

Exploitation of Nature and Women in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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The most important problem that man faces today is the degradation of land and environment and its consequences on human existence. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* deals with the power and the domination that directly oppresses both the feminine and the natural world. The narrator depicts the protagonist of the novel as a representative for all those who are exploited and abused because of their powerlessness. The novelist has made an attempt to create an emphatic relationship between the wounded self of an unnamed protagonist and the damaged landscape of the island, Quebec. The protagonist had a relationship with her lover and got conceived. The lover himself compels her to abort the baby and when she aborts she feels herself as murderous. This shows her emotional and artistic death. The journey to Quebec is not only for searching her father but also for the self-exploration of her identity. The protagonist links her life with the natural things as her life has been totally changed. She revolts against exploitation. She feels so confident about her own power and refuses to be a victim. At last she gains absolute freedom. Throughout the journey, the protagonist realises her self – discovery and assertion of her individual identity. She pacifically tries to transform the dominant nature of men by restoring harmony between women and men.

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. It 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” (27). The term ecofeminism is a combination of ecology and feminism. Ecofeminism is a term coined in 1974 by Francoise d' Eaubonne. According to Greta Gaard, “Ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorises oppressions that based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities are the same ideologies which sanctions the oppression of nature” (20). Ecofeminists point out that wherever nature is exploited, women are also degraded and vice versa. Both women and nature are life sustaining and resource giving forces. Hence they should be treated property for the growth of society and world.

As a Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood has dealt with the issues of women and nature in many of her novels. Oppression of women in a male dominated society and exploitation of nature in a society are the major themes of her writings. Within this text, power and domination directly oppress both the feminine world and the natural world. To quote Lorraine Anderson becomes

indispensable when he equates the exploitation of woman by man to man and nature:

Man and woman are not just “opposites” but the female is subordinate and inferior to the male. Man’s enterprise in subduing female nature to his will is analogous to his mechanistic and technological domination over the Earth’s original environment. That which resists subjugation causes unease, fear, and a sense of evil. The exploitative relation between man and woman, and man and nature is equated. (26)

In *Surfacing*, an unnamed protagonist is an ecofeminist who returns to the undeveloped island, Northern Quebec. She goes to that island to search for her missing father. She is accompanied by her three friends – Anna, Joe and David. The story follows the protagonist’s search for her father and that serves as a pretext for the search of her inner – self too. Her relationship with her lover and friend are played out alongside this search. She had a physical relationship with her teacher and got conceived. The lover himself compels her to abort the baby and when she aborts, she feels herself as a murderer. This 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 realises that nature provides no identity. She declares herself ready for motherhood to incorporate with the 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 natural identity of herself and her artificial construct only when she encounters nature. While searching for her missing father in the wilderness and under the lake, she recognises the extent to which nature has been victimized by the Americans. It is parallel to her victimization. Man destroys nature and woman just for their fun. The relationship between nature and man is the 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). 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 as, “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 seaplanes for hire. (*Surfacing* 3)

The dying of birches 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” (165).

The unnamed protagonist finds a reflection of her own tragedy in the Quebec landscape. She expresses a deep concern for nature and helps the readers to understand the deep rooted connection between woman and nature. In the course of her homeward journey she discovers that “Nothing is the same, I don’t know the way anymore”(10). She has been alienated from the landscape of her country. The old road has been closed for years and the new one is created. 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 destruction of older trees as

“The trees will never be allowed to grow tall again, they’re killed as soon as they’re valuable, big trees are scarce as whales” (55).

The protagonist has been entrapped like fishing in the lake. 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, the differences between natural predation and the hunting done by the man which is done for their excitement for killing. This contributes to the alienation of modern man from the natural world. The narrator draws attention to two meaningless killings: the shooting of the heron and the explosions made at the lake by Americans who come for fishing. She does not want to kill the fish herself for food: “I couldn’t any more, I had no right to. We didn’t need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they call it”(153).

The relationship of Anna and David is full of tensions and imbalance. David acts as the powerful and dominating male character and tries to humiliate Anna. Like nature, the female body is also seen as a resource to be colonized and commercialized. In the lake scene, David forces Anna to strip off her clothes for the movie *Random Samples*. He succeeds in taking her nude photographs. Anna is described in animal terms and this naturalizing of women shows that in patriarchal culture, women are seen as inferior to men and being considered as animals. Her protest against the patriarchy which structures upon the market value of a female body is symbolically expressed through destruction 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 represents the male power over the female body and so it acts upon Anna like a “bazooka or a strange instrument of torture” (173).

The narrator becomes a victim when the boys tie her to the tree in school and forget to release her. She feels that 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 takes other options 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. She experiences oppression and domination of male world and the lack of her strength to fight for her survival. The unnatural act of her abortion shows an empowering and dominating nature of her ex-lover, “It [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” (42). 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 narrator feels like modern techniques, in the guise of assisting women in child labour, really interferes in the natural process in which women and Mother Nature mingles together. She does not want the child to be taken out with a fork, “like a pickle out of a pickle jar” (101).

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. The journey to Quebec is not only for searching for her father but also for self-exploration of her identity. In this 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 as “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).

The narrator 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 that is parallel to the experience of the narrator. She feels the deep disgust towards the killing of the bird and compares it with oppression and harassment of women.

The power of destruction can be reconciled only with the power of creation. She gradually comes to feel that she herself has been anti – nature. She had tried to subvert nature by getting the foetus aborted:

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)

She wants to 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. She links her life with the natural things and then 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 natural woman who should be “a new kind of centrefold” (248). She feels herself to be powerful at the same time she is natural, human and saintly. She is not like the same person whom one saw at the beginning of the novel. Her association with nature raises her consciousness of victimization of women. When her feminine consciousness reaches its climax, the protagonist makes ready for revolt against exploitation. She uses Joe to get her pregnant but refuses to get marry him. 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).

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

Like a true ecologist, she makes the earth her literal home. She knows that in the natural world all life is interrelated, teeming with diversity and complexity. She is not afraid of any one. She may recreate a culture that respects to seek harmony with nature. She feels sorrow for her ex-lover. She totally relies on Mother Earth. She is not prepares to rely on anyone including Joe. She gains absolute freedom now. Firmly rooted to the Earth like the native people several years ago, she, with an enormous contentment says, “The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing” (251).

In this novel, the language, events and characters reflect a world that oppresses and dominates both femininity and nature. This actual journey is the surface that 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. She wants to perform non-violently the structures of male dominance and restore a kind of balance and harmony between women and men.

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