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Ecofeminism and Atwood's *Surfacing*: A Re-Reading

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Abstract:

Beginning approximately in the 1970s, the socio-cultural movement of 'ecofeminism' gained momentum from the 1990s onwards. Presently, it is a major concern of both the environmental activists and feminist authors. The 79-year-old Canadian litterateur Margaret E. Atwood has, since the publication of her second novel, *Surfacing* (1972), has also gained recognition as an eco-feminist writer. The present essay tries to offer an eco-feminist rereading of her second novel.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, Nature, Canada, Exploitation, Quebec.

With the increasing number of atrocities against nature and human (females) in the late-20th and early-21st-centuries, the issue of eco-feminism – the cohabitation of natural presence and female sensitivity – has already produced critically-acclaimed fiction and poetry on the theme by writers like Mary Oliver (U.S.A., b. 1935), Annie Dillard (U.S.A., b. 1945), Octavia Butler (U.S.A., 1947-2006), Sue Monk Kidd (U.S.A., b. 1948), Barbara Kingsolver (U.S.A., b. 1955), and Nandini Sahu (India, b. 1973). In the present paper, I seek to recall another famous name and her *magnum opus*: the Canadian novelist and poet Margaret Eleanor Atwood (b. 1939) and her prize-winning 1972-novel, *Surfacing*, to which, David Staines pays much importance for its faithful and exhaustive 'mapping of Canada' (Howells 18), especially the country's flora and fauna.

Coined by the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in "Le féminisme ou la mort" ('Feminism or Death') (1974) (Merchant 184), 'eco-feminism' came to be explored first in non-fictional writings with the U.S. author Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) (Warren 168), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* (1991). As far as eco-feminist literature is concerned, the

U.S. author Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Moving the Mountain* (1911), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), and Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (1982), for example, could be cited as early specimens. Importantly, Patrick Murphy identifies Atwood's *Surfacing* as "one of the first of the current generation of ecofeminist novels" (26). Eco-feminism, which links feminism with ecology, theorises that culture and nature have been separated by capitalism, which oppresses non-human and female bodies, and can be healed by the feminine instinct for and knowledge of nature's processes. Perhaps in no novel other than Atwood's *Surfacing* could one find its most suitable and vivid depiction. In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (House of Anansi Press, 1972), Atwood had already clarified her concern: focussing on the survival of the Canadian 'victims' – women and nature – and she explores her idea in the novel published in the same year. The exploited nature and suffering women of *Surfacing*, in fact, become the nature and women in any capitalist society around the world.

Atwood's *Surfacing*, it is known, focuses principally on an unnamed female narrator's (who is mentioned as 'N.') search for her father back at Northern Quebec (her hometown in Canada), accompanied by her lover Joe and the married-couple David and Anna. Atwood's choice of 'Northern Quebec', or Nord-du-Québec for the narrator's hometown is itself significant in the eco-feministic perspective because this Labrador Peninsula-based land is the least populous area of Canada, full of rivers and large lakes, and covered by coniferous forests of spruces, larches, and pine trees. Set especially in this region, *Surfacing*, as already mentioned, shows the exploitation of the Canadian nature of Northern Quebec by the capitalist White societies and the marginalisation of women in such societies, connecting both these themes. The nameless narrator, herself an eco-feminist, realises how she has had been artificially brought up when she encounters the pristine Northern Quebec-nature. Atwood uses her language in such a way which even more highlights the domination of femininity and nature. In the novel, narrator finally submits herself completely to nature (before leaving back for her old urban dwelling) because she successfully understands that only in the natural world all forms of life are interrelated to everyone's benefit.

It would be unjust to belittle other literary qualities of *Surfacing* and identify it only as a novel dealing with human's relation with nature, but it is undeniable, as already said, that it is the novel's principal focus. In her 1972-novel, the feminist-activist, then a Professor at Toronto's *York University*, offers her deep insight into the suppressed condition of both women and nature in a Canada which is supposed to be on one of the higher possible scales in international standards of transparency, freedom, treatment of women, and conservation of natural resources. One can only marvel at how *Surfacing*, even though published in the conservative 70s, exhaustively demonstrates Atwood's futuristic concern about the crisis of human intrusion in the wilderness, and evokes readers' attention to the disequilibrium in the novel.

In *Surfacing*, Atwood embraces many of the dichotomies that have long been standards in Western thought, and that have been criticised vehemently by feminists such as Beauvoir, Millett, and Walker. Herself a prominent second-wave-feminist, Atwood, throughout her *Surfacing*, connects women with nature, and men with culture, which are usually (and erroneously) assumed to be in opposition to the other. Although these supposedly-binary ideas bring immense grief to the nameless narrator (in search of her father), she, at the end of the novel, succeeds to relieve herself from the burdens of dichotomy, and returns to her old city, as already mentioned, with optimism.

As Atwood writes in *Surfacing*, when the anonymous narrator, who has had matured in a remote island in Northern Quebec, goes back to her birthplace in search of her missing father, she quickly discovers that she has been captivated and summoned by the mysterious power of nature – not unlike the sensitive female characters of the fairy tales. The unnamed narrator develops an intuitive and inexplicable sense as she settles in the natural environment of the place of her origin. She fully utilises her once-in-a-lifetime experience to come into close contact with and learn about nature. Unlike her unfeeling companions – the couple and her lover – the unnamed narrator easily believes in and cohabits with nature. A much-harried female herself, she however finds safety in nature. She reflects, “How have I been able to live so long in the city, it isn't safe [...] I always [feel] safe here, even at night” (Atwood 70). In contrast to her temporary-residing city,

which symbolically asphyxiates her, the father-searching narrator feels liberated in the pristine Canadian nature.

Atwood, perceptively eager to demonstrate in *Surfacing* the superiority of nature to urban life, indirectly suggests why city-life is so much burdensome and bothering for her unnamed narrator. Everything in urban Canada is difficult for the narrator. Getting along with numerous city-centred people makes her uneasy. The narrator fails to fit herself into the urban surrounding at all. Back to her place of origin, every time the narrator recalls the nights she has had spent in city, she suffers from anxiety and unease. The eco-feminist author fails her narrator to accustom herself to pressures of modern life. She cannot get used to the life in city-based civilisation. This brings for her innumerable difficulties during the period she spends in the city. One can observe that the narrator disdains everything symbolising civilisation. To her, 'civilisation' becomes a mark of foreignness which betrays both the nature and her.

That is precisely why when the unnamed narrator comes back to Northern Quebec, goes fishing with her friends, and eats artificial food on a natural land, she can no longer be at her ease. Aware of her own role in destroying the natural surroundings, she turns to demonstrate her hatred for the Americans because the U.S.-based capitalists are usually castigated internationally for destroying nature for their own gains. N., the unnamed narrator, even compares them with dogs because they 'dig' nature up:

“After we landed we found that someone had built a fireplace already, on the shore ledge of bare granite; trash was strewn around it, orange peelings and tin cans and a rancid bulge of greasy paper, the tracks of humans. It was like dogs pissing on a fence, as if the endlessness, anonymous water and unclaimed land, compelled them to leave their signature, stake their territory, and garbage was the only thing they had to do it with” (111).

Through N., Atwood registers her grievance at the Americans' destruction of nature for their capitalistic ventures and for demonstrating their power. Jaidev opines that the U.S.A., "in *Surfacing* is 'the disease from the south', and shows itself in Quebec through a persistent imagery of death, destruction, and senseless mutilation" (277). Danielle Schaub agrees, and states: "The protagonist faces the threat of Americanisation, with its sprawls of commercialism and trendy tourism wreaking havoc on the natural habitat surrounding her parents' cabin" (86). They repeatedly ravage and rob the landscape with their own will, and disregard the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. Human beings should preserve land and nature with all efforts because without the support of natural system, it is impossible for humans to sustain themselves.

As N. reminisces, human beings venerate Jesus Christ for his sacrificing himself for their good. Interestingly, as Atwood speaks through N., the same human beings do not feel any concern for animals who sacrifice themselves for being food to individuals. In *Surfacing*, birds and fishes in are the 'victims' whose miseries convey the embarrassing condition. Atwood further connects the human exploitation of nature to the oppression of woman in capitalistic Western society through the narrator who is a woman, suffers painfully from the domination of men and civilisation, and develops a special bond to nature: the hallmark of eco-feminism. In fact, in daily-life, both nature and woman contribute to human society, but are repressed under men's commanding power.

It is important that in *Surfacing*, Atwood gives no name to women in the rural Canadian town. Almost all the matured females are addressed to as 'madams': passive objects that, like nature, belong to men in male-dominated societies. They exist to satisfy the physical, domestic and sexual needs of their spouses or male companions. In *Surfacing*, Atwood's females do not care for their names because they are portrayed as not having any individuality. The narrator's abortion of her child is portrayed as brutally as a butcher's slaughter of livestock – an act of destruction of nature – although the narrator deliberately describes it as if she goes through a delivery:

"After the first I didn't never want to have another child, it was too much to tie your hands down and they don't let you see, they don't want you to

understand, they want you to believe it's their power, not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your leg are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or snickering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. After that they fill your veins up with red plastic, I saw it running down through the tube. I won't let them do that to me again" (Atwood 79).

As if to enforce her eco-feministic stance, Atwood, in *Surfacing*, makes her women – like nature itself – almost entirely powerless. The narrator N.'s best female-friend, Anna, is a stereotype which portrays that in conjugal relationships as well as in societies, the females are supposed to be subordinate to men who – like on nature – have absolute dominance on them. Anna, throughout her married-life, remains submissive to David. She does her best to please him, and is never in control of her life. The critic Bouson opines that Anna "is a passive recipient and not active agent" (42). The objectified Anna conceals herself with her made-up appearance. Bouson writes how, without 'make-up', Anna loses the only magic in her life, and is thus trapped in the powerless role of woman. In the critic's words, "Drawing attention to the power politics of gender relation, it shows how women, in an age of supposed sexual aggressor and woman that of passive victim and sexual object" (40).

The marriage between Anna and David, thus, is as problematic and exploitative as capitalist-men's relationship with nature. Initially, N. assumes that David and Anna have succeeded in their conjugality:

"They must have some special method, formula – some knowledge I missed out on; or maybe he was the wrong person. I thought it would happen without my doing anything about it, I'd turn into

part of a couple, two people linked together and balancing each other, like the wooden man and woman in the barometer house” (Atwood 36).

Anna maintains that for a successful marriage, “you just had to make an emotional commitment, it was like skiing, you could not see in advance what would happen but you had to let go” (*ibid.* 44). N. feels that marriage is “more like jumping off a cliff: that was the feeling I had all the time I was married; in the air, going down, waiting for the smash at the bottom” (*ibid.* 44-5). However, the unnamed narrator’s gradual realisation of Anna and David’s fake marriage surfaces slowly. David views marriage as a balance of power, and the only way, he feels, of keeping Anna subjugated to him is by victimising her, just as capitalists victimise nature.

During the photographing scene, the exploitative husband David forces Anna to strip for his film *Random Samples*: “You’ll go in besides the dead bird, it’s your chance for stardom, you’ve always wanted fame. You’ll get to be on *Educational T.V.*, he added as though it was a special bribe” (*ibid.* 135). David’s desire to put Anna’s picture ‘in beside the dead bird’ shows a parallel between natural references, including the bird and female anatomy, where Anna illustrates the connection of nature/woman subordination. As Warren observes,

“Women are described in animal terms as pets, cows, sows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old boots, old hens, mother hens, pussy cats, cats, cheetahs and herbaria-s. Animalising or naturalising women in a culture where animals are seen as inferior to humans thereby reinforces and authorises women’s inferior status” (27).

Atwood seems to agree with Warren in the ecofeminist belief that women and nature are pushed to the periphery and relegated to a position inferior to men, important only as objects meeting the ends of the subject. N. ultimately realises that the basis of this marriage is nothing but exploitation, power equation, mutual distrust and hatred and

comes to a conclusion that they do have a commitment; through hatred they have achieved a balance almost like 'peace'.

Like the exploited nature and Anna, N. herself is a victim of male ego. Her first lover, the middle-aged art teacher, portrays the subjugating patriarch. He not only exploits her physically, but also mutilates her emotionally. He always times their meetings, for all along he is also timing her, but she accepts him at face value. N. muses, "For him I could have been anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that is where I learned. I worshipped him, non-child bride, idolater; I kept the scraps of his handwriting ... his aesthetic judgment" (Atwood 144). He manipulates N. according to his convenience. He gives her a wedding ring to wear so that he can easily pass her off as his wife at motels. N. is also coerced to kill her unborn child. As Barzilai writes, "[Here] [t]he subject of the daughter's accusation is not just the man who fathered her but also, and probably more so, the lover who unchilded her" (65). Thus, like the exploited nature and Anna, N. also becomes a victim of masculinity.

What marks out N. from Anna and from nature is that she strongly refuses to be a victim within the system of patriarchy. Besides fighting back violently, she tries to find out some placid ways to solve the problem. As Bouson writes,

"Women and men may not only oppose but also represent aspects of one another. Despite her inner resistance to the monolithic voice and finalising speech of bourgeois culture, the Surfacer is not unlike Anna who speaks in a 'radio' voice and finds herself responding to Joe in an inauthentic feminine voice" (45).

The narrator of *Surfacing* is conscious that she will never be a woman like Anna. She has to resist and fight. She decides to find her own path through the patriarchal constraints by journeying into the rural Canadian wilderness. After a brief sojourn to the natural island, N.'s long-denied past and affection begin to surface, and she wants to experience nature. She decides to resist journeying back to the city to conform to the

patriarchal standards of women. Rather, she opts for turning herself into a ‘natural’ woman living a ‘natural’ life in Northern Quebec-nature.

As part of her wilful ‘naturalisation’ – her finding solace in nature – N. begins to eat roots, destroys her clothes, and tries to sleep in the wilderness – thus reverting, symbolically, to the ‘primitive’ state of life. According to Parker, this demonstrates the narrator’s way to experience nature:

“When [...] [N.] rejects culture and retreats into the wilderness to become a ‘natural’ woman, she gives up eating processed food. Such food is contaminated in the same way that society is contaminated by patriarchal ideology. Both are unnatural, constructed, man-made, and both threaten to poison her” (Bloom 115).

This is how the narrator relieves completely from all of her burdens. She accepts nature’s healing power. As Bouson writes, the narrator also reserves the perfect woman image set by Anna in her own way:

“Through this troubling image of the natural woman, the novel deliberately subverts the cultural construction of an eroticised, commodified femininity promoted by and circulated in the men’s magazines: the glossy magazine centrefold woman who is, like Anna, an imitation of an imitation” (58).

Atwood, in *Surfacing*, seems to enforce the idea that human beings are part of nature and are indivisible from it. Even the narrator, who chooses to back to civilisation at the conclusion, does not deny this idea. Nature and civilisation, and women and men are not absolutely opposite. If any such idea exists, it requires changing. As Rao opines, the importance of living in harmony with nature does not equal to give up everything civilised:

“Atwood implies that we should transcend the politics of victims and victors and thus try to achieve some kind of harmony with the world, which is a productive or creative harmony rather than a destructive relationship towards the world” (8).

After her journey, N. prepares to go back to her urban life, but with a new realisation, which Atwood wants to depict in her eco-feministic *Surfacing*: that nature and civilisation are not opposites, but they are mutually dependent parts. For exemplifying this so masterfully, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* would continue to be cited as one of the foremost eco-feministic novels throughout the 21st century and beyond. It is not that papers on the same theme have not been written – for example, Ambika Bhalla and L.D. Bruckner, like many others, have published their papers on this topic. But, Atwood's self-explanatory eco-feminism in *Surfacing* always deserves rereading and still further rereading.

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