

Reclaiming Self through Nature: Ecofeminist Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract:

Exploring Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), this article reads the work through the ecocritical lens of ecofeminism: mind, body and spirit for the unnamed narrator (protagonist) lead from alienation and disconnection toward redemption in self and nature. The critique of patriarchal ideologies that exploit and oppress both women and the earth is potent in this novel. By analysing issues of alienation, separation, feminism and ecological awareness, the paper shows how Atwood represents nature as a healing and renewing power. The protagonist's flight to the wild not only offers her an occasion to confront buried trauma and rediscover her lost self, but also helps fashion an ecofeminist consciousness that refuses dominant patriarchy, territorial violence and cultural alienation. Through thematic and interpretative reading, this paper contends that the novel prepares a return to nature, not as an evasion of reality but as a solution for mental health, moral acceptance and self-replenishment.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, self-reclamation, alienation, patriarchy, nature, female psyche, ecological consciousness.

Introduction-

Contextualising *Surfacing*: Atwood and Feminist Thought: The paper is an attempt to represent the challenges, psyche, and melancholy of a woman in the novel *Surfacing* (1972), beautifully portrayed by the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood. She is an internationally acclaimed Canadian, postmodern and feminist writer specialising in women's literature. She has actively engaged in the Canadian feminist movement, and she has written novels, including *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Life Before Man* (1979), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), and *Alias Grace* (1996).

In most of her works, Margaret Atwood tries to shed light on feminism and gender issues. She also tends to discover the conflict between women and their struggle to realise and confirm their real identity in a society that is mainly patriarchal. It has been seen that the difference between males and females has existed in all societies for years. The literature of Canada mainly focuses on two things: the position of women in society and the exploitation to which they were subjected.

Canada has faced social, economic, and political issues that have restricted women's freedom and disrupted their identity, as reflected in the writers' works. Patriarchy, misogyny, sexual exploitation, gender discrimination, and the right to education were some of the key issues and glaring problems. Atwood often writes in her novels about the oppression and suppression of the female protagonist. She strongly condemns sexual exploitation and gender discrimination in her novel *Surfacing*.

Atwood discusses concerns related to women in the world. She also discussed the alienation of the female and her psyche. She has portrayed the isolation of her female protagonist in the present milieu. The superiority of male society diminishes the power of females at one end. In *Surfacing*, the primary concern was depicted through sexual politics.

She ponders the effects of societal norms where a man has the right to take advantage of a woman's body and disguise himself as a husband. She did not even have the right to negotiate.

Atwood focuses on the rigid social norms that are for women and not for men. She elucidates the philosophical doctrine and psychological magnitude built by the society that led to the chief sources of women's oppression and psychological dilemma. She has realistically illustrated the conventional as well as social and sexual roles assigned to women by patriarchal society. Self-denial, gender roles, fractured marriage, and male dominance in husband-wife relationships are affectingly portrayed by the novelist.

Surfacing deals with the theme of alienation and separation of an unnamed narrator who was searching for her missing father, accompanied by a couple, Anna and David, whom she recently met, and her boyfriend Joe. In her family's house, the unnamed protagonist remembers her past and recalls feelings and events; she tries to find clues that can help her find her father, but in vain. Being alienated and disconnected affects the narrator's mind so immensely that it leads her to wildness and madness. This place lies back to her past life and her feelings of alienation at different levels.

This paper adopts a thematic, interpretative, and ecofeminist approach to analyse the novel *Surfacing*. The study focuses on the psychological dimensions of alienation and separation while examining the protagonist's evolving relationship with nature.

Research Questions:

Q.1 How are the themes of ecofeminism, alienation and separation inter-woven in the narrative structure of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*?

Q.2 How does the female in the state of isolation, alienation and separation reconstruct her psyche through an inward journey?

Q.3 How will the present themes be either freeing and emancipating or terror-stricken, intimidating and terrifying experiences?

Research gaps:

- The protagonist narrator's relationship with her husband is not clear. As a reader it was unable to understand whether she was married or in a relationship.
- The protagonist narrator's brother died before she was born, but throughout the novel, she talks for his brother, which is not clear.

Alienation and the Fragmented Female Psyche: According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, alienation is "the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work or self" The English word 'Alienation' is derived from the Latin word '*Alienato*'. *Alienato* is a noun that receives meaning from the verb '*alienare*', which means to make a thing for others, to snatch, to avoid, to remove, etc.

From the beginning of the novel *Surfacing*, the protagonist narrator tries to escape from the three people, Anna, David, and Joe. Her crowded mind needs isolation and alienation on the remote island. "You go in and have a beer or something, I'll be back in about half an hour" (Atwood 15). She liked to live alone instead of going with her friends. She always seeks to be apart from them. She sank into her own thoughts. The past life with her parents, the husband and the child that was not born. She needs to remain aloof.

Similarly, Anita Desai, in her novel *The Fire on the Mountain* (1977), creates the character Nanda Kaul, who remains alienated from society. In the same way, the protagonist of the novel *Surfacing* needs alienation from her parents, friends and society. Nanda Kaul, on the arrival of her great-granddaughter, was agitated as she prefers to remain silent and alienated from the patriarchal society. Francine E. Krishna says, "The news is an assault on her peace;

she struggled to suppress her anger, her disappointment and her total loathing of her daughter's meddling, busybody ways, her great-granddaughter's impending arrival here at Carignano" (158).

The journey of searching of missing father becomes more of an inward journey. She floated more in her childhood thoughts. In her parental place, she dived into the memories of her sick mother, her brother's death, and the bad experience that she had with her so-called husband. "My brother was under the water, face upturned, eyes open and unconscious, sinking gently; air was coming out of his mouth" (36). All these bad memories haunt her in the company of her friends, and she feels suffocated by the intimacy of her friend Joe, who was real to her, but due to her bad experiences in the past, she was always rude to him. She prefers silence rather than talking and enjoying. Atwood remarked:

I never identified it as mine; I didn't name it before it was born, even, the way you're supposed to. It 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, and he wanted a replica of himself. After it was born, I was no more use. I couldn't prove it, though; he was clever: he kept saying he loved me. (38)

Surfacing focuses on the split of the protagonist's personality. The novel portrays the depth of the protagonist's ignorance about her own identity, and it becomes her journey of self-discovery. She started behaving like an animal in the forest. "The animals do not need speech, why talk when you are a word" (Atwood 195). Gradually, she was becoming alienated by everyone and isolated within herself.

At her parents' place, she recalls the memories of her parents when they used to teach her life, but she took those words for granted. At one point, she says, "leaving my child, that was the unpardonable sin; ...and I didn't have any excuse, I was never good at them" (Atwood 31). The narrator felt guilt for being in such a relationship with a married man who also forced her to abort the child. She was so disturbed by this shameless act that she thought her parents would never forgive her. She states, "They never forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce; I don't think they even understood the marriage, which wasn't surprising since I didn't understand it myself" (Atwood 31). She lived aloof from everyone for nine years, and this alienation made her isolated long before coming to the homeland.

The main reason for isolation and alienation was her abortion, which crushed her not only physically but also psychologically. She never overcame the truth that she had gone insane. The abortion hurts her a lot. All the time, she makes herself convinced that she is experiencing a divorce rather than an abortion. She uses the word divorce instead of abortion. "They must have mentioned it to Paul, that, but not the divorce" (Atwood 25). Undoubtedly, abortion is not an easy thing for a sensitive woman like the protagonist. The narrator finds herself alone, and no one tries to stand on her side to support her "They take the baby out with red plastic, I saw it running down through the tube" (Atwood 85-86).

When the narrator has an abortion, she does not feel anything; there is no physical pain, but the psychological pain is unpleasant and unbearable. She became deeply alienated to the point that she feels that she is the only creature on the earth who bears such pain. In addition to what is mentioned above, the nameless protagonist finds men alienating because they treat women and nature badly. For example, David forces Anna to wear make-up all the time, scorns her and even compels her to strip for his film "Random Samples". Men always taken women

as a subject, and whether the talk of any country's male domination can be seen as the same. They disrespect and make fun of women.

Separation, Loss, and Emotional Displacement: The word separation is a noun that refers to “severing, detaching, cutting apart, act of removing and disconnecting one thing from another. The word is the old French word “*separacion*” and Latin word “*separatio*”. Separate is a verb, meaning is “to remove, detach completely, divide (something), sever the connection or association of”. The word comes from the Latin word “*separatus*”. According to Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary and Thesaurus “Separation is a term used to describe the act of separating or the state of being separated. It can refer to a situation in which two or more people or things are apart, or to a legal process of ending a marriage.

Humans are born with the tendency of emotions that exhibits and distinguish them from other species. Only humans can feel the love and compassion that distinguishes humans from animals. Humans explore themselves, set goals, develop strategies, love each other, feel pain of separation, have creativity and reasoning and set goals to achieve them. Only man can fulfil the meaning of ‘Existentialism’. He lives in society and sets social norms. According to Aristotle, “Man is a social animal”. Only human beings desire to search for meaning and social relationships, and the potency to experience the sanctity and mystery of life. When anyone loses these aims and qualities, he lost his humanness and aliveness.

Surfacing deals with the theme of separation, where the protagonist is the sufferer from the very beginning of her life. In her childhood, she experienced the separation from her brother, who died in the lake. “But it’s the same dock my brother fell off the time he drowned. (36) She left the home and started living aloof for a span of nine years with the guilt within herself for the insane marriage she had done so insanely, and the abortion of her child forcibly by her so-called husband. She felt the pain of living separate with her parents. Then she lost

her mother, who died young, and now she never met her again. She was separated from her father when Paul, one of her father's friends send her a letter regarding her father was missing. – “Your father is gone, nobody can find him’ – It seemed incredible, but it appears to be true. (25).

The novel *Surfacing* started with the search for his father, which later in the novel came to an end with the news of his death. Now again, the narrator is separated from her father as well. The main separation that the protagonist narrator suffered was the separation of her child, when the foetus was forcibly taken away from her body. The umbilical cord was separated, and the foetus was taken away in front of her eyes. Which also shook her psyche, and she became wild later in the novel. Her own conscience reacts, and she feels ashamed of herself. She was also ashamed of her parents, who had given descent upbringing, but in the act of loving a wrong man, she suffered all over her life and was separated from everyone very close to her.

The novel's title, *Surfacing*, has many layers. It has a multi-layered reality. In “Quest for Identity,” at one level, it is the protagonist's quest for a female identity. On the other level, if we take her as a representative of the colonised Canadian psyche, being passive, lacking identity, and having a victim complex, the novel can be taken as a Canadian search for national identity where Canada is the woman, and America is the male. Divorced from the past and parents, separated from the body and emotions, the narrator loses both personal and national identity. (164)

Feminism and Patriarchal Power Structures in *Surfacing*: There is no single theory of feminism or a definition of feminism that is universally accepted, leading to the plural term feminisms. The origins of feminism are debated but often traced to the book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), which was written in

response to *The Rights of Man* (1771) by Thomas Paine (1737–1809). Mary Wollstonecraft's work was consciousness-raising and inspired women to seek equal rights with men, particularly voting rights through the suffragette movement and access to education.

Feminism is a series of movements against society and the politics that have been playing since the norms for men and women were established. Where men regarded themselves as superior and women as inferior to them. In every sector of life, she has been portrayed as subordinate, whether in any role of mother, sister, wife, daughter, or so on. The female point of view is that society only prefers the male point of view, and women are disregarded, and injustice has been done for years. Therefore, this movement is raised to uplift women's rights and understand the nature and causes of inequality and its impact on the consequent gender discrimination politics.

When *Surfacing* was being published, Canadian Nationalism and feminism significantly acted on the issues of independence and identity. The development became more extensive with the advancement of feminist theorists. In a 1981 lecture, Atwood explained Canadian-American relations. As she was aware of ongoing movements. The harshness is reflected in her novels:

I had a good childhood; it was in the middle of the war, with flickering grey newsreels. I never saw bombs and concentration camps, the leaders roaring at the crowds from inside their uniforms, pain and useless death, flags rippling in time to the anthems. (Atwood 17)

Atwood not only talked about sexual politics, but she also talked about the fight for liberty. She addressed Canada's struggle to escape social control by America in her novel *Surfacing*. In the second-wave feminism, Canada was still in a state of immaturity and dominated by the English, the French, and the Americans. Simon de Beauvoir, the most influential critic, wrote about the anthology of Canadian feminist writing. In her famous book,

The Second Sex, she states, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." She further states, "The whole of feminine history has been man-made. Just as in America, there is no Negro problem, but rather a white problem; just as anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is our problem; so, the woman problem has always been a man problem."

Such concerns were also on Atwood's mind as she was writing *Surfacing*, and in subsequent interviews about the novel, she frequently referred to thoughts of ideological colonialism, arguing that, "what we have done in this country is to use imported gods like imported everything else" (149). The novel *Surfacing* deals with the theme of feminism. Anna, who seems happy to live all the time in the novel, was living under the consideration of her husband David, who was a womaniser on one hand and a strict husband to her. Her fear of make-up can be seen as she says to the narrator, "he doesn't like to see me without it" (52)

Ecofeminism: Nature as Healer and Liberator: Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism and political ecology. Ecofeminist thinkers draw on the concept of gender to analyse the relationships between humans and the natural world. Ecofeminism is the combination of two words, where 'eco' is concerned with ecology and 'feminism' is the movement for women. The term was coined by the French writer Françoise d' Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). This paper studies the ecofeminist awareness that was established by the writer through the female, unnamed narrator.

The protagonist's level of journey is divided into two parts; one is physical, where she is in search of her missing father, and the second one is psychological, which is very important, in which she surfaces the ecofeminist awareness. Many mysteries have been opened in front of her. She becomes aware of her gloomy personality, the dominance of men over women as well as nature, the women-nature connection, and the patriarchal hierarchical philosophy that privileges men over women and nature.

The protagonist narrator's journey was not only for searching for her missing father, but she was also searching for herself. She delved into her past, her history, and her origin and came to understand each thing better in the lap of 'Mother Nature'. The woman is a replica of nature, full of love and emotions, and she always becomes a giver like nature. The narrator further realises no human being can relieve her; only she can calm herself in the landscape of Quebec.

She chose to live alone on the land of her parents. She was enlightened and getting calmer day by day. She negates all human links. She avoids urban civilisation and its modernity as she finds every sort of thing is under male dominion and prefers to live aloof on the surface of the lake and avoids clothing, canned and processed food; instead, she chooses to eat the raw food which nature has provided to her. Emma Parker says:

Her rejection of and return to nature society is reflected by what she eats. When she 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, and man-made, and both threaten to poison her. Instead, the narrator eats the raw food that nature provides. (350-51)

She understood that she was under pressure from the guilt of that aborted child. Her psyche is repressed due to her past life. In the novel *Surfacing*, Atwood presents a world that oppresses and represses both femininity and nature. She tries to prove that nature is obligatory for man's survival on earth, and the contemporary scientific formulation suffices to distance Man from Nature. The protagonist makes a return only when she is close to nature to retrieve her real self, until she is suppressed by the unevenness and dualism of the patriarchal world.

Ecofeminism is a social and political movement between environmentalism and feminism. In the novel *Surfacing*, the protagonist's 'undying spirit' selects the wilderness to

search for his lost father. She dives into the lake to find his father, but there is a trigger in her conscience, and she sees a dead body, the body of her aborted foetus who forgives her. According to the theory of catharsis, memories that were sleeping in her subconscious mind were wiped away in the lake (nature), and she comes out with a new spirit, and her self-realization revitalizes to a new journey of life with a positive attitude.

Nature is a healer to mankind. In *Fire on the Mountain*, the two women, Nanda Kaul and her great-granddaughter, chose to live in agony in the peaceful area of Kasauli, “what pleased her and satisfied her so here at Carignano was its barrenness. This was the chief virtue of all Kasauli, of course- its starkness. It had rocks, it had pines. It had light and air...to the north, of the mountains, to the south, of the plains. Nanda Kaul was overburdened by the responsibilities and patriarchal norms and heals herself lonely living in the lap of nature.

(Desai 4)

The protagonist narrator is unnamed because this is all of us who are burdened by the harshness of technology and the patriarchal hierarchy of the society that devises mental issues rather than health issues. After living in nature for a while, the narrator realises that being detached from people will not help her to discover her real identity. Thus, she decides to turn to society, to her lover Joe, to reclaim her real identity and to integrate with people.

Surfacing as Self-Reclamation and Ecological Awakening: The title *Surfacing* symbolises emergence—from repression to awareness, from fragmentation to wholeness. The narrator’s psychological breakdown is not a descent into madness but a necessary phase of transformation. Through her communion with nature, she recognises the interconnectedness of life and rejects human superiority over the environment. Her ecofeminist awakening leads to self-reclamation, as she acknowledges responsibility, forgives herself, and prepares to re-enter

society with renewed strength. Unlike total withdrawal, Atwood suggests balance: healing through nature followed by reintegration into human relationships.

Conclusion: In the novel *Surfacing*, the themes of alienation, separation and ecofeminism are inter-woven from the beginning of the novel. The protagonist narrator comes back from the city to her homeland, Quebec. Quebec was under the province of the U.S.A. and the U.K. at that time when the novel was written. The narrator was separated from her homeland for nine years. After receiving the letter from his father's friend Paul, she comes back to search for her father. The separation from the homeland can be seen when she inquisitively reaches Paul's home for the inquiry about her father.

The protagonist is a decent, shy, polite and good-natured girl who was deceived by her art professor, who hurts her emotionally and physically. He was the family person with children, yet he came into contact with the narrator. The narrator was the descent girl who was a freelancer, but insanely she commits the mistake with the art professor. Throughout her life, she felt guilty for her parents and for the child who was forcefully aborted. This was the main reason for her alienation, which inwardly develops a turmoil and later comes out in the form of madness and relentlessness.

Nature, which is a healer and a mother, controls and soothes the narrator when she comes in contact with her. In the novel, the protagonist, in her madness, destroys everything in her outhouse. She demolishes her parents' clothes, tears her clothes and becomes naked out of her regression. All along his journey, she was suffering from guilt and separation from her own baby. It has accumulated in her subconscious mind. She abandoned man-made canned food. She ate natural food that nature has given us. This shows her intimacy towards nature

simultaneously. Nature was calling her towards herself. To treat her and soothe her mind and body, which was stuffed with sorrows and worries.

The protagonist lives an isolated life. She does not like the company of her friends. She does not want to marry Joe. As for her, the word 'love' becomes painful. She had determined not to rely on anyone. Her conscience was brutally victimized. So, she did not want to trust anyone. She remains aloof, alienated even from herself. She came back to her homeland in search of her father, but she explored herself, poked her psyche, understand man-women relation better. She also explored the relation of man to nature.

She comes to understand not only woman is victim of men, but nature also faces the same. When she came into her conscience she understood the role of women in this existence. At the end of the novel, she comes out of his sorrows. She comes out as a new woman who has taken rebirth and wants to stay with society, with the people and live the life as a human.

If a woman cannot change the patriarchal system, she has to change herself. Life is a boon, and one should respect it as a gift from the Almighty. Living isolated and alienated from society is not worthy. It does not fulfil the goal of the existence of a human being. Women should write for her sake and encourage others to ponder over themselves. Alienation accelerates the stress level, and a few of them give up on their life. But it is not the right meaning of life.

According to Darwin's theory, "Struggle for Existence," life runs only when the person struggles or fights for their existence. Women are powerful human beings. They are both physically and mentally strong. They give birth to a baby. A new life comes through her. Nature has gifted this miraculous boon to her, not to the man. So, women should come together nationally and make their own world instead of separation, alienation and isolation. Nature is the healer, and it will heal all the pain and worries. This paper is the call of 'Nature to Man'.

Recommendation and Contemporary Relevance: This paper tries to outline the fact that the materialistic society has led to a conflict between Man and Nature. Man is destroying nature for their well-being in the same way he exploits the dignity of women to tranquillise his self-esteem. Nature and women are closely related to each other. Here, Atwood has put an emphasis on nature as it is the call of 'Nature to Man'. Nature is also a teacher, but as a present-day teacher is disrespected by its pupil in the same way nature is humiliated by man.

Nature is the source of strength to man and the vice-versa. Man and nature are interdependent. Nature conserves the man and the species, so it is the prime duty of man to conserve nature to protect the species and humanity. When man becomes the protector of nature, only then will he get the benefits of nature. Then only nature will come to the rescue of man. If a man wants a peaceful and stress-free life, which is the burning issue of the day, then he has to protect nature. Once nature is disturbed, then man will also be disturbed.

In the novel *Surfacing*, Atwood points out that from the beginning, the poor soul is lost and manipulated by all means, but as soon as she comes into contact with nature, she is healed, and her rotten mind becomes fresh. Nature provides vivid symbols to her. This is the power of nature. Man and nature become one community as they are interdependent. It is the noble duty of man to become the guardian angel of nature; then only nature will come out as a guardian angel. There is a vice versa.

The novel certainly recalls the fact that nature suffers just like women living on her, humiliated, destroyed, unacknowledged, misused, discriminated and thrown away from society. Whether it be a man or a woman, they have to respect each other and care for nature. Life exists due to nature. A living being cannot survive without nature. One should preserve nature and reduce our needs, reuse things and recycle them. We should conserve biodiversity.

Without biodiversity, the ecosystem will become unstable, and it will affect our health.

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