

## **An Ecofeminist Approach to Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing***

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### **Abstract**

Feminism and ecology are brought together in the ecofeminist assertion that women's subordination and ecological degradation are linked. While there is no central definition of ecofeminism, it is generally regarded as a feminist approach to environmental ethics. The ecofeminists feel that men dominate women and humans dominate nature. Naturally, then, women and the environmentalists should be united in their struggle.

Among the Canadian women novelists, Margaret Atwood is the most prominent figure. Atwood's novels examine themes related to the politics of gender, such as enforced alienation of women under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of women forced by men, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women and women's quest for identity. Atwood's novel *Surfacing* is a loud feminist assertion of female reproductive rights, and celebration of motherhood and a declaration of the independence and self-sufficiency of woman through complete reflection of patriarchy.

*Surfacing* focuses on a young nameless woman and her inner-search for who she is and how she relates to the world around her. The novel begins with the narrator's search for her missing father and ends with the protagonist's celebration of her awakened self. Through the struggle to reclaim her identity and roots, the surfer begins a psychological journey that leads her directly into the natural world.

The protagonist moves from struggling with the oppression and domination of the male world to eventually embracing and returning to the natural world as an equal, unassuming member. This paper purports to view and interpret Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* against the background of ecofeminist ideology by highlighting men's misuse of women and women's return to nature.

**KEYWORDS:** ecofeminism, oppression, quest for identity, inner-search

Feminism and ecology are brought together in the ecofeminist assertion that women's subordination and ecological degradation are linked. Ecofeminism is generally regarded as a feminist approach to environmental ethics. Ecofeminists see the oppression of women and the domination of men as interconnected; as a movement, ecofeminist theorists use a framework that confronts issues of gender, race, class, and nature. The ecofeminists feel that men dominate women and humans dominate nature. Naturally, then, women and the environmentalists should be united in their struggle. Women are hurt most by the exploitation of the earth because they are the most vulnerable in the patriarchal society. The main focus is on women who are most at risk because they suffer multiple oppression of poverty, race or education.

What ecofeminism reveals is a wider analysis of relationships of mediation as between 'society' and 'nature'. Such an analysis would embrace not only patriarchy, but other socio-economic domination, as well as the domination of nature. These structures

of mediation are tangled in such a way that most people are exploiters and dominators in some contexts, and exploited and dominated in some others. It is therefore, the patterns of subordination, exploitation and oppression that affect so many people, including the vast majority of women and the non-human natural world.

Margaret Atwood is the most prominent writer among the women novelists, in the present day Canadian literary scene. She presents through her novels the urgency to express the newly grasped freedom of women. Atwood's novels examine themes related to the politics of gender, such as enforced alienation of women under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of women forced by men, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of women and woman's quest for identity. Atwood's protagonists through the process of self-discovery gain courage, determination, resilience of outlook on life and emerge as self-willed women transcending feminist constraints and predicaments. This paper purports to view and interpret Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* against the background of ecofeminist ideology by highlighting men's misuse of women and women's return to nature.

Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972) seems to interrogate the notion of identity formation, nationality, culture, language, gender, sex, childhood memories, the family relationships, human interaction with nature, etc. The novel is a loud feminist assertion of female reproductive rights, and celebration of motherhood and a declaration of the independence and self-sufficiency of woman through complete refection of patriarchy.

As Carol P. Christ says:

The protagonist in *Surfacing* 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 judgement (320).

*Surfacing* focuses on a young nameless woman and her inner-search for who she is and how she relates to the world around her. The narrator's journey is quiet incredible, The novel begins with the narrator's search for her missing father and ends with the protagonist's celebration of her awakened self. Through the struggle to reclaim her identity and roots, the surfer begins a psychological journey that leads her directly into the natural world. Like the journey itself, the language, events and characters in Margaret Atwood's novel reflect a world that oppresses and dominates both femininity and nature. Thematically it is a quest novel about diving below the surface of consequences to discover the hidden and denied self. Resurfacing she finds herself empowered with a radical shift in her perception. In order to attain her identity, she feels, she must avoid every association with the "metal" killer society and go back into the remotest forest. In the course of this impassioned, desperate search she takes her plunge literally in the ancient lake, mentally in the memory of her parents and mystically in the vision of their continued existence in Nature.

The protagonist moves from struggling with the oppression and domination of the male world to eventually embracing and returning to the natural world as an equal, unassuming member. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* has been interpreted as a feminist novel. This novel can be explained in terms of ecofeminism also, for Atwood shows men's misuse and women's use of nature in *Surfacing*. At the outset of the novel, a journey motif is introduced. The journey of the unnamed protagonist is with her friends, David and Anna, the married couples and her lover Joe. At the surface level, it seems the sole-aim of the journey is to search for her missing father. But behind this surface

interpretation, the search becomes an occasion to enhance, self-actualize, define and assert her identity. So the search becomes an occasion for her to encounter her own enlarged, missing self. Anna, the protagonist's friend, while reading her palm comments, "your lines are double" (4) suggests the protagonist's personality. Through her search, she comprehends only divided selves. One is her suppressed self and the other demanding, dormant self, waiting to brush aside patriarchy and to stamp a self-integrated, strong, independent identity for her.

The protagonist of the novel seeks new definitions of the self and finally moves in different ways to achieve a changed social order. Margaret Atwood's new woman is concerned with arguing that she is a normal human being struggling with her imperfections to establish her identity. The protagonist is a woman in her late twenties who chooses to remain nameless throughout the novel. At one stage, responding to the call of her friend, the protagonist herself significantly states, "I no longer have a name" (173). The name is the primary source of one's identity and the fact that the protagonist feels that she has no name justifies the prevalent inner conflicts and identity crisis in her.

In portraying the unnamed narrator, Atwood gives a picture of the young modern woman who not only struggles for her right place in society but is also strong, enduring and adventurous enough to break the old structures of life and find a new order. (Quental 146)

Atwood's women often gain a self-identity by returning to their ancestors and the wilderness. In the words of Joseph Campbell, this return to her birth place is "penetration to some source of power, and a life enhancing return". (18)

In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood is writing about a search for unity and wholeness in a "divided" person. The novel is divided into three parts. Part one describes the physical background and introduces the characters. The protagonist's father's disappearance and her search for him are described in this part. This section ends on a note of suspense and the narrator's decision to stay at Northern Quebec Island. In Part One, the narrator's false marriage and divorce and existence of her child, her abortion as a 'sin' show her nature. The protagonist rejects her sin by constructing a network of deception and lies.

Part Two continues to develop the rising action as the search for her missing father goes on. She discovers the truth of her father's missing and some shocking truth about herself. She accepts the truth of her sin that is her aborted baby. In this section the narrator recalls her past events that happened to her in her childhood, vision of her child, her mother, father, etc. that is why this part is in past tense. In the third and final section the narrator has gone from rejecting her sin to admit it. She gets pregnant and thinks that her lost baby is surfacing within her, forgiving her. At the end of this section the narrator emerges as a total human being, complete with feelings. The unnamed narrator comes back from Toronto to Northern Quebec where she lived as a child. She is anxious and excited:

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 seaplanes for hire. (1)

The protagonist seems to have come back to her native place after nine years. The reason for this long separation was that she was exploited by a man whom she loved. She could not face her parents after this disastrous incident and hence she decided not to

return. She sent them a postcard regarding her wedding. She had a child but she had lost him to the husband whom she divorced. The protagonist suffers from a confidential, unshared guilt of her past and this in a profound sense, accounts for her enigma of identity in the present. She is painfully conscious of the meaningless existence of the world. The violence, brutality, lack of love and affection in modern life disturbs her very much. Her insecurity and fear arising out of her previous involvement with her husband makes her life meaningless. The novel makes the reader realize how the narrator-heroine has met a rather unhappy past with a broken marriage and the forced abortion of the foetus.

The unnamed protagonist is an artist whose professional aspirations are suppressed by her male art teacher. The art teacher feels nothing wrong in destroying her creativity as well as dignity as an artist. He takes advantage of her obedience and tries to convince her that, "... there has never been any important women artists" (49). He implies that women should not aspire for any great heights. He says, her aspirations to become a real artist is "cute but misguided" (49). Consequently, she can never be a commercial artist or an illustrator, and she is brainwashed to accept "he was right, there never have been any" (49). The creative marginality of women compelled her to survive in a crippling state of utter humiliation and objection. She is convinced that women cannot hope to be man's equal in any concrete way. Simone de Beauvoir aptly illustrates women's plight thus:

Men have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; these codes of law have been setup against her ; and thus she has been definitely established as the other. (171)

The art teacher not only crushes the artistic sensibility of the protagonist but also he uses all his skills to physically exploit her and seduce her. He gifts her wedding ring and almost succeeds in creating the image of himself as her husband. The protagonist becomes a prey to his exploits and gets pregnant. Her lover who is a middle- aged and selfish man refuses to marry her after impregnating her because he was already wedded and had children. The heroine feels shattered when he shows her the photographs of his wife and children. She says "he showed me snapshots of his wife and children, his reasons, his stuffed and mounted family, they had manes, he said I should be mature". (150). She is betrayed by the man but she has some sort of love for him and still keeps pining for him as she says :

For him I could have been any one but for me he was unique, the first that's where I learned. I worshipped him ... I kept the scraps of his handwriting like saints' relics. (150)

Her love for liberty is strengthened more and she longs to advocate a new world order for woman. Her feminine sensibility has been awakened more when he says abortion is, "like getting a wart removed". But quite against her wishes, her pregnancy is terminated. She claims that the child is always her husband's :

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 on me ... (30).

The abortion leaves an indelible, scathing scar on her psyche. She painfully but in a tone of anguish expresses "I was emptied, amputated ... they had planted death in me like a seed" (145). She begins to hate him after her abortion as she says:

After the slaughter, the murder, he couldn't believe I didn't believe I didn't want to see him any more; it bewildered him, he resented me for it, he expected gratitude because he arranged it for me, ... since then I'd carried that death around inside me.(146).

Her decision immediately after her forced abortion is to get the divorce. She proclaims this act, as an act of revolt against inhuman behaviour of her husband. She understands the cruel, aggressive nature and she sees in him a murderer of her foetus and a destroyer of her identity as a mother, as well as an artist.

The protagonist cites that not only her relationship with man but also that of Anna-David turns illusory. She is depressed, disillusioned, startled and appalled at the loveless, pretentious and artificial relationship between Anna and David. She feels that marriage stifles women's march towards autonomy. It is "like jumping off a cliff" (44). It means totally dissolved in the male world, a complete surrender, a complete losing of identity something with which Atwood's protagonist cannot get reconciled. The protagonist views the experience of Anna as terrible, thoroughly outrageous and atrocious. She feels that it is no wonder; the male world's harshness makes women like Anna feel helpless, powerless and victimized. The protagonist unlike Anna has the tremendous courage to revolt against male oppression.

Following the disillusionment with the very concept and the institution of marriage, she is reluctant to marry her lover Joe. Even though the protagonist is fond of Joe, she finds it extremely difficult to answer Joe's question "do you love me?"(153). Because she feels the word 'love' by itself is a hollow word and means nothing. Having been exploited and betrayed by her lover, she never trusts the word again. She distrusts the word 'love' because for men love is nothing but sex and they think, "Love is taking precautions" (79). She thinks that men need women primarily as sexual objects and she vehemently comments at Joe's sexual desire: "Perhaps that was the only time there could be anything like love, when he was asleep demanding nothing". (156)

Otherwise,

...even with my head turned away I could feel his X-ray vision prying under my skin, a slight prickling sensation as though he was tracing me. (84).

She re-experiences primitive emotion and childish thinking. She removes her clothes, letting them float away She purifies herself in the water, as water has long been used as a symbolic means of removing impurities. She survives on mushrooms, plants and berries. She merges with the forest, descending even further along the phylogenetic scale to the level of plants. She loses all sense of a personal identity and reaches a point of total oneness with nature, "I am a tree leaning". (43)

After her abortion, the protagonist comes to develop deep sympathy for the flora and fauna of the Quebec Island. The narrator's journey ends off discovering about herself. She discovers about herself and her relation with the world. She explores the power-politics in interpersonal relationship and relates the women's crisis of identity not only to the patriarchal structures of power and domination but also to the women's passivity and complicity in the power structures that subject and subjugate them. The surfer struggles with the notion that the head (a masculine element) should be remotely separated from the body (a feminine element). In order for each to prosper to the fullest extent, they must work together. The narrator, in the last few pages sees the natural world

as her equal, refuses to fall 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 fulfillment of our humanity is profoundly linked with learning to appreciate the nature within us and without. (43)

Standing there, with, “the trees (surrounding her ) ... asking and giving nothing”(43), she has embraced the ecofeminist ideal. Ecofeminists argue that two very defined, contradictory, and dualistic worlds exist in the patriarchal society the feminine and the masculine; on the one hand, the feminine principle represents Mother Nature, the body, irrationality, emotion, invitation and mysticism. On the other hand, the masculine principle represents rationality, logic, separation from nature, the head, intellectualism, language and concrete reality. Margaret Atwood seems to be questioning the existing power politics, the traditional notions of male superiority, the mutilation of women by men. She is trying to assert that women can refuse victimization and can gain transcendence from the male defined world and can hope to breathe freely in a world defined by them. Emma Parker observes:

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 that society is contaminated by patriarchal ideology. Both are unnatural constructed man made and both threaten to poison her. Instead, the narrator eats only the raw food that nature provides. (29)

In order to attain her identity she feels, she must avoid every association with the “metal” killer society and go back into the remotest forest. Eventually she becomes synonymous with nature. She realizes that being human, she cannot simply live in the wilderness, but must live with other people in the society. She decides to go back to city to face the life. According to Avtar Singh, “her journey has been, indeed journey from death to life, from withdrawal to reintegration with society, from ignorance to knowledge, from illusion to reality. (79). She has been recovering the part of herself she had lost. At the end, the protagonist feels she must look forward to her child who is taking shape in her womb. She is determined to protect her second foetus the “shape of a gold fish”(197) which is a fulfillment of her self. Therefore she realizes the need to eat, to live and to bear the child. She says, “if I starve it starves with me. It might be the first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed. (198). She wishes to give birth to a truly human child rather than a divine son-whom she likes to bring up as an artist- a supporter of ideal society. She announces her autonomy of existence, rejecting all bonds those of the unborn child growing within her. Thus as an advocate of the much-awaited female identity, she celebrates her unwed motherhood status without any hesitation.

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