, she comes to this decision. She declines to be dominated and absorbed by the male-dominated environment, which includes her ex-lover and the anguish of a forced abortion. The silence surrounding these incidents promotes patriarchal control. Death symbols, such as the aborted foetus, her father, mother, and dead animals, portray a past marked by cold rationalism, inflexible dualities, American cultural supremacy, exploitation, alienation, and isolation. Her childhood artwork of the mother and infant serves as her ' mother's gift' and 'guide' to a matriarchal perspective that "everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive" (Atwood 159).

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To overcome her past passive innocence and bring about the decision that her "lost child... must be born, allowed" (191), the narrator uses her maternal strength at the end. She chooses 'to choose life,' committing herself to a more profound, psychological kind of 'worship' rather than any nationalist or feminist ideology (140). In order to confront and conquer the psychological conflicts that have shattered her sense of self, she draws on a spiritual strength. Her willingness to embrace life and nature causes her to undergo a complete metamorphosis: "I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly, the frees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark" (180). She compares her body to the soil, which sustains life, because she is prepared to start a new life of her own. The protagonist's body becomes an place of identification, a site similar to the environment, by merging with the terrain. The body and landscape become one; the blending of the emotions and physical fusion are both translated by free syntax and synesthetic combination in a space that is unrepressed and available for the engraving of feminine subjectivity. She goes through all stages of development in the forest, evolving from the animal with "no need for speech" to "a tree leaning" (181). Lastly, she is neither a tree nor an animal. She is a thing where animals and trees develop and move. She is a place.

This awareness of spirituality enables her to face her parents' deaths. She is now willing to face mortality and free herself from its grip by establishing her unique personality and distancing herself from her upbringing. By learning to accept others' defects and limitations, the narrator comes to grips with her own shortcomings and constraints, acknowledging her own agency and accountability. In an interview, Atwood expressed her concern about the way people ought to live and behave. No religious system has the right to condone or defend cruel or harmful behavior. The narrator imagines the child growing within her as a new Adam, the first truly human being, rather than a divine being. Near the end of the novel, she says "Americans can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied"(188). She acknowledges her past involvement in becoming a "killer," yet she also acknowledges her own victimization as a woman and social outcast. By making this shift, Atwood suggests that Canadians must reject the American paradigm of progress, which puts material achievement ahead of natural harmony, just as women must reject psychological enslavement to male dominance if they wish to restore their humanity.

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This expresses the essential premise of ecofeminism.: In his work 'The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology,' Despite being a cultural construct, Ynestra King acknowledges that nature-culture duality exists. However, we have the conscious choice to remain part of male society and not break the link between women and nature. Instead, we can utilize it as a starting point to develop a new culture and political system that embraces science and magic to the extent that it blends spiritual, logical, and intuitive forms of knowledge. Through them, we may envisage and build a free, sustainable society and change the nature-culture divide (23). The narrator deliberately distances herself from the patriarchal systems that formerly harmed her in the novel's concluding moments, viewing nature as her equal. After a while, she does rejoin society, but she is a different and regenerated person. As Daniel Schaub notes, because wilderness has changed its influence, she will need to return to society and live out her Canadian identity while remembering her time spent immersed in the terrain, or in her own body. It makes no expectations and offers nothing in return. The conclusion implies that internalization is temporary; the only practical remedy is to transcend the experience (98). Her ultimate understanding that humans and nature are not fundamentally different and that understanding and appreciating nature both inside and outside of ourselves is essential to achieving our own humanity serves as the catalyst for her redemption in day-to-day existence (King 43). She stands silently among "the trees," asking for nothing and giving nothing in return. She ultimately embraces the ecofeminist idea and rejects the false luxuries of civilization. She thus fully integrates into the intricate web of life, where previous limits vanish and she finds inspiration for a fresh start—one of which offers the possibility of a world that has been changed.

As a result, she eventually comes out of it renewed and unaffected by territorial delimitation, strict definitions, or uniformization. After gaining a sense of identity through putting down her body, the protagonist needs to return to civilization and recover her territory by altering patriarchal maps to take into account her reality rather than ignore it. To ensure a comprehensive experience, "she must pursue mental integration after emerging from her immersion in the body and scenery" (Schaub 99). Thus, from the ecofeminism point of view, the narrator ultimately attains a profound awareness of her inner world and its connection to nature by the end of the story.

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Conclusion

As a result, 'Surfacing' by Margaret Atwood offers a powerful examination of ecofeminism by merging the maltreatment of nature with the repression of women. The novel follows an unnamed female protagonist's journey into the Canadian wilderness, using her physical and emotional transformation as a powerful critique of patriarchal and colonial systems that seek to control both women's bodies and the natural world. As the protagonist reconnects with nature, her psychological and spiritual awakening reflects a return to a more intuitive, embodied way of living, free from the constraints of modern, mechanistic thinking. Atwood uses this journey to emphasize the importance of reclaiming a more holistic and interconnected relationship with the earth, challenging the destructive binaries that separate human and nonhuman, body and mind, nature and culture.

By dissolving the divides between the human and the nonhuman, the rational and the instinctual, Atwood confronts the rigid dualisms that form the foundation of Western philosophy. In this way, Surfacing emerges as a powerful act of resistance—a literary space where ecological awareness and feminist insight intersect. The novel is a pillar of ecofeminist fiction because it promotes a more respectful and reciprocal relationship with the natural world and the feminine by fusing the protagonist's changing mental landscape with the landscapes of her immediate surroundings.

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