

Feminization of Nature and Naturalisation of Female in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract:

Degradation of the land and environment and its effects on human existence are the biggest issues facing man today. The term 'Ecofeminism' becomes quite pertinent in this scenario. The aim of this paper is to provide a thorough analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) from an ecofeminist standpoint. Both the natural world and the feminine realm are directly oppressed by dominance and power in this literature. The anonymous protagonist of the novel is an ecofeminist who goes back to her childhood home of a remote island in Northern Quebec to look for her father, who has vanished. It is only when the protagonist comes into contact with nature that she begins to see the difference between her true self and her constructed one. The protagonist's return to nature serves as an implicit example of influence of ecofeminism. Her connection to the natural world makes her more aware of the mistreatment of women. She treats the planet as her actual home, since she is aware of how interconnected and complicated all life is in the natural world. The novel serves as a notable literary example of ecological feminism since it raises issues related to feminism and environmentalism. Even the language, plot, and characters of this novel all point to a society that subjugates and controls nature and female.

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

The destruction of the environment and land and its effects on human existence are the biggest issues that modern man faces. The term 'Ecofeminism' becomes quite pertinent in this scenario. Ecofeminism is a novel perspective on the natural world. Ecofeminists, according to Andy Smith, are "mostly concerned with the oppression of women and the oppression of earth." They think that the environmental rape of our world and the dominance of women over time are intimately related. Therefore, the issues of power, dominance, and subordination are crucial to ecofeminism. As the title implies it is a fusion of feminism and environment. According to Greta Gaard, "Ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology, which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities, is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminist theorists consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism and other social inequalities."

The aim of this paper is to provide a thorough analysis of *Surfacing* from an ecofeminist point of view. Many of the Canadian author's novels have addressed the topic of women and nature. The problems of the day are clearly reflected in *Surfacing*, which was written and published at the same time as the feminist and environmentalist movements began to gain traction. The main themes of her writings

are the exploitation of nature in a civilization with new technological advancements and the oppression of women in a society controlled by men. Both the natural world and the feminine realm are directly oppressed by dominance and power in this literature.

The anonymous protagonist is an ecofeminist who goes back to Northern Quebec, an untamed island, where she grown up, to look for her father who had vanished. The main character is a commercial artist who appears to have returned to her homeland after a long absence. Her three pals, Anna, Joe, and David, are going with her. The protagonist of the novel gradually immerses herself in nature and moves towards mystical visions as a means of exploring her inner self, which is framed by her search for her father. Alongside this search, her relationships with her friend and lover are being played out. Her attempt at an abortion, which she now views as murderous, and her relationship with her teacher demonstrates her emotional and creative demise. She has come to the realisation that nature cannot give one identity, and she has declared herself prepared for motherhood and social reintegration. She exposes the contradictions and dualities in her own life as well as in her patriarchal culture through this approach. A psychological journey that takes the protagonist straight into the natural environment is initiated by her struggle to restore her identity and roots.

It is only when the protagonist comes into contact with nature that she begins to see the difference between her true self and her constructed one. She discovers the extent to which Americans have harmed nature while looking for her father in the woods and beneath the lake. Her self-awareness as a 'victim' is developing in tandem with this realisation. Men mistreat women and the natural world only to have fun. There is an exploitative interaction between nature and humans. A prominent ecofeminist Petra Kelly states "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" (118). She understands that in being violated, the Mother Earth's holiness has been compromised, and the ecological unity—which entails the independence of every species—has been upset. In *Surfacing*, Atwood depicts how women use nature and how men misuse it. The opening lines of the novel mention the extinction of white birches: "I can't believe I'm on the same road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the South, and I notice they now have sea-planes for hire" (*Surfacing*,3). In *Surfacing*, the decline of birches is viewed as a sickness brought on by technological expansionism, which Atwood compares to 'Americanism'. As a Canadian characteristic, the narrator's compassion for dying birches, which represent nature, is contrasted with the actions of the two Americans who brutally killed the heron. But as it happened, they were Canadians. This led Atwood to state that "If you look like them and think like them then you are them" (165).

The landscape of Quebec serves as a mirror for the unnamed protagonist, reflecting her personal tragedy. She conveys her sincere concern for the environment and explains to the readers the relationship between women and nature. During her route back home, she learns "nothing is the same. I don't know the way anymore" (10). She has been estranged from her nation's terrain since the 'Old road' has been closed for many years, and she needs the 'new one' but she is unsure of its direction. Whether it is to regulate the dam or the removal of older trees, Atwood consistently informs the readers that ecological destruction permeates the scene: "The trees will never be allowed to grow tall again, they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scarce as whale" (55).

Lake fishing is a metaphor that alludes to imprisonment. The female lead soon comes to the realisation that, she has not been any different from them. She remembers a game she played as a youngster called 'the stabbing of the doll' which actually predicted her abortion, shattering the illusion

of her innocence. The novel serves as a reminder to readers of the distinctions between man-made hunting for the thrill of killing and natural predation. This adds to the estrangement between modern man and the natural environment. Vandana Shiva states “it is the elevation of hunting to the level of ideology which does so” (*Staying Alive*, 50). The narrator draws attention at least two instances of senseless killing: the shooting of heron and the detonations of lake by Americans who come for fishing. The narrator starts to feel hurt by the injustices she witnesses being done to the surroundings and creatures. The fact that Joe and David are recording the fish's insides disgusts her. The second time she said, “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). This usage of the word ‘recreation’ is sarcastic. Subsequently, she lets the frogs go into the lake, which therefore brings up memories of her brother releasing the bottled frogs. She learns her first lesson in patriarchal coercion from his ensuing rage. It also recalls the child that was aborted as a bottled frog. As an adult, he works in a field that entails damaging the environment.

There are a lot of conflicts and imbalances in Anna and David's relationship. In an attempt to make Anna feel inferior, David plays the all-powerful, domineering male persona. Like nature, the female body is likewise considered as a resource to be colonised and commercialised. As Bouson stated through David ‘*Surfacing* brings attention to the subjugation of women in a male-defined order of hierarchical and antagonistic positions that empower men at the expense of women. The female heroine is reminded of burning leeches crawling to the lake by Anna, who is sprinting towards it while coated in sand. This reminds her of a game she played as a youngster’. At the scene by the lake as David forces Anna take off her clothing for the film *Random Samples*, David calls Anna “darling...a good girl...twatface...in beside the dead bird” (172-73). He manages to get pictures of her in her undies. Here, Anna is referred to as an animal, demonstrating how patriarchal culture views women as inferior to men on par with animals. The destruction of the camera films represents her first symbolic protest against the patriarchy, which is based on the commercial worth of the female body. Anna's female image has been raped by David's camera, imprisoning her warped self behind its bright lens for eternity. In order to signify masculine dominance over the female body, the camera is utilised as a phallic symbol. As a result, it treats Anna as “bazooka or a strange instrument of torture” (173).

In this novel there are similarities between the victims of the animals and the victims of women. David wants Anna to take a nude photo next to the deceased heron. In this episode, she is again compared to a tree. The national emblem of Canada, the divided beaver and the beaver's victim status are combined. Linda Hutcheon tells the beaver first attracted the attention of European colonists and fur traders, and subsequently American money. The image of the beaver has associations with both the history of Canada as a land ravaged and colonised by both the US and England, as well as with pornographic reductions of women. The Moose family at the petrol station serves as a prime example of how emotive domestication of nature is exploited for profit. The first lover of the narrator coerces her into aborting her child by showing her pictures of his wife and kids.

Atwood highlights how men take advantage of women's bodies to fulfil their own desires. They even have influence over the childbirth process, which is a natural right reserved for women. The overuse of reproductive technologies is another issue raised by the protagonist. Under the pretence of helping women, current tactics deprive women of their ability to perceive their own body rhythms. She therefore objects to the infant being removed using a fork “like a pickle out of a pickle jar” (101). In this

context, the impact of the fertility-controlling drugs on the protagonist's eye, specifically the blurring of her vision, also assumes significance.

The novelist has attempted to establish a strong connection between the destroyed island near the border country in Quebec and the wounded self of the unidentified protagonist. With her three friends, she travelled to Quebec, where she gained insight into the workings of the world and managed to distance herself from both her companions and the Americans and Canadians who engage in the needless killing of fish, trees, and birds. Atwood states: “At the midway pond the heron was still there, hanging in the hot sunlight like something in a butcher’s window, desecrated, unredeemed. It smelled worse ...the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted” (167).

She retreats to nature after realising, if belatedly, that no human being can assist her in finding her true self. Paradoxically, she doesn't find herself until she starts to identify with the broken environment. She throws away her name, her marital ring, and her apparent identity before becoming a part of the scenery. The narrator starts equating herself with the deceased heron as she recovers. There is an obvious ecological link between the narrator's experience and the senseless and horrific killing of the heron. Rigney states, “The protagonist sees the heron as symbolic of her own psychological death” (100). She harbours a strong disdain for the slaughter of the bird and draws parallels with the mistreatment and repression of women. Men’s exploitation of the environment and women's relationship with reproduction serve as a metaphor for how males violate women: “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 is able to sense the rhythm of nature—the cycle of life and death—when she connects her own life with that of the other creatures. She begins to realise that she must change into the victim animals in order to get one with nature and discard her garments. She subsists on berries, plants, and mushrooms. She disappears even further into the forest, down to the level of the plants. She feels as though her life has completely transformed after making the connection between it and the natural world. She senses:

Through the trees the sun glances; the swamp around me smoulders, energy of decay turning to growth, greenfire. 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 simultaneously transforms into a plant, animal, earth, and woman; she becomes a natural lady who ought to be “A new kind of centrefold” (248). She moves like an animal, her blood expands like cell sap within her body, but she still acts like a normal lady “eyes staring blue ice from deep sockets” (248). She believes she is strong because she is simultaneously human, natural, and holy. She is no longer the same person that the reader first encountered in the book. She understands the fundamental suffering in her parents' lives and comes to the conclusion that this is the only reality in her own. The narrator retreats from civilization and faces the surrounding bush wilderness. She literally immerses herself in the natural elements and transforms into a virtually pre-cultural or natural state, merging with the non-human ‘other’ and gradually erasing the boundaries between herself and non-human nature: “I lean against a tree; I am a tree-leaning” (236).

Her connection to the natural world makes her more aware of the mistreatment of women. The protagonist prepares for an uprising against exploitation as her feminine consciousness reaches its peak.

She uses Joe to get pregnant, but she declines to marry him—possibly in retaliation for the way her former lover mistreated her. It appears that the struggle for dominance is over. She feels so strong and independent that she won't let herself be a victim.

The novelist has indicated that germination will occur because of the protagonist's resolve to conceive the child. She is quietly aware of how deeply and methodically men dominate women. Many men and women believe that it is a normal and widely accepted phenomenon. She was not going to submit to male dominance. She is fully aware that an unchecked, terminal patriarchy will ultimately lead to an ecological disaster. This is the reason she befriends Joe whom she considers to be a feminist guy despite the fact that he is a member of the masculine caste.

The novel serves as a notable literary example of ecological feminism since it raises issues related to feminism and environmentalism. This book's language, plot, and characters all point to a society that subjugates and controls nature and feminine. The profound meaning is found in her path of self-discovery and assertion of her unique identity; this actual journey is the surface meaning. These two interpretations connect feminism and environment and create a book about ecofeminism. She does not, however, wish to abolish patriarchy and establish female supremacy in its place. Her goal is to restore a kind of harmony and balance between men and women by peacefully changing the systems of male supremacy.

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