

# **Rejuvenation in an Eco-communal Ambience: An Analysis of Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel***

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Eco-critical analysis is a form of literary criticism that is based on the relationship between the human beings and the natural environment. The main thrust of the eco-oriented writing is based on the reintegration of human as well as non-human world. The critic Sumathy is of the view that, "eco criticism brings out the interconnections between man and nature" (81). Ethel Wilson, one of the pioneer women writers in Canadian literary milieu, elucidates the fact that man and his environment are intertwined and interdependent. She strongly believes the fact that man cannot exist without nature because both are inseparable and interactive towards each other. Her novels analyse the ways in which the environment illuminates the characters and show how the natural settings rejuvenate them in the natural environment. In her fiction *Swamp Angel* Wilson highlights the rejuvenating impact of natural environment in the lives of the characters. The present paper analyses the rejuvenating experiences of the characters amidst the natural settings in Wilson's *Swamp Angel*.

Women characters of Wilson find happiness and rejuvenation in their life when they move from ego-centered living to eco-consciousness or cosmic consciousness. The novels of Wilson argue that the women characters are not for resistance but for "a sympathy between wilderness and the innermost self" (New 154). The protagonist of the novel *Swamp Angel* becomes aware of her enclosed sphere of 'self' and moves towards eco-awareness. The analysis of Wilson's novels reveals the fact that the female protagonists' healing and growth depend on the decision they take to escape from circumstances that imprison her natural impulses.

In the fiction *Swamp Angel* Wilson presents the interdependence between the human instinct and the natural environment. It is powerfully presented in the opening lines of the novel that arise sympathy between wilderness and human beings, which is narrated in the novel as, "TWENTY fifty brown birds flew past the window and then a few stragglers, out of sight. A fringe of Mrs. Vardoe's mind flew after them (what were they - birds returning in migration of course) and then was drawn back into the close fabric of her preoccupations" (*Angel* 7). The above lines focus on the protagonist Maggie's escape from a life of self-dependence and to a

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world of independence and self fulfilment. Maggie watches the returning of the migrating birds to their place of regeneration and productivity. Thus the fiction highlights the power within the female and their quest for independence and self-respect. Maggie who leaves her second husband Edward and starts a new eco-centered and rejuvenated life serving as a cook in a fishing lodge in British Columbia is presented in a language that is, “perfectly controlled, effective, firmly snaring the reader’s interest [and] give immediate promise of enjoyment to come” (qtd. in Ferres 373). Throughout the novel Wilson has used a language that is embedded with a connection between human thoughts and the nature that surrounds human kind.

Wilson’s female characters used to undertake a physical as well as psychological journey in order to get affiliated with nature. In the novel Maggie undertakes a journey for refuge deserting her second husband Edward. She has endured nightly humiliations and assaults day by day after her marriage with him. She thinks her marriage as a period of slavery and she earnestly prepares herself to leave Edward in order to free herself from “the nights’ hateful assaults” (*Angel* 20). Also she says: “I am humiliated for always by what I did, for marrying him. I won’t think of it there’s no good in it – ever if I can. The cruel dangerous thought slid away and played by itself” (42). Maggie marries Edward out of compassion as he is unfit to serve in the army. When the humiliations cross the limits she cannot control herself and takes a right decision as she resolve that “a loveless marriage is a cardinal sin” (Reddy 17) and therefore she walks out of her married life resolutely.

Wilson poignantly focuses the idea that nature always extends its hands towards the people who are suffering from loneliness and psychic turmoil. Maggie in her life has already seen the deaths of her father, first husband and her dear daughter Polly. Seeking true self-value in isolation, Maggie feels communion with nature where she finds solace and happiness ultimately in an “enlarged, supra-personal sense of community” (Bagchee 181) and the natural environment.

Nature always heals a person who is willing to surrender wholeheartedly to it. Emotionally exhausted, Maggie reaches the bus station at the outskirts of new Westminster and then she boards a bus for Chilliwack which is seventy miles away from Vancouver. At Chilliwack near the modest auto camp she is offered a small cabin for that night. Through the cabin windows Maggie envisages “the tops of tall firs moving slowly in a small arc, and back, against the starred sky. Slowly they moved, obliterating stars, and then revealing them. The place was very still. The only sound was the soft yet potential roar of wind in the fir trees” (*Angel* 34-35) and she feels that the cabin is a safe small world encloses her. The sweet smell and the sound of the fir trees make her to sleep soundly. The first night after her escape from Edward, Maggie lies contentedly in the

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modest bed receptive to the sounds and smells of nature. Feeling free at last from the humiliation of Edward, the rest of the novel is “concerned with Maggie’s regeneration, and with the journey on which she sets out in order to discover her selfhood” (Bagchee 187). More obviously Maggie feels a child-like nature within herself and she feels that nature has soothed her inner self as well as removed almost all her scars.

Eco-centered characters never stop their journey until they reach their destination which leads them towards a positive life leaving the negative forces behind. The places which Maggie journeys through have their own significances. After a short stay in Chilliwack, Maggie takes a Hope-Princeton bus and travels through the road to Hope who “lies between two forks of mountains, and is subsidiary to them” (*Angel* 37). She gets down from the bus near the Similkameen river which has, “the dancing name, it was a broad mountain stream of a light blue that was silver in the bright morning and of a silver that was blue. There was a turn in the road, and crowded somber jack pines hid the Similkameen River” (38). Maggie’s fear of being overtaken by her second husband is at last over. To herself and to the narrator, Maggie Vardoe is dead and henceforth will be known as ‘Maggie Lloyd’ or simply ‘Maggie’. Then Maggie walks down to the margin of the river as in an enchantment: “The pine-needle earth felt soft. She set down her gear, gazed up and down the stream, sat down, and then lay down, looking up at the sky” (39). Then she walks down the margin of the river as in an enchantment.

Wilson in the novel points the fact that ecocentered characters surrender themselves to nature unconditionally. Maggie voluntarily surrenders to the nature’s advances:

Some rivers are sweet and equable. Such was the lightly dancing Similkameen River at that place, and such was Maggie lying beside it. She gave herself up to the high morning. Was she not lucky? Chipmunks watched her.

The bend of the river beside which she lay was so far from the road that the sound of the immediate rippling water filled her ears, and so she heard no sound of passing cars, and lay high up in these mountains, near the sky - it seemed - on the fringe of some open pine woods. (39)

Maggie surrenders herself to the nature’s advances and enjoys the soft pine needle earth as she lies down on it. In the pleasure of casting and fishing Maggie becomes “a co-ordinating creature of wrists and fingers and reel and rod and line and tension and the small trout leaping, darting, and leaping” (40) and finally her fears are overcome by her involvement in fishing in the Similkameen River.

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When Maggie's ego-consciousness is surrendered to the natural environment, her mind is renewed: "No thought, no memories occupied her. The clouds that drifted across the blue drifted through her mind as she lay idle" (40) and the most remarkable feature is she forgets her own self: "In the pleasure of casting over this lively stream she forgot - as always when she was fishing - her own existence" (40). Maggie continues fishing, casting and landing the fish as, she undergoes a spiritual regeneration within herself.

Maggie's rejuvenation in her mind has naturally leads to remorse and repentance. In the night after she has rested in a cabin, she takes a walk after supper and finds a log near the curling Similkameen River and sits down. At this juncture, "sadness fell upon her and the thin cruel thought returned. What dreadful thing had she done to Edward Vardoe? He who had built himself up to satisfaction was humiliated and angry now, and unhappy with a helpless unhappiness that was shocking because he was unprepared" (41). Being an eco-conscious woman, Maggie repents for what she has done in the past and she accepts full responsibility for her crime. She says, "I didn't judge him, but I am his executioner just the same and he has been my executioner for what I did by marrying him. We have been each other's executioners. Now this is the very last time. I will think about it, the very last, she said to herself despairingly, it was too dreadful to bear" (41). She accepts the dreadful impact of her actions and judges its consequences: "I shall always go unforgiven" (42) and she has lifted "her heart in desolation and in prayer" (42) with a truly repented spirit, tears come to her eyes for she realizes that she is on the margin of life. Maggie stay at the Similkameen Cabins lasts for three days, where her dead past is buried and she is resurrected when she lifts up her spirit in desolation and prayer. The novelist points out that, Maggie's heart is renewed thereafter and it is narrated in the novel in following lines:

These days had been for Maggie like the respite that perhaps comes to the soul after death. The soul (perhaps, we say) is tired from slavery or from its own folly or just from the journey and from the struggle of departure and arrival, alone, and for a time - or what we used to call time - must stay still, and accustom the ages of the soul, and its multiplied senses to something new, which is still fondly familiar. (42-43)

Reborn in solitude, hope and silence, Maggie returns to the human world.

After her brief retreat at the Similkameen Cabins, Maggie takes a bus leaving Hope and starts up to Frazer Cannon. She enjoys the scenery and yields her mind to happier thoughts of the future. The bus that she travels goes up to Frazer Cannon and for few minutes Maggie is able to stand on the brink of the Frazer River and the scene ravishes her mind: "This formidable river rushed past the village of Hope at great speed, boiling as it rushed on. This boiling was strangely

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maintained in a flat yellow opaque surface. A sinister thing about this river at this place and season, Maggie thought, was that for all its force, it was silent" (68). She contemplates the dangerous silent Fraser and the dancing Similkameen River, her life too begins to flow like a racy river towards places and people. Even she does not respond very eagerly to the woman who sits next to her in the bus, but is increasingly aware of her natural environment. She looks out of the window past which fled the "young green of spring, dark firs, small waterfalls; then a turn of the road brought near the narrowing Fraser River, noisy here, beating madly against rock sides. She would see each leaf, each stone, each brown trunk of a tree, but she would not listen any more" (70). Maggie is reserved because she "did not require to talk, to divulge, to compare, to elicit. Maggie brought up from childhood by a man, with men had never learned the peculiarly but not wholly feminine joys of communication, the *déshabille* of conversation, of the midnight confidence, the revelation" (30). What she does, she does "serenely and alone" (Murray 244). She is, however, not merely self-reliant. She "relies on the land itself, the life of woods and lakes and rivers to which she has returned" (Santhoff 41), and becomes a part of her environment with relishing sights and sounds of the wilderness.

When Maggie's journey continues through her window, she watches the ascending pine trees and the journey continues in silence. She sees a picket fence and distant crosses up the hill among the ripping hillocks "The picket fence and the crosses would be covered by snow in the winter. Then the spring sunshine beating on the hillside would melt the snow, and the snow would run off, and the crosses would stand revealed again" (*Angel* 72). The writer focuses "on the excursion into the relationship between human culture (the human imagination) and the natural world" (Bhanja 605). These endless harmonies of nature parallel with the narrator's mind as she travels in the bus.

When Maggie arrives at Three Loon Lake, her destination with her canvas bag and her rod, her little yellow bowl and "all her strength and gentleness and good will" (*Angel* 92), she instinctively likes the place. She fits in quickly and takes up her duties there immediately and is extremely happy and contented with her new job. Through her hard unflinching work, she builds up the fishing resort and earns a good name from her lodger Halдар Gunnarsen within a short span of time. To show a change in her life Maggie changes her name to Maggie Lloyd in order to indicate her change of living. Like the birds in migration, Maggie returns to her place of origin. While "the simplest migratory bird had a guidance system that is more subtle and far more reliable than the most sophisticated ICBM . . ." (Meeker 164) and the resurrected instinct in Maggie brings her safely to her resting (or nesting) place. Maggie is a perfect fit in Three Loon

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Lake. In fact, by the time two months are over: “Maggie’s union with Three Loon Lake was like a happy marriage” (*Angel* 106) and she enjoys cooking for the lodger and feels happy always.

After her works in the lodge, Maggie listens to the sounds and signals of the creatures of the night around her; it becomes clear that human values can no longer be based on the assumption that man is alone at the center of creation, allowance [her] to be made for the welfare of all the plants, animals and land of the natural environment mankind would have to cultivate a new and more elaborate mentality capable of understanding intricate processes without destroying them. (Meeker 168)

Maggie’s entry into the natural environment engulfs her and releases her from her fears: “Her tormented nights of humiliations between four small walls and in the compass of a double bed were gone, washed away by this air, this freedom, this joy, this singleness and forgetfulness (*Angel* 122). Maggie’s ego-consciousness is overwhelmed by the spiritual forces in nature and she always withdraws into a natural setting, a green world in search of the lessons of simplicity which only nature can teach.

When the fiction draws to a close, Maggie has lived in Three Loon Lake for three years and has loved every day of it where “Things were falling into place; thus and so they should be. This was Maggie’s own sphere” (207). Maggie has happy memories and has also come to the conclusion that, “for better or worse, there were certain things that two people must resolve - however mistakenly, however uncertainly - between themselves” (209). Maggie’s experiences have transcended, “all barriers of nationality, culture and gender” (Abraham 20). While living with the eco-communal environment, Maggie feels rejuvenated from all her worries and be able to save two lives: Cunningham, a fisherman and Vera, her employer’s wife from drowning. These acts triggers her up and she further plans to stay back in the Three Loon Lake amidst the eco-friendly atmosphere.

The pattern of journey traced in the fiction keenly follows from Maggie’s flight or escape from her second husband and the four walls of her home to large unwallled expanses of lake and log cabins in Three Loon Lake and a human community that is part of the web of creation. Maggie’s journey becomes a journey of self-discovery, from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness where she finds power, freedom, liberation and peace amidst community relationships and values. The critic Krutch mentions that through his investigation he has felt a “growing awareness of interconnectedness between humankind and the non-human world” (qtd. in Love 232) so that his “ego-consciousness had gradually changed to eco-consciousness” (232).

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Likewise Maggie's experiences make her to realise and release her from her self-centered existence and help her to move towards cosmic awareness or eco-consciousness.

The natural environment of the Canadian landscape, especially which of British Columbia is a central feature in the fictional works of Wilson. In all her works, she gives importance to eco-consciousness, especially the relationship between man and his natural environment. Wilson also provokes her readers to eco-consciousness by recreating scenes of natural beauty and majesty describing the human thoughts and feelings of people who respond to their surroundings. As nature seems to have more accommodative with healing and soothing properties, it tries to remove the emotional fears as well as the scars from the minds of the people and thereby it rejuvenates their life.

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