

# Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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**Abstract-** The most important problem that man faces today is the degradation of land and environment and its consequences on human existence. In this context the term Ecofeminism becomes highly relevant. This paper attempts to take an in-depth study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) from an ecofeminist perspective. Within this text, power and domination, directly oppress both the feminine world and the natural world. The nameless protagonist of the story is an ecofeminist who returns to the undeveloped island, Northern Quebec, where she grew up, to search for her missing father. The protagonist realizes the gap between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she encounters nature. The ecofeminist impact is seen implicit in the novel by the protagonist's return to the natural world. Her association with nature raises her consciousness of victimization of women. Like a true ecologist, she makes the earth her literal home for she knows that in the natural world all life is interrelated, teeming with diversity and complexity. Since the novel introduces issue pertaining to feminism and environmentalism, the novel constitutes a representative literary example of ecological feminism. Even the language, events and characters in this novel reflect a world that oppresses and dominates both femininity and nature.

**Index Terms-** Domination, Ecofeminism, Femininity, Nature, Patriarchy.

## I. RESEARCH

*"I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place."*  
- (*Surfacing*, 236)

*Ecofeminism suggests that an end to the oppression of women is bound up with ecological values, and that women should be centrally concerned with ending the exploitation of the ecosystem (Collard, 1988). Ecofeminism has been particularly strong within radical feminism and within the Green Movement.*

- Collins Dictionary of Sociology

The most important problem that man faces today is the degradation of land and environment and its consequences on human existence. In this context the term Ecofeminism becomes highly relevant. Ecofeminism is a new way of approaching nature. According to Andy Smith ecofeminists are "mostly concerned about the oppression of women and the oppression of earth." They believe that the domination of women over the years is directly connected to the environmental rape of our planet. Thus, issues of power, domination and subordination are very vital to ecofeminism. As the term suggests, it is a combination of ecology and feminism. 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."

This paper attempts to take an in-depth study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) from an ecofeminist perspective. The Canadian writer has dealt with the issue of women and nature in many of her novels. The writing and publication of *Surfacing* coincides with the emergence of the feminist and ecological movements and obviously reflects the concerns of its time. Oppression of women in a male dominated society and exploitation of nature in a society having new developments in technology, are the major themes of her writings. Within this text, power and domination, directly oppress both the feminine world and the natural world.

The nameless protagonist of the story is an ecofeminist who returns to the undeveloped island, Northern Quebec, where she

grew up, to search for her missing father. The protagonist is a commercial artist and seems to have come back to her birthplace after many years. She is accompanied by her three friends - Anna, Joe and David. The story follows the protagonist's search for her father, which serves as a pretext for her search for her inner-self which is observed through her gradual submersion into nature and towards mystical vision. Her relationship with her lover and friend are played out alongside this search. Her relationship with her teacher, her attempt to abortion, which she now sees as murderous, shows her emotional and artistic death. She becomes a symbol for all those who are exploited and abused because of their powerlessness. At the end of the novel she realizes nature provides no identity, and she declares herself ready for motherhood and for reintegration into society. In this process, she unmask the dualities and inconsistencies in both her personal life and her patriarchal society. Through the struggle to reclaim her identity and roots, the protagonist begins a psychological journey that leads her directly into the natural world.

The protagonist realizes the gap between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she encounters nature. While searching for her missing father in the wilderness and under the lake, she recognizes the extent to which nature has been victimized by the Americans. Her evolving awareness of herself as a 'victim' is parallel to this recognition. Men destroy nature and women just for their fun. The relationship between nature and men is relationship of exploitation. As the renowned ecofeminist Petra Kelly observes, "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 realizes that as she has been violated, the sacredness of the Mother Earth is violated and the ecological unity, which means the independence of all species, is disturbed. Atwood shows man's misuse and woman's use of nature in *Surfacing*. The first sentence of the novel indicates the death 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)

## II

The dying of birches in *Surfacing* is seen as a disease resulting from technological expansionism which Atwood equates with 'Americanism'. The narrator's sympathy for dying birches symbolizing nature is taken as a Canadian trait and this is contrasted with the two Americans who cruelly killed the heron. But they turned out to be Canadians. This prompted Atwood to say that, 'if you look like them and think like them then you are them' (*Surfacing*, 165).

The nameless protagonist finds a reflection of her own tragedy in the Quebec landscape. She expresses a deep concern for nature and helps the readers understand the women-nature connection. In the course of her homeward journey she discovers that "nothing is the same. I don't know the way anymore." (*Surfacing*, 10) She has been alienated from the landscape of her country, for the 'Old road' has been closed for years and what she needs is 'the new one' but she does not 'know the way anymore'. Throughout the novel Atwood reminds the readers that ecological destruction pervades the setting whether it is to control the dam or the destruction of older trees: "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)

Fishing in the lake is a metaphor which suggests entrapment. Soon, the female protagonist realizes that in her capacity for evil, she herself has not been different from them. The illusion of her childhood innocence shatters and she recalls a childhood game - the stabbing of the doll - which actually foreshadowed her abortion. The novel reminds the readers of the differences between natural predation and the hunting done by the man which is done for the excitement of killing. This contributes to the alienation of modern man from the natural world. As Vandana Shiva points out, it is not hunting which leads to a violent relationship with nature: "it is the elevation of hunting to the level of ideology which does so" (*Staying Alive*, 50). The narrator draws attention to at least two such acts of meaningless killing: the shooting of the heron and the explosions made at the lake by Americans who come for fishing. Increasingly, the narrator feels herself hurt by whatever harms she sees done to the

environment, including animals. She is disgusted by Joe and David's filming of the fish's inards. She does not want to kill the fish herself, the second time: "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." (*Surfacing*, 153). The word re-creation has been ironically used here. Then she releases the frogs into the lake and this, in turn, triggers off memories relating to the release of the frogs bottled by her brother. His subsequent anger constitutes her first lesson in patriarchal pressure. The aborted child is also recalled as a bottled frog. Her childhood drawings consist of 'rabbits with their colored egg-houses'- and all that is "normal and green" (116). This is in contrast to her brother's drawings of war and death and as a grown up his profession is one that involves violating the earth.

The relationship of Anna and David is full of tensions and imbalance. David acts as the all-powerful and dominating male character and tries to humiliate Anna. As Bouson says, through David, '*Surfacing* draws attention to the oppression of women in a male-defined order of hierarchical and oppositional roles that empower men at the expense of women.' Like nature, the female body is also seen as a resource to be colonized and commercialized. Anna, running to the lake, naked and sand-covered reminds the female protagonist of burnt leeches crawling to the lake, a part of her childhood game. During the lake scene in which David forces Anna to strip off her clothes for the movie *Random Samples*, he refers to her as, "darling. . . a good girl. . . twatface" and desires to put her picture, "in beside the dead bird" (172-73). He succeeds in taking her nude photographs. Here Anna is described in animal terms and this naturalizing of women shows that in patriarchal culture women are also seen as inferior to men as animals. Her first protest against the patriarchy which structures upon the market value of female body is symbolically expressed through the destroyal of the camera films. David's camera has raped Anna's female image, it has forever entrapped her distorted self within its luminous lens. The camera is used as a phallic symbol, representing the male power over the female body. So, it acts upon Anna like a "bazooka or a strange instrument of torture." (173)

Some of the animal victims in the novel invite comparison with women as victims. David wants Anna to pose naked beside the dead heron. She is also compared to a tree in this episode. David's joke about the split beaver (128), and the fact that the beaver is the national emblem of Canada, fuses the victim status of the beaver, of women and of Canada. The beaver, as Linda Hutcheon tells, was an appealing lure to European fur traders and colonizers first, and then to American capital. The beaver image has connotations of pornographic reductions of women and also of Canada's history as a land raped and colonized by England and then by the US. The Moose family at the gas station highlights the commercial exploitation of a sentimental domestication of nature. The narrator's first lover uses photographs of his wife and children: "his stuffed and mounted family" to make her abort her child.

The narrator's self-image of animal victim is first indicated when the boys tie her to the tree in school and forget to release her. She feels she becomes an "escape artist of sorts, expert at undoing knots" (88). As an escape artist her escape route lies in thinking of herself as a victim and to take recourse to detachment and flight. She seeks her liberation through a regression to primitiveness which involves total immersion in environment to the extent of living like a wild animal. In her vision significantly, her mother turns into a jay and her father into a fish-like creature. The ecofeminist impact is seen implicit in the novel by the protagonist's return to the natural world. Before her "surfacing" takes place, she undergoes an extensive change in perception and as a result learns to embrace the natural world, healing herself in the process. She experiences the oppression and domination of male world lacking the strength to fight for her survival and passively consents to abort her child. The unnatural act of her abortion shows the empowering and dominating nature of her ex-lover:

[The unborn child] 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, he wanted a replica of himself. (39)

The abortion itself illustrates the ecofeminist thought that, “the implications of a culture based on the devaluation of life giving and the celebration of life taking are profound for ecology and for women.” Her ex-lover feels no emotional attachment with the child, for him it is, “simple like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn’t a person, only an animal.” (185)

Atwood emphasizes the fact that men exploit the bodies of women for their needs. They even control the process of childbirth which nature has assigned only to women. The protagonist also questions the excessive use of reproductive technologies. The modern techniques, in the guise of assisting woman, rob her of the ability to sense her bodily rhythms. Hence, she does not want the child to be taken out with a fork, “like a pickle out of a pickle jar” (101). The effect of the fertility controlling pills upon the protagonist’s eye, that is, of blurring her vision, also becomes significant in this context.

The novelist has made an attempt to create an emphatic relationship between the wounded self of the unnamed protagonist and the damaged landscape of the island near the border country in Quebec. Her journey to Quebec with her three friends made her see into the life of things and in the process she gets away from all- her friends as well as the American-Canadians who indulge in senseless cruelty to birds, trees and fish. Atwood writes:

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 realizes though belatedly that no human being can help her in discovering her real self and, therefore, she turns to nature. Ironically enough it is only when she identifies herself with the damaged landscape that she discovers herself. She becomes part of the landscape but prior to this, she discards her marriage ring, her name and her seeming identity. In her healing process, the narrator begins to compare herself with the dead heron. The brutal and unnecessary murder of the heron presents a direct ecological parallel to the experience of the narrator. According to Rigney, “The protagonist sees the heron as symbolic of her own psychological death” (100). She feels the deep disgust towards

the killing of the bird and compares it with oppression and harassment of women. Women’s association with fertility and men’s with environment abuse serves as a metaphor of the violation of women by men:

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)

After her abortion, the protagonist comes to develop deep sympathy for the flora and fauna and realizes that regeneration through nature is the only solution for her disintegration: “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)

The power for destruction can be reconciled only with the power for creation. She gradually comes to feel that she herself has been anti-nature. She had tried to subvert nature by getting the foetus aborted. So, she must compensate for this anti-nature activity. So she decides to bear a child and allow the baby to grow as a natural human being in the most natural way.

This time I will do it myself . . . the baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten and I’ll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it, it will be covered with shining fur, as god, I will never teach it any words. (209)

When she links her own life with those of the other beings of nature, she is able to perceive the rhythm of nature—its cycle of life and death. She comes to feel that in order to be one with nature; she has to shed her clothes to become like the victim animals. She survives on mushrooms, plants and berries. She merges with the forest, descending even further to the level of plants. After linking her life with the natural things, she feels that her life has been totally changed. She feels:

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. (217)  
She becomes a plant, animal, earth and woman at the same moment; she becomes a natural woman who should be “A new kind of centerfold” (248). She dodges like an animal, blood swells within her body like cell sap and yet she remains as a natural woman with “eyes staring blue ice from the deep sockets” (248). She feels herself to be powerful, for she is natural, human and saintly at the same time. She is no more the same person whom one saw at the beginning of the novel. She understands the essential pain in the life of her parents and realizes that this is the only truth in her own life.

Withdrawing from civilization and turning to the bush wilderness surrounding her, the narrator literally immerses herself in the natural elements and merges with the non-human ‘other’ through a metamorphosis into a virtually pre-cultural or natural state, thus gradually dissolving the boundaries between herself and non-human nature: “I lean against a tree; I am a tree-leaning.” (Surfacing, 236)

Her association with nature raises her consciousness of victimization of women. When her feminine consciousness reaches its climax, the protagonist makes ready the ground for revolt against exploitation. She uses Joe to get her pregnant but refuses to get married to him, possibly as revenge upon her ex-lover who used her. The power struggle seems to have come to an end. She feels so confident about her own power and refuses to be a victim and says,

“This above, all, to refuse to be a victim”. (249)

She decides to stay back in Quebec and give birth to the ‘gold fish’ nurturing in her womb. She does not know whether the child in her womb is a male or a female child but has made up her mind to assert herself by allowing the foetus to grow. She says:

I cannot know yet; it’s too early. But I assume it: if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me. It might be first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed.  
(Surfacing, 250)

With the protagonist’s determination to give birth to the child, the novelist has hinted that germination will take place implying

that both women and nature will be protected provided they defend themselves against the onslaught of men over them. She is quiet aware that men’s domination of women is deep and systematic. Many men and women think that it is something natural and accepted throughout the world. The oppression of women is so deeply embedded in our societies and our psyches as Petra Kelly observes, “Women suffer both from structural oppression and from individual men” (113). But the heroine would be different. She would not allow herself to be dominated by men. She is very well aware that “the ultimate result of unchecked, terminal patriarchy will be ecological catastrophe. . .” (Kelly, 118). That is why she becomes chummy with Joe (though he belongs to male caste), who according to her estimate is a profeminist man.

Like a true ecologist, she makes the earth her literal home for she knows that in the natural world all life is interrelated, teeming with diversity and complexity. She is not afraid of any one. There is no one to boss over her and violate her physique. She becomes one with her sacred Mother Earth. She throws away all her civilization as it is destroying the biosphere. She may recreate a culture that respects to seek harmony with nature. Those whom she has known are living in the city now, in a different time. She remembers her man, the “fake husband” for whom she now feels nothing but sorrow. She totally relies on Mother Earth. Gods are questionable to her; it includes even Jesus Christ who is to her “theoretical” (247). She is not prepared to rely on anyone, it includes even Joe. She gains absolute freedom now. Firmly rooted to the Earth like the original people several years ago, she, with an enormous contentment says, “The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing” (251).

Since the novel introduces issue pertaining to feminism and environmentalism, the novel constitutes a representative literary example of ecological feminism. Even the language, events and characters in this novel reflect a world that oppresses and dominates both femininity and nature. This actual journey is the surface meaning while the deep meaning lies in the journey of self-discovery and assertion of her individual identity. These two kinds of meanings links ecology with feminism and make the

novel an eco-feminist novel. However, she does not want to overturn patriarchy and replace it with women's dominance. She wants to transform nonviolently the structures of male dominance and restore a kind of balance and harmony between women and men.

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