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## Environmental Re-Imagination in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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### **Abstract:**

Eco-feminism is a movement which links ecology with feminism. Eco-feminists see the domination of women that bring about the domination of the environment. Eco-feminists argue that the men in power control the land, and therefore are able to exploit it for their own profit and success, and pleasure. In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), the protagonist embarks on a journey back into Nature. Her primary search for her father in Nature is essentially in the Canadian wilderness. *Surfacing* provides readers with a protagonist who must become a part of Nature to understand and accept herself. After a near-drowning experience, she essentially becomes one with Nature. At the end of the novel, she goes to the water one last time, which now accepts her as "part of the land". The aim of this paper is to define the nature and the parameters of the differences. It endeavors to explore how women in their daily lives enter into social relationships which are significantly different from those of men. This paper will seek to take an exhaustive study of the novel from an eco-feminist perspective.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Subjugation, Nature, Social Relationships, Psychological Breakdown.

Eco-feminism can be defined as a social movement which associates ecology with feminism. Eco-feminists reckon that the domination of women bring about the domination of the environment. Eco-feminists contend that the men in power control the land and therefore are able to exploit it for their own profit and pleasure. Andy Smith opines that eco-feminists are "mostly concerned about the oppression of women and the oppression of earth" (Smith: 21). Eminent eco-feminists consider that the domination of women over the years is directly linked to the environmental rape of the earth. Hence, issues of power, domination and subordination are quite critical to eco-feminism. As the term 'Eco-feminism' suggests it is a combination of ecology and feminism. According to Greta Gaard, "Eco-feminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities, is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Eco-feminist theorists consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism and other social inequalities" (Gaard np).

*Surfacing* (1972) is an eco-feminist novel concerning environment and nature. As a matter of fact, it establishes a representative literary model of ecological feminism. Quite a few events and incidents in the novel echo a world that suppresses both femininity and nature. The actual journey of the nameless protagonist's is the surface meaning whereas the deep meaning lays on the journey of discovery her individual identity. These two kinds of meaning which connects ecology with feminism brand the novel as an eco-feminist novel. The protagonist does not want to upset patriarchy and substitute it with women's dominance. She wants to fix a sort of harmony between women and men.

Like most of her contemporaries, Atwood has dealt with the theme of women and nature in quite a few of her novels such as *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1983) and *Cat's Eye* (1988). The writing and publication of *Surfacing* coincides with the emergence of the feminist and ecological movements and obviously reflects the concerns of its time. Power and domination directly oppress both the feminine world and the natural world. In *Surfacing*, the nameless protagonist commences a journey – a psychological journey that leads her directly into the natural world near her childhood home. Her primary search for her father in nature is basically in the Canadian wilderness. After a near-drowning experience, she becomes a part of Nature. She has appeased the nature "Gods" and they accept her. The narrator is an eco-feminist who returns to the developing island, Northern Quebec, with her three friends - Anna, Joe and David. The protagonist's search for her father serves as a pretext for her search for her inner-self which is observed through her gradual submersion into nature and towards mystical vision. At the end of the novel, she understands nature provides no identity and she holds herself ready for motherhood and for reintegration into society. In fact, her journey to Quebec made her examine the life of things and in the process she gets away from all – her friends as well as the American-Canadians who gratify in senseless cruelty to birds, trees and fish. Atwood writes:

At the midway pond the heron was still there, hanging in the hot sunlight like something in a butcher's window, desecrated, unredeemed. It smelled worse...the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted. (*Surfacing* 167)

The narrator unveils the dualities and incompatibilities in both her personal life and her patriarchal society. Colonialism and patriarchy are indicators of power structures that exploit. In Canada, colonial exploitation is viewed as exploitation of nature and women. Colonial hierarchies have gone far into the collective unconsciousness of Canada and have become metaphor for feminine and nature exploitation for women writers which bring about eco-feminism. 'Eco-feminism' or 'ecological feminism' is a term coined in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne. It is a philosophy/movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the natural environment. Nelson Joyce says, "Eco-feminism

bridges the gap between ecology and feminism: strands of analysis which have existed side by side over past decades without necessarily intertwining. By making explicit the connection between a misogynist society and a society which has exploited “mother earth” to the point of environmental crisis, eco-feminism has helped to highlight the deep splits in patriarchal paradigm” (Joyce n.p).

Eco-feminist theory associates the subjugation of women with the subjugation of environment/nature. More specifically, “Ecological feminism is the position that there are important connections – historical, symbolic, and theoretical – between the domination of women and the domination of nature, an understanding which is crucial to both feminism and environmental ethics” (Warren 235). Eco-feminism is quite critically addressed in Margaret Atwood’s novel *Surfacing*. Margaret Atwood is best known for her feminist/eco-feminist novels around the world. In *Surfacing*, Atwood projects a story of a protagonist without name in form of the narrator of the story. The title of the novel is very important because it unwrap the efforts of a person’s self-exploration which experiences many stages of physical troubles and mental traumas.

The protagonist sees the break between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she confronts nature. While looking for her missing father in the wilderness and under the lake, she knows the extent to which nature has been exploited by the Americans. The developing awareness of herself as a ‘victim’ is parallel to this acknowledgement. Men destruct nature and women for their merriment. The relationship between nature and man is the relationship of exploitation. As the famous eco-feminist Petra Kelly observes, “Women are sex toys for men, women’s lives count less than those of men; women who assert their independence and power are in some way defective” (Kelly: 118). The narrator actualizes that as she has been defiled, the sanctity of the Mother Earth is defiled and the ecological integrity, which means the independence of all species, is interrupted. Atwood shows man’s abuse and woman’s use of nature in *Surfacing*. The writer highlights the eco-feminist aspects at the initial stage of the novel where she talks about the dead white birches:

I can’t believe I’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)

The dying of birches in *Surfacing* is interpreted as a disease ensuing from technological expansionism which Atwood compares with Americanism. The narrator’s sympathy for the dying birches representing nature is taken as a Canadian attribute and this is contrasted with the two American who cruelly killed the heron. This propelled Atwood to say that, “if you look like them and think like them then you are them” (*Surfacing* 165). The heroine bitterly reacts to eating animals, stating she had no right to it and even suggests that killing a fish is worse than starting a war because there is always reason for killing living creatures.

The nameless protagonist finds a manifestation of her own catastrophe in the Quebec landscape. She conveys a deep fear for nature and assists the readers empathize the women-nature connection. In the course of her homeward journey she finds that “nothing is the same. I don't know the way anymore” (*Surfacing* 10). She has been estranged from the landscape of her country. Throughout the novel, Atwood reminds the readers of ecological destruction of older trees: “The trees will never be allowed to grow tall again, they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scarce as whale” (*Surfacing* 55).

Fishing in the lake is a metaphor which indicates entrapment. Soon, the female protagonist realizes that in her capacity for evil, she herself has been different from them. The fantasy of her childhood innocence breaks and she recollects a childhood game-the stabbing of the doll- which actually foreshadowed her abortion. The novel prompts the readers of the differences between natural predation and the hunting done by the man which is done for excitement of killing. This adds to the estrangement of modern man from the natural world. As Vandana Shiva points out, it is not hunting which leads to a violent relationship with nature: “it is the elevation of hunting to the level of ideology which does so” (*Staying Alive* 50). The narrator attracts attention to two such meaningless killing – the shooting of the heron and the explosions made at the lake by Americans who come for fishing. The narrator is deeply hurt by the environmental destruction and the brutal killing of animals. She is disgusted by Joe and David's filling of the fish's inards. She does not want to kill the fish herself, the second time: “I couldn't anymore, I had no right to, we don't need it, our proper food was fin cans. We were committing this act, this act. Violation for pleasure, recreation they call it. (*Surfacing* 153). The word re-creation has been ironically used here. Then she releases the frogs into the lake and this, in turn, triggers off memories relating to the release of the frogs bottled by her brother. His subsequent anger constitutes her first lesson in patriarchal pressure. The aborted child is also recalled as a bottled frog. Her childhood drawings consist of rabbits with their coloured egg houses” - and all that is “normal and green” (ibid 116). This is in contrast to her brother's drawings of war and death and as a grown-up his profession is one that involves violating the earth.

As J. B. Bouson says through David, “*Surfacing* draws attention to the oppression of women in a male-defined order of hierarchal and oppositional roles that empower men at the expense of women” (Bouson 43). Like nature, the female body is also seen as a resource to be exploited and marketed. The female protagonist recalls her childhood game ‘burnt leeches crawling to the lake’ when she sees Anna running to the lake naked and sand covered. In the lake scene, David forces Anna to take off her clothes for the movie *Random Samples* and pose “beside the dead bird” (*Surfacing* 172-73). Here, Anna is dragged down to inferior level of an animal in patriarchal culture. Some of the animals in the novel invite comparison with women as victims. David wants Anna to pose naked beside the dead heron. She is also compared to a tree in the novel. David jokes about the split beaver which is the national emblem of Canada. The

beaver, as Linda Hutcheon tells, was at first an appealing lure to European fur traders and colonizers, and then to American capital. The beaver image has connotations of pornographic reductions of women and also of Canada's history as a land raped and colonized by England and then by the US.

The narrator's self-image of animal victim is first indicated when the boys tie her to the tree in school and forget to release her. She feels she becomes an "escape artist of sorts, expert at undoing knots" (*Surfacing* 88). As an escape artist her escape route dwells thinking of herself as a victim and to take recourse to detachment and flight. She seeks her liberation through a regression to primitiveness which involves total immersion in environment to the extent of living like a wild animal. In her vision, her mother turns into a jay and her father into a fish-like creature. The eco-feminist effect is seen inherent the novel by the protagonist's return to the natural world. Before her "surfacing" takes place, she experiences a broad change in perception and as a consequence learns to encompass the natural world, curing herself in the process. She experiences the oppression of male world lacking the strength to fight for her survival and passively consents to abort her child. The empowering and dominating nature of her ex-lover is shown through her unnatural act of her abortion:

(The unborn child) was my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it to me, he wanted a replica of himself. (*Surfacing* 39)

The abortion exemplifies the eco-feminist sentiment that, "the implications of a culture based on the devaluation of life giving and the celebration of life taking are profound for ecology and for women." Her ex-lover feels no emotional attachment with the child, for him it is, "simple like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal" (*Surfacing* 185).

In almost all the novels of Margaret Atwood, women remained reconciled to their own interiority. Margaret Atwood draws attention to the fact that "the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it ruled it, and still dominate it today, are men" (Beauvoir: 557). Atwood emphasizes that men exploit the female/women bodies for their pleasure and sexual urge. They also endeavour to control the childbirth process which nature has specified only to women. The narrator also questions the excessive use of reproductive technologies. The modern techniques, in the guise of assisting woman, rob her of the ability to sense her bodily rhythms. Hence, she does not want the child to be taken out with a fork, "like a pickle out of a pickle jar" (*Surfacing* 101).

When the protagonist links her own life with those of the other creatures of nature, she is able to comprehend the rhythm of nature – its cycle of life and death. She deeply feels that in order to be one with nature; she has to shed her clothes to become like the victimized animals. She survives on mushrooms, plants and berries. She merges with the forest, descending even

further to the level of plants. After linking her life with the natural things, she feels that her life has been totally changed. She feels:

Through the trees the sun glances; the swamp around me smoulders, 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. (*Surfacing* 217)

It is because of the narrator's association with nature which raises her consciousness of victimization of women. When her feminine consciousness reaches its climax, the protagonist prepares for revolt against exploitation. She uses Joe to get pregnant but refuses to get married to him, as revenge upon her previous lover. Her rejection of Joe gives her enough confidence about her own power that she refuses to be a victim, "this above, all, to refuse to be a victim" (*Surfacing* 249). Because of women's lack of power women sections are severely exploited. Petra Kelly observes, "Women suffer both from structural oppression and from individual men" (Kelly: 113). After gaining much experience from the environment, the heroine does not allow herself to be dominated by men. She is very well aware that "the ultimate result of unchecked, terminal patriarchy will be ecological catastrophe...." (ibid: 118)

Like a true ecologist, she makes the earth her literal home for she knows that in the natural world all life is interrelated, teeming with diversity and complexity. She does not fear anyone. There is no one with her sacred mother earth. She abandons her civilization as it is destroying the biosphere. She may revive a culture that represents to seek harmony with nature. At the final stage of story in the novel, the narrator's merges with nature (environment):

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 *Surfacing*, the heroine remains nameless throughout the novel possibly because she represents the women folk who are exploited by the patriarchal society. Commenting on the namelessness of the heroine, Nancy A. Walker says that the narrator "lacks a clearly defined 'self' that can be named" (Walker 79). Being nameless the protagonist says to her friend Anna, "I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending" (*Surfacing* 162).

As the story of the novel progresses, the narrator discovers the natural world as her equal, denies falling into the same patriarchal trap that initially destroyed her, and reclaims her ability to trust. Though she does not return to society, she does so as a changed person. She realizes, "that 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" (Atwood 43). *Surfacing* symbolizes the feminine awareness and demonstrates a woman's battle to free herself.

Her connection with the people and nature arouses her cognizance of victimization of woman. When her feminist cognizance reaches its climax, the protagonist makes ready the ground for revolt against exploitation oppression. As Carol Christ says, narrator awakens, “from a male-defined world, to the greater terror and risk, and also the great potential healing and joy, of a world defined by the heroine’s own feeling and judgment” (Christ 325).

Eventually, the protagonist realizes that no human being can help her in discovering her real self and therefore, she turns to nature. It is only when she distinguishes herself with the discredited landscape that she discovers herself. She becomes part of the landscape; she discards her marriage ring, her name and her apparent identity. While at recovery process, the narrator starts to compare herself with the dead heron. The unnecessary killing of the heron exhibits a direct ecological parallel to the experience of the narrator. In the view point of Barbara H. Rigney, “the protagonist sees the heron as symbolic of her own psychological death” (Rigney 100). She feels pathetic due to the killing of the heron and compares it with oppression and harassment of women. Women’s association with fertility and men’s with environment abuse serves as a metaphor of the violation of women by men:

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.” (*Surfacing* 149)

The protagonist’s empathetic approach towards environment/nature is worth appreciating. She after a psychological experience feels a part of nature which makes her realize that regeneration through nature is the only solution for her disintegration: “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” (*Surfacing* 43).

The theme of nature in Atwood’s *Surfacing* works as an idea of clothing as either separate from or as extremely crucial in the making of one’s identity. The aim of this paper is to define the nature and the parameters of the differences. It endeavors to explore how women in their daily lives enter into social relationships which are significantly different from those of men. Atwood shows men’s misuse and women’s use of nature in *Surfacing*. The novel shows women projecting different perceptions of the environment than men. Atwood’s female protagonist is forced to psychological collapse due to her unwillingness to stick to the social expectations imposed on women. Thus, this paper is an exhaustive study of the novel from an eco-feminist perspective.

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