

Role of Nature in Self-Exploration in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract- This paper focuses on human interaction with nature. The protagonist of the novel, *Surfacing* returns to the undeveloped island where she grew up on to search for her missing father. In the 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. 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.

Index Terms- Nature, Femininity, Identity, Duality, Exploitation

I. RESEARCH

Colonialism and patriarchy are seen as power structures that exploit. In Canada, colonial exploitation is seen as a kind of exploitation of both Nature and women. Colonial power structures have gone deep into the collective unconsciousness of Canada and have become metaphor for feminine and nature exploitation for women writers in that country. This gives rise to Eco-feminism.

Eco-feminism or ecological feminism is a term coined in 1974 by Françoise d'Eaubonne. It is a philosophy and movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the natural environment. Joyce Nelson says, "Eco-feminism bridges the gap between ecology and feminism: strands of analysis which have existed side by side over past decades without necessarily intertwining. By making explicit the connection between a misogynist society and a society which has exploited 'mother earth' to the point of environmental crisis, Eco-feminism has helped to highlight the deep splits in patriarchal paradigm."

Eco-feminist theory links the oppression of women with the oppression of nature. More specifically, "ecological feminism is the position that there are important connections—historical,

symbolic, and theoretical— between the domination of women and the domination of nature, an understanding which is crucial to both feminism and environmental ethics" (warren, p.235)

Eco-feminism is dealt in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972). Margaret Atwood is a leading novelist of Canada. She is best known for her feminist novels around the world. *Surfacing* is one of the best novels of Atwood which projects the story of an invisibly visible character without name in form of narrator of the story. The title of the novel is very significant because it reveals the efforts of an individual's self exploration which undergoes many phases of physical troubles and mental traumas. All the efforts of an individual in the novel for self exploration clearly come up on the surface in midst of the nature from deep conflict between self and society and gives a new power of re-thinking and insight to the nameless heroine of the novel for further process of life.

The protagonist grows up in a masculine world where it was worse for a girl to ask questions than for a boy. If a boy asked a question the other boys would make derisive sucking noises with their mouths but if a girl asked one the other girls would say "Think you're so great" in the washroom afterwards.

Thus growing up in a culture saturated with male bias, women remain reconciled to their own inferiority. Margaret Atwood draws attention to the fact that "the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it ruled it, and still dominate it today, are men." (Beauvoir, p.557)

In *Surfacing* the narrator of the story remains nameless throughout the novel. Commenting on the namelessness of the heroine Nancy A. Walker says that the narrator "lacks a clearly defined 'self' that can be named". Being nameless the protagonist says to her friend Anna, "I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending." (Atwood, p.162)

It can be said that by depriving her protagonist of a name, Margaret Atwood has been able to suggest that *Surfacing* is not a story of a particular woman but of the millions of women all over the world who may identify themselves with her. The protagonist loves her art teacher who uses all his skill to seduce her. He gave a wedding ring and almost succeeds in creating the image of himself as her husband. When she is pregnant, he uses all tricks

to abort the child. For him it is “simple like getting a wart removed.” (Atwood, p.138)

The protagonist discovers that after marriage women’s exploitation, oppression and victimization gets sharpened. According to her marriage is nothing but a surrendering of values and distortion of the identity of a woman. Thus the protagonist’s journey into the interior provides her, “a means for tapping emotions that would otherwise remain inexpressible, and reveals aspects of her personality hitherto hidden.” (Stewart, p.156) In an interview Margaret Atwood says, “It seemed to me that getting married would be a kind of death.” (Valerie, p.16) According to Margaret Atwood, marriage should follow love. A marriage which is not based on mutual love is meaningless. The narrator says she was fool to enter into the bond of marriage. But in reality she never got married. Her lover was a “middle aged”, “second hand” and “selfish” man. He has refused to marry her because he is married. The narrator feels shattered when he shows the photographs of his wife and children, “they had names, he said I should be mature.” (Atwood, p.143)

She is betrayed by selfish lover but says, “for him I could have been anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that’s where I learned. I worshipped him...I kept scraps of his handwriting like saints’ relics...” (Atwood, p.142) The narrator cannot forget the misery abortion has caused her. She says: “I couldn’t accept it, that mutilation, ruin I’d made” (Atwood, p.137)

The unnatural act of her abortion and the continual struggle for her to feel comfortable with words and language illustrate the extent to which society or man oppressed and consumed the surface. Both empowering and dominating nature of her ex lover shows, “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 on me, he wanted a replica of himself.” (Atwood, p.28)

Margaret Atwood is emphasizing the fact that men exploit the bodies of women for their needs. They have controlled the process of childbirth which nature has assigned only to women. Men want women to remain powerless victim. She refuses Joe’s marriage proposal, “The finality; and he’d got the order wrong, he’d never asked whether I loved him, which was supposed to come first. I would have been prepared for that.” (Atwood, p.80)

Joe does not realize the need for it because men except women to be absolutely passive and also because they think marriage is a woman’s destiny. The relationship between the protagonist and Joe, offers an interesting insight into male-female dichotomy. The protagonist’s acceptance of the partnership is almost fatalistic. She realizes that for Joe sexual need is primary and he wants to dominate and control her. She perceives a killer and victimizer in him.

We can notice the split between the narrator’s feminine self that is peace and harmony in married life and her feminist self which suggests Anna to walk out of marriage instead of suffering. Her imaginary divorce caused her tremendous pain and suffering. Remembering her parent’s reaction on her divorce she says:

“They never forgave me, they didn’t understand and divorce, I don’t think they even understood the marriage, which wasn’t surprising since I didn’t understand it myself. What upset them was the way I did it, so suddenly, and then running off and

leaving my husband and child, my attractive full-colour magazine illustrations, suitable for framing.” (Atwood, p.23)

Margaret Atwood’s “*Surfacing* takes woman as an existential condition, the condition of being powerless and manipulatable.” (Jaidev, p.54) Since power is centralized in the hands of man, they feel nothing wrong in destroying her dignity or creativity. According to them, a woman has no right to have a baby without a husband. When the pregnancy of the protagonist concluded not in childbirth but in abortion she feels emptied, amputated.

Margaret Atwood displays a superb, penetrating awareness of the traumatic experiences of abortion in the life of sensitive woman. Sushila Singh, an exponent of feminism in India thinks that, “the trauma of abortion has never been dealt with such an extraordinary understanding before in fiction”. The protagonist undergoes emotional and artistic death at the hands of her teacher. It is a “planted death in her”. As Malashri Lal says, “...the pain of aborting life unhinges the minds to a degree that it creates an alternate ‘truth’ to the event.”

The protagonist suffers from a guilt complex and in the end of the story, she decides to conceive a baby and resolved that, “this time I won’t let them.” (Atwood, p.187) The narrator wants to prove that the process of childbirth is women’s power not men’s and a woman can deliver the baby the natural way. She says:

“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 retiring 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, a God.” (Atwood, p.156)

After her abortion, the protagonist comes to develop deep sympathy for the flora and fauna of the Quebec Island. She finds that the beauty of Nature is being destroyed by the Americans. The relationship between nature and Americans is relationship of exploitation and the entire landscape has been mutilated, raped:

“Further in the trees they didn’t cut before, the flood are marooned, broken and gray white tipped on their sides, their giant contorted roots bleached and skinless; on the sodden trunks are colonies of plants, feeding on disintegration; laurel, sundew the insect eater, its toe nail- sized leaves sticky with red hairs. Out of the leaf nests the flowers rise, pure white, flesh of gnats and midges petals now, metamorphosis.” (Atwood, p.161)

Within *Surfacing*, power and domination directly oppress both the feminine world and the natural world. From the human driven need to control the dam to the destruction of older trees. . The protagonist looks with disgust on the disrespect of her companions and others towards the natural world. When she sees a dead heron, obviously killed by a human and on display to reveal the killer’s ego, she is sickened and becomes more sickened when David wants to film it because it looks suitable for a film titles “Random Samples”. She opposes to eating animals, saying she had no right to it and even suggests that killing a fish is worse than starting a war because there are always reason for killing a living creatures.

Eco-feminists 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 and mysticism. On the other hand, the masculine principle represents rationality logic, separation from nature, the head, intellectualism, language

and concrete reality. The protagonist tries to re-unite these two dualities:

“The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I’m not against the head or the body either: only the neck that creates the illusion that they are separate.... If the head extended directly into the shoulders like a worm’s or a frog’s without that constriction, that lie, they wouldn’t be able to look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets; they would have to realize that if the head is detached from the body both of them will die.” (Atwood, p.75)

The surface 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 fulfilment of our humanity is profoundly linked with learning to appreciate the nature within us and without” (Atwood, p.43) standing there, with, “the trees [surrounding her]...asking and giving nothing”, she has embraced the eco-feminist ideal.

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.

Despite her fear of the consequences, her search for her missing father and her search for self increasingly offers her the power to resist the oppression inherent in their relationship and to reassess her own need. Margaret Atwood seems to be questioning the existing power politics, the traditional notions of male superiority, and 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 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 man made and both threaten to poison her. Instead, the narrator eats only the raw food that nature provides.” *Surfacing* represents the feminine consciousness and shows a woman’s struggle to free herself. Her association with the people and Nature raises her consciousness of victimization of woman. When her feminist consciousness reaches its climax, the protagonist makes ready the ground for revolt against exploitation oppression. As Carol Christ says, narrator 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 judgment”.

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 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. She also tries to attain some unknown but ancient wisdom, which might have been behind the rock paintings. At the end she reverses the mirror in order “not to see myself but to see”, and alone resumes her journey which finally brings her through extreme hardship to the symbolic plunge and to resurface—this time with the defiance never to be a victim any more. The protagonist moves from struggling with the oppression and domination of the male world to associating with various feminine principles and motifs to eventually embracing and returning to the natural world as an equal, unassuming member. Margaret Atwood shows men’s misuse and women’s use of nature in *Surfacing*. Women’s association with fertility and men’s with environment abuse specifically as a metaphor of the violation of women by men.

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