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Surfacing from Eco-feministic Perspective

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Abstract:

Margaret Atwood is a prolific, controversial, and innovative Canadian writer. Known as the queen in the contemporary Canadian literature, she enjoys a high status in the world as a poet, novelist, essayist, environmental activist, and literary critic. The Feminism, Canadian nationalism, and Eco-consciousness are most prevalent themes in Atwood's novels. As an astute woman writer, she always focuses her attention on women under the domination of male society. Almost every novel of Atwood has female characters as protagonists dealing with particular problems that women face and thereby reflecting universal social problems. The female characters experience the process of getting lost, escape, and try to have a rebirth with the help of nature. She pays due attention to environmental injustice in her novels as well. It would be fair to label her novels as eco-feministic because eco-consciousness and feministic notions integrate perfectly in her novels. Her novels aptly display how ecocides-as well as oppression of women go hand in hand in a male dominated society. Margaret Atwood presents her women characters as victims of male domination and oppression, trying to create a female space for themselves and her novels are filled with characters who are all seeking something, whether for freedom, answers, revenge, understanding, equality or fulfilment. This paper attempts to take an in-depth study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) from an eco-feministic perspective. The novel raises voices against all four forms of exploitation encompassed in race, class, gender, and nature.

Key words: Domination, Ecofeminism, Femininity, Nature, Patriarchy.

To live a peaceful and balanced life on this earth, preservation of the environment is compulsory. Throughout history nature is portrayed as feminine -- the reproductive capacities make women closer to nature than men. Women and nature are life supporting and resource giving but their role is often overlooked and sidelined in society. Oppression has been an issue that has affected human life for a very long time. The power that is levelled upon nature causes the same harm that is similar to that resulting from the oppression of women. A society based on cooperation and balance rather than dominance and hierarchy is necessary for survival on this planet and seeks to end all forms of oppression. These concerns gave birth to a theory called famously Ecofeminism. The theory mingles Feminism and Ecology to bring harmony in chaos. Ecofeminism attacks dualism and patriarchy to develop harmony in nature and human beings,

male and females. When men focus on the strength and power that technology and civilisation bring to them, females hope to find harmony, equality, wholeness and mutual benefit by getting close to nature which shows the nature's healing power upon women and the closeness between women and nature.

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s with an increasing consciousness of the connections between women and nature. The term, "ecofeminism," was coined by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 who called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet. Such an ecological revolution would entail new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature. Developed by Ynestra King at the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont about 1976, the concept became a movement in 1980 with a major conference on "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 'SOS,'" and the ensuing Women's Pentagon Action to protest anti-life I nuclear war and weapons development. During the 1980s cultural feminists in the United States injected new life into ecofeminism by arguing that both women and nature could be liberated together. An ecofeminist ethic is both a critique of male domination of both women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male gender bias about women and nature. It not only recognises the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age, [and] ethnic considerations, it centralises those voices. Ecofeminism argues that there is a parallel between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal society. Ecofeminists claim to be part of a distinct social movement. They feel that men dominate women and humans dominate nature. Naturally, then women and the environmentalist should be united in their struggle.

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* highlights male oppression of both feminine and the natural world. Patrick Murphy designates it as, "one of the first of the current generation of ecofeminist novels" (qtd.in Hartmann 98).The novel seeks to do away with all kinds of oppressions and holds the belief that no attempt to liberate woman will be successful without a similar attempt to liberate nature from the onslaught of modern technology and the colonialists. The protagonist with her boyfriend Joe and two other friends, Anna and David visits an island in distant part of Northern Quebec. During the trip, she seeks to search her missing father. As a child, the protagonist worshipped her father, a logical and scientific man, as a god; identifying with him rather than with her mother. The journey revives her memory of the unhappy past from which she feels estrange and brings to her mind the recent traumatic events---- a painful relationship with her art teacher, a married man, and the forced abortion. The art teacher who was determined to crush her artistic talent and sensibility by denying her the opportunity to grow as an artist finally played a trick on her concealing her of his intention to marry her. The protagonist was moved by his words and got pregnant in the process. Then she understood the exploitive behaviour of her lover who forced an unwanted pregnancy upon her and took it as a part of sexual colonialism. She becomes a symbol for all those who are exploited and abused because of their powerlessness.

While searching for her missing father in the wilderness and under the lake, she recognises the extent to which nature has been victimised by the Americans. Her evolving awareness of herself as a victim is parallel to this recognition. She concludes that man destroys nature and women for enjoyment and recreation. The relationship between man, nature, and woman is nothing more than the relationship of misuse and exploitation. A well-known ecofeminist Petra Kelly notes, —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). She realises that as she has been pillaged likewise the sacredness of the Mother Earth is despoiled and the ecological unity is disturbed completely. Atwood exquisitely illustrates man’s curt attitude towards nature and woman. The first sentence of the novel indicates the death of white birches. The novel opens with a concern towards nature: “ 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 sea-planes for hire”(7). The dying birches are seen as a disease resulting from technological expansion which Atwood equates with ‘Americanism’. The narrator’s sympathy for dying birches, which stands for nature, is taken as a Canadian trait and this is contrasted with the two Americans who cruelly killed the Heron. But these two American turned out to be Canadians. This prompted Atwood to say that, ‘if you look like them and talk like them and think like them then you are them’ (129)

Atwood endeavoured to create a definite relationship between the wounded self of the unnamed protagonist and the damaged landscape of the island near the border country in Quebec. Her journey to the island made her peep into the life of things and in the processes, she gets away from all----her friends as well as the American--Canadians who indulge in senseless cruelty to birds, tree, and fish. She writes: “at the midway pond the Heron was still there, hanging in the hot sunlight like something in a butcher’s window, deserted, unredeemed. It smelled worse ... the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted” (129). The brutal and needless murder of the Heron presents a direct ecological parallel to the experience of the narrator. According to Rigney, “The protagonist sees the Heron as symbolic of her own psychological death” (Rigney). She feels repugnance towards the killing of the bird and associates it with persecution and harassment of women. Women’s link with fertility and men’s with environment abuse works as a symbol 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. (149)

She comprehends that no human being can help her to discover her identity or real self, therefore, she turns to nature. She finds herself part of nature as both have been devastated by the iron hand of man. She identifies herself with the landscape so that her tragedy and that of the landscape mirrors each other, reflect each other. What men do to women, they do to Nature as

well. She expresses a deep concern for nature and helps the readers understand the women and nature connection. In the course of her homeward journey, she discovers that “nothing is the same. I don’t know the way anymore”. (10) She has been alienated from the landscape of her country, for the “Old road ‘has been closed for years and what she needs is the new one” but she does not “know the way anymore”. In this novel, Atwood pinches the readers to remind that ecological destruction pervades the setting whether it is to control the dam or the 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 a whale. (55)

Fishing in the lake symbolises entrapment. Soon, the female protagonist realises that in her capacity for evil, she herself has not been different from them. The illusion of her childhood innocence shatters and she recalls a childhood game -- the stabbing of the doll - which actually foreshadowed her abortion. The novel reminds the readers of the differences between natural predation and the hunting done by the man which is done for the excitement of killing. This contributes to the alienation 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 (Vandana). The protagonist magnets attention to at least to two such acts of hollow and meaningless killing: the killing of the heron and the blasts made at the lake by Americans who come for fishing. Increasingly, the narrator feels hurt by harms done to the environment. She is offended by Joe and David’s filming of the fish’s innards. 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 tin cans. We were committing this act, this act. Violation, for pleasure, recreation they call it. (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 (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.

The protagonist did not intend to marry as the relationship between Anna and David frightened her severely. Anna is forced to strip naked for the purposes of a film. In this novel man and woman are shown not as complementary to each other but as victimiser and victimised respectively. By perceiving the concept of victimiser and victimised she decides to stay alone on the island. She thinks that this decision may help to give up the old belief that I am powerless. Oppression of women in a male-dominated society and exploitation of nature in a society having new developments in technology is a major theme of her writings. Within this text, power, and domination, directly oppress both the feminine world and the natural world. The relationship of Anna and David is full of tensions and imbalance. David acts as the all-powerful and dominating male character and tries to humiliate Anna. As Bouson says, “through David, *Surfacing* draws attention to the oppression of women in a male-defined order of hierarchical and

oppositional roles that empower men at the expense of women”. Like nature, the female body is also seen as a resource to be colonised and commercialised. Anna, running to the lake, naked and sand-covered reminds the female protagonist of burnt leeches crawling to the lake, a part of her childhood game. During the lake scene in which David forces Anna to strip off her clothes for the movie *Random Samples*, he refers to her as, —darling. . . a good girl. . . twat face and desires to put her picture, —in beside the dead bird (172-73). He succeeds in taking her nude photographs. Here Anna is described in animal terms and this naturalising of women shows that in patriarchal culture women are also seen as inferior to men as animals. Her first protest against the patriarchy which structures upon the market value of female body is symbolically expressed through the destruction of the camera films. David’s camera has raped Anna’s female image, it has forever entrapped her distorted self within its luminous lens. The camera is used as a phallic symbol, representing the male power over the female body. So, it acts upon Anna like a —bazooka or a strange instrument of torture. (173)

Some of the animal victims 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 this episode. David’s joke about the split beaver (128) and the fact that the beaver is the national emblem of Canada fuses the victim status of the beaver, of women and of Canada. The beaver, as Linda Hutcheon tells, was an appealing lure to European fur traders and colonisers first, 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 colonised by England and then by the US. The Moose family at the gas station highlights the commercial exploitation of a sentimental domestication of nature. The narrator’s first lover uses photographs of his wife and children: —his stuffed and mounted family to make her abort her child.

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, an expert at undoing knots (88). As an escape artist, her escape route lies in 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 significantly, her mother turns into a jay and her father into a fish-like creature.

The ecofeministic influence can be seen clearly in the novel by the protagonist’s return to the natural world. Before her —surfacing takes place, she undergoes an extensive change in perception and as a result learns to embrace the natural world, healing herself in the process. She acknowledges the domination and oppression of male world lacking the strength to fight for her survival and passively consents to abort her child. The unnatural act of her abortion shows the empowering and dominating nature of her ex-lover:

[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. (39)

The abortion too exemplifies the ecofeminist notion 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 connection with the child, for him, it is, —simple like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal. (185)

Atwood accentuates the fact that men abuse the bodies of women for their requirements. They even control the process of childbirth which nature has assigned only to women. The protagonist also questions the excessive use of reproductive technologies. The modern techniques, in the guise of assisting the 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 (101). The effect of the fertility controlling pills upon the protagonist's eye, that is, of blurring her vision, also becomes significant in this context.

After her abortion, the protagonist comes to develop a deep sympathy for the flora and fauna and realises 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. (43)The power for destruction can be reconciled only with the power for creation. She gradually comes to feel that she herself has been anti-nature. She had tried to subvert nature by getting the foetus aborted. So, she must compensate for this anti-nature activity. So she decides to bear a child and allow the baby to grow as a natural human being in the most natural way:

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)

When she links her own life with those of the other beings of nature, she is able to perceive the rhythm of nature—its cycle of life and death. She comes to feel that in order to be one with nature; she has to shed her clothes to become like the victim 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. (217)

She becomes a plant, animal, earth, and woman at the same moment; she becomes a natural woman who should be —A new kind of centerfold (248). She dodges like an animal, blood swells within her body like cell sap and yet she remains as a natural woman with —eyes staring blue ice from the deep sockets (248). She feels now powerful, for she is natural, human and virtuous at the same time. She is no more the same person whom one saw at the beginning of the novel. She understands the essential pain in the life of her parents and realises that this is the only truth in her own life.

Withdrawing from civilisation and turning to the bush wilderness surrounding her, the narrator literally immerses herself in the natural elements and merges with the non-human other through a transformation into almost pre-cultural or natural state, thus slowly melting the borders between herself and non-human nature: —I lean against a tree; I am a tree-leaning. (236). Her association with nature raises her consciousness of victimisation of women. When her feminine consciousness reaches its climax, the protagonist makes ready the ground for revolt against exploitation. She uses Joe to get her pregnant but refuses to get married to him, possibly as revenge upon her ex-lover who used her. The power struggle seems to have come to an end. She feels so confident about her own power and refuses to be a victim and says, —This above, all, to refuse to be a victim. (249)

When she decides to stay back in Quebec and give birth to the goldfish nurturing in her womb. She does not know whether the child in her womb is a male or a female child but has made up her mind to assert herself by allowing the foetus to grow. She says:

I cannot know yet; it's too early. But I assume it: if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me. It might be first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed. (250)

With the protagonist's determination to give birth to the child, the novelist has hinted that germination will take place implying that both women and nature will be protected provided they defend themselves against the onslaught of men over them. She is quite aware that men's domination of women is deep and systematic. Many men and women think that it is something natural and accepted throughout the world. The oppression of women is so deeply embedded in our societies and our psyches as Petra Kelly observes, —Women suffer both from structural oppression and from individual men (Kelly). But the heroine would be different. She would 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. . . (Kelly). That is why she becomes chummy with Joe (though he belongs to male caste), who according to her estimate is a profeminist man.

Her decision to make earth her real home adds her into true ecologists. she knows that in the natural world all life is interrelated, teeming with diversity and complexity. She is not afraid of anyone. There is no one to boss over her and violate her physique. She becomes one with her sacred Mother Earth. She throws away all her civilisation as it is destroying the biosphere. She may recreate a culture that respects to seek harmony with nature. Those whom she has known are living in the city now, in a different time. She remembers her man, the —fake husband for whom she now feels nothing but sorrow. She totally relies on Mother Earth. Gods are questionable to her; it includes even Jesus Christ who is to her —theoretical (247). She is not prepared to rely on anyone, it includes even Joe. She gains absolute freedom now. Firmly rooted to the Earth like the original people several years ago, she, with an enormous contentment says, —The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing (251).

To sum-up, the novel hosts issue pertaining to feminism and environmentalism and constitute a representative literary example ecofeminism. Even the language, events and characters in this novel reflect the world that oppresses and dominates both femininity and nature. This actual journey is the surface meaning while the deep meaning lies in the journey of self-discovery and assertion of her individual identity. These two kinds of meanings link ecology with feminism and make the novel an eco-feminist novel. However, she does not want to overturn patriarchy and replace it with women's dominance. She wants to transform nonviolently the structures of male dominance and restore a kind of balance and harmony among men, women, and nature.

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