

Nature as a Heuristic Presence: An Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is an acclaimed Canadian writer who always dealt with women related issues in her writings. This paper attempts to make an ecofeministic reading of her brilliantly crafted novel *Surfacing*. There is an invisible and intangible parallel between the marginalization of women and the exploitation of nature under the stipulations of the anthropocentric world. The novel vividly portrays how the protagonist identifies herself with the Canadian wilderness and thereby draws sustenance from it.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Anthropocentrism, Industrialization

The intriguing interface of man and nature has been interrogated by theorists down ages. The dichotomy between the anthropocentric world and the bio/zoo centric world has become a fascinating area for literary deliberations. Eco-conscious theories or green studies delves deep into the impact of natural milieu on the human space and vice versa. Ecofeminism is an offshoot of such ecocritical studies which infuses feminism with eco-consciousness. It is mostly concerned with the one to one correspondence between oppression of women and oppression of earth. Greta Gaard posits:

Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class gender, sexuality, physical abilities and species in the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature (1)

Ecofeminists unearth the patriarchal power structure as the common root for the oppression of women as well exploitation of the earth. Karen J Warren says, "The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalizing them" (12). The main exponents of this theory are Greta Gaard, Maria More, Marry Mellor, Karen J Warren, Noel Sturgeon, Vandana Shiva many more. The patriarchal monopolization of women are compared and paralleled by the ecofeminists to that of the nature. Power followed by violence estranges women from her own body and the living forms from their own natural environment, both inevitably results in terrifying catastrophe. Materialism tolls the death knell of wilderness which remained a succor for human existence both in physiological and psychological way.

Apart from its utilitarian benefits, nature remains a pacifying, soothing presence for traumatized minds.

Margaret Atwood is a towering literary figure in Canadian literature, who has carved a niche for herself in the world literature as well. Her novels problematised the concept of gender nature nexus and offered an altogether new way of observing the interconnectedness between the anthropocentric world and the nature world.

Surfacing which came out in 1972, centers around the inextricable inter relationship of unnamed protagonist with the wilderness, and how nature helps her to evolve into a new individual thereby resulting in her surfacing. The novel begins with a journey by the unnamed protagonist with her boy friend Joe and their couple friends Anna and David to the Quebec country side in search of her missing father. This journey made her realize how estranged she had become from her roots and how mechanical her life had become. She was shell shocked to see the beautiful countryside she had spent her childhood days mutilated and destroyed beyond repair. Her long absence had completely changed the country side. The rampant industrialization has made it a diseased and rotting place. The power company which had raised the level of water in the lake became instrumental in destroying the natural habitat of innumerable flora and fauna. She feels as a foreigner in her own native place. The pristine and serene beauty of the land was ruthlessly molested in the name of development. The beautiful ecological spaces once occupied by cows and horses got replaced by for rail way tracks, roads, buildings, factories and the like.

The nameless protagonist begins to relate to this ecological trauma to her own predicament. Having deceived by her lover, she had to undergo a harrowing experience in the past. She had become an alien to her body when she consents to abort her child at the behest of her lover. She lacked the strength and vigour to fight and hence passively subjugates to the will of the patriarchal power. She regrets this always and laments to her friend Anna about her abortion, that “I have to behave as though it doesn’t exist, because for me it can’t, it was taken away from me, exported, deported: A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled” (57).

It was during the search for her missing father that she comes to realize the extend of wreckage caused to the pristine nature of the Quebec country side by the Americans. She draws a parallel between the victimization of nature with her own predicament, both being victims of patriarchal power structures. This realization as the victim of the anthropocentric world dawns on her only when she encounters the devastation of the wilderness. The journey she undertakes in search of her missing father turns out to be her journey towards self discovery. It results in the emergence of a new woman free from the smothering shackles of the society, imperialism and domination. Slowly and steadily she discerns the extend of victimization of herself as well the nature around her. Technological advancement had adversely affected the flora and fauna of the Quebec country space. While referring to the cutting of trees, she seriously blurts out, “I’m anxious every opening between two trees looks like a path” (47).

It is not only the natural world but the animal world too are brutally vandalized by the intruding humans. During her journey, the protagonist comes across a heron, mercilessly killed by the inhuman and insensitive male dominated world . It represents the brutality of the modern civilized men who had tied the dead heron upside down on a tree branch. It was killed by American tourists apparently for no reason at all:

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: beautiful from a distance but it couldn’t be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it (149).

The nameless protagonist gets furious with the uncouth atrocities of the tourists and underscores their anthropocentric attitude. She says, “for them the only things worthy of life were human, their own kind of human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks, laminated” (168). The innate cruelty of the human world of gaining mastery over the lesser mortals is an ingrained feature of society. Female body like nature is monopolized not only by the patriarchal world but by technological innovations as well. The protagonist is reminded of burnt leeches crawling

to the lake when her friend Anna becomes naked and runs to the lake as part of a camera shoot by her own husband David. The camera and lens become the symbol of instruments of commercialization and modern technology which colonized and sabotaged the female body. The camera stands as a phallic symbol thereby representing the power structures of the patriarchal world. It becomes, “bazooka or a strange instrument of torture” (136).

The protagonist finds herself as well as the nature around her to be helpless under the subjugation of the homocentric world. She stays in the wilderness all alone in order to establish an intangible connection with nature and thereby bring back her power of procreation. She realizes that her disintegrating self can be sustained only through nature. She begins to enjoy the rhythms of nature. She says:

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 (168)

The protagonist ruminates over the weird childhood she had on the lap of nature. Their rural existence with picking vegetables from the home garden, collecting wood for cooking purposes and even the deafening silence of the place seem too remote and alien for city dwellers. The protagonist’s dislocated self gets adapted to the rhythms of the city life and she feels it extremely strange to be back to her native place. She gradually changes to her original self once she is back to the soothing presence of the wilderness. She establishes a deeper symbiotic correlation with nature around her and began to realize human atrocities on nature. She empathetically realizes that just like human beings each and every living organism has a right to live in this world. She even compares frogs and rats dissected for medical experiments to Jesus Christ as they are being crucified for the sake of humanity. She vehemently lashes against thoughtless acts of humans in the pretext of tourism which leaves the nature landscape with filth and garbage

The natural life makes her powerful and she experiences a saintly calm and serenity around her.

There is complete transformation of the self of the protagonist from being a victim of the patriarchal world to a very powerful and confident lady. She establishes an absolute harmony with the Canadian wilderness. She gets metamorphosed into a transpersonal individual. She becomes a plant, animal, insect etc. Clothes become symbols of civilization which brutalized female body and nature. By taking it off she attains self revelation. The supreme synthesis of the protagonist with nature is palpable in these words:

The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word. I lean against a tree, I am a tree, learning I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground I am not an animal or a tree, the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place (236).

Atwood draws an enticing parallel between the atrocities committed on women and on nature by judiciously picking up instances and weaves them brilliantly into the fictional fabric of the novel. She also incorporates the victimization of the Canadian people by the American imperialists. Regarding this double victimization Emily Dinomme comments:

The journey of Atwood’s narrator highlights the problematic groupings that her society demands in terms of nationality and gender under these categories, the narrator is doubly victimized as a Canadian and as a women (30).

Atwood’s heroine finally refuses to be a victim and surfaces herself into an empowered woman. The life of her couple friends Anna and David is portrayed to convey the conventional concept of the institution of marriage. Their apparently happy life has turbulent under currents as David turns out to be an abusive husband. Atwood herself had elaborated the tolerance of Anna in her well-known work of literary criticism, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*:

Anna herself, though clearly a victim of sexist ideology, willingly chooses to back her abuser when she must choose where to position herself. This follows Atwood’s logic of the first victim position of denied victimhood, where victim is “afraid to recognize they are victims for fear of losing the privileges that they possess” and often direct their anger “against one’s fellow-victims,

particularly those who try to talk about their victimization (36).

Hence Atwood's women characters exhibit various aspects of womanhood. The protagonist in *Surfacing* tries to emancipate herself by drawing power from the natural world around her.

Conclusion

The conventional concept of woman- nature and man-culture is being questioned in the tenets of ecofeminism. Modern science adversely affects and exploits nature and its resources. In *Surfacing* the protagonist associates herself with the natural world inclusive of its flora and fauna in her struggle against the oppression of both the physical and mental wilderness. It is imperative to stop the abuse of both nature and to protect the biodiversity to sustain life in this planet. The novel offers an ecofeminist reading as it unravels the victimization of women as well nature in true light.

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