

# MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING* AS AN ECOFEMINISTIC NOVEL

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**Abstract:** The severe problem faced by the contemporary man is the degradation of land and environment as well as its consequences on human existence. If we try to observe and compare the life of women and mother earth, we can clearly see that the power of male supremacy is completely oppressing and destroying both women and nature. In this context the term Ecofeminism becomes more eminent. It analyses the effect of gender discrimination in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust hegemony over women and nature. Margaret Atwood in *Surfacing* illustrates how women and nature are victimized by patriarchal system. She expresses ecofeminism through the life of anonymous female protagonist. Hence, this paper attempts to examine Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* under Ecofeminist perspective.

**Index Terms:** Ecofeminism, Domination, Self-realization, Quest, Gender roles, Femininity, Patriarchy, Environmental issues.

*“Nature is like a women who enjoys disguising herself and whose different disguises, revealing now one part of her and now another, permit those who study her and assiduously to hope that one they may know the whole of her person.”*

- Diderot

From time immemorial nature was always described in a female gender. Many critics claim that both women and nature possesses the same qualities like domestic, pious, moral, pure gentle, kind, beautiful and simple whereas men posses qualities like hardworking, industrial, rational, assertive, independent and proud which cannot be connected to nature. There are references to this in literature especially in poetry. Wordsworth in his poem *Tintern Abbey* quotes, “Nature never did betray the heart that loved her”. Under this context, the term ecofeminism becomes highly pertinent. Ecofeminism is a mode of approaching nature in connection with women. According to Andy Smith ecofeminists are “mostly concerned about the oppression of women and the earth.” As the term propose ecofeminism is an amalgamation of ecology and feminism. They consider that women are more sensitive towards nature. Many a times women and nature becomes victims to the patriarchal society. Both women and nature are brutally exploited by the men for their own betterment of living. This is well depicted in the novel *Surfacing* (1972) written by the Canadian writer Margret Atwood. This paper aims to scrutinize Margret Atwood's *Surfacing* from an ecofeminist perspective. The novelist had also written other four feministic novel entitled *The Edible Women* (1969), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Bodily Harm* (1981), and the *Handmaid's Tale* (1983) which depicts the mistreatment of women. The novelist tries to portray the oppression of women faced in the Western society by the supremacy of men.

*Surfacing* is a novel that revolves around the story of an unnamed young women who is in her late twenties. The events in the novel are narrated through the mouthpiece of the unnamed protagonist. When the novel opens we can see the unnamed protagonist returns to the isolated cabin by the lake side in Northern Quebec where she had spend her childhood she has come along with her three friends Joe, David and Anna in search of her father

who has mysteriously vanished in the Canadian wilderness. David and Anna are married, while Joe is her live in partner. The journey of protagonist from the city of Canada to the Canadian wilderness can be interpreted as returning to ones own roots since the search of her father becomes a quest for her real self, her true identity and her means of re-entering the world she has been alienated from. Throughout the novel the novelist depicts the domination of men over the female characters and the exploitation of nature in Canada by Americans.

When the unnamed protagonist reaches her home town she sees a blue “ceramic Madonna” with a pink child hanging above it. Madonna symbolizes the importance of motherhood in the society. In this novel it is claimed that girls are grown up witnessing these pictures so that they can prepare themselves to be a mother in future. Patriarchal system consider women’s ability to give birth and motherhood as mere tools – they want women to stay back at home for reproduction and increase the population of their country. Many a times women are consider to be “Angel in the House”. When the unnamed protagonist of the novel encounters with nature she realizes the gap between her natural self and her artificial construct. As she come across the Canadian wilderness and the lake she realizes the exploitation of nature by the Americans. This recognition is parallel to her awareness of herself becoming a “victim”. Both women and animals are trapped by men. They are destroyed by men for mere fun. To quote the words of Petra Kelly, one the prominent ecofeminist, “ 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 “. She believes that since she has been completely destroyed, the sacredness of the Mother Earth is violated and the ecological unity is also disturbed. Atwood through *Surfacing* manifest how men misuses nature and women’s use of nature. The unnamed protagonist finds her own misfortunes mirrored in the Quebec landscape. When she reaches her hometown after many years she is not able to find the way to her house as the landscape was totally changed due to industrialization in Canada. She says “nothing is the same. I don’t know the way anymore” (10). She feels completely alienated. She finds that “The trees will never be allowed to grow tall again, they are killed as soon as they are valuable, big trees are scarce as whales” (55). They cut trees to build dams. The dying of Birches in the novel due to an epidemic resulting from technology expansionism with the novelist equates with the Americanism. Americans in the novel do hunting just for the exhilaration of killing. They cruelly kill Herons and while fishing they exploit the beauty of lakes. The protagonist narrates her early experiences of her earlier colonialism growing up in a masculine world. She vividly remembers how when she was in school.

*“The boys chased the girl and captured the girls after school and tied them up in their own skipping ropes. I spent many afternoons looped to fences and gates and convenient trees, waiting for a benevolent adult to pass and free me; later I became an escape artist of sorts, experts at undoing knots” (88).*

She also recalls her childish argument with her brother in which “after a while I no longer fought back because I never won”. She grew up in a system in which “it was worse for a girl to ask question than for a boy” (124). They are taught and made to believe that “men ought to be superior”. This can be evidently seen in the novel when Paul, her father’s friend, comes to know that she is going to undertake the risk of finding her father who has mysteriously vanished in the Lake. He tells her “a man should be handling this” (24).

In the world of patriarchal system even the plays and games were gender based for the children. The protagonist while looking at her brother’s scrapbook notices that there are “explosions in red and orange, soldiers dismembering in the air, planes and tanks” (114). There were also pictures of “swastikas”, “explores on another planet”, “spaceships” etc. In contrast to this her scrapbook contained “illustrations cut from magazines and ladies, all kinds; holding up cans of cleanser, knitting, smiling, modelling topless, high heels and nylons with dark seams and pillbox hats and veils” (115). These girls are made to expose to these images for so long that they would wish to become “a lady” or “a mother” when she grew up. But she repudiated her motherhood and the roles given to her by the patriarchy. This can be well seen in her dialogue:

*“I identified it as mine; I didn’t name it before it was born even, the way you are suppressed to. It was my husband’s, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator” (38-39).*

In the above quotation we can find she referring the baby as “it” instead of he or she or my baby. She does not give an identity to the baby showing her disapproval of her motherhood. The violation of nature by the domination of men is also portrayed through the recollection of memories of her drowned brother. When they were children her brother used to catch frogs and chain them inside tight bottles. He does it for mere enjoyment. This were later released by the protagonist showing her care for a life. She even recalls her aborted baby as a bottled frog. The

protagonist also recalls the contrast she has observed between her drawings and her brother's drawings. She drew pictures of "rabbit with their colored egg- houses" (116) and everything was "normal and green" whereas her brother drew pictures of war and death as a result when he grew up takes up the profession that involves the violation of earth. The protagonist speaks about her mother who was a nature- lover. She was very fond of birds and give crumbs to them. Her mother was a nature friendly role model for her. It was her mother who implemented the love of nature on her. This influence can be seen towards the end of the novel where she collects only the branches of the dead trees to use them as wood and not destroying the young ones.

Fishing is often seen imagery in the novel. It symbolizes entrapment. Both women and nature are entrapped in hands of men. Both are victims of male dominated society. The institution of marriage becomes an entrapment and restriction of women in patriarchal system. Marriage ring on her finger becomes like handcuff and like a chain for herself. She dreamt of becoming a real artist but her husband, who was her professor whom abandoned her later, oppressed and discouraged her ambition: "He said I should study something I'd be able to use because there have never been any important women artist" (63) as the protagonist expresses in the novel. Finally she ends up her career becoming a "commercial artist". Thus, she tries to satisfy her "fake-husband" rather than fulfilling her own dream. The characters David and Anna's relationship portrays the supremacy of husbands over their wives. David many of the time tries to insult Anna in front of others at any given opportunity. He tries to show his power over his wife in front of the society. He thinks that a housewife should only be endowed with the knowledge of "how to switch on the TV and switch off their heads" (142-43). He demands that Anna should follow certain rules said by him in their relationship which Anna says that he would keep changing frequently. We can see that David suspects Anna of having some illicit relationship with other men where he himself confronts to have with other women. Here the novelist tries to portray how women of the society are made to serve her husband as god whereas it's not a big deal to have extramarital affairs with men. We can see in the novel that Anna always keeps herself equipped with fully makeup in order to attract her husband. For men, women becomes a mere sex toy to fulfill their desires. In the novel, David in both the occasion of anger and happy want to use Anna for his sexual pleasures. It is the responsibility of women to take contraceptive measures while sexual intercourse. Men never care to take any of the measures and they nature thing about the future health issues of women who take the contraceptive pills. When the protagonist got impregnated by her 'fake-husband', he wanted her to get aborted. It shows his dominating power on her. He had no emotional connection with the fetus. For him it was "simple like getting a wart removed. He said it was not a person, only an animal" (185). But she never wanted to abort the baby with a fork "like a pickle out of a pickle jar" (101). Atwood accentuates the fact that the bodies of women are exploited for the needs of men.

Atwood through the novel put forth how a female body is made into an object of commercialization just like nature. David wanted Anna to pose naked beside the dead Heron. He also compares her to a tree. He also wanted Anna to take off her bikinis and dive into the water for a shot of his film "Random Samples". When she protests, he says "now just take it off like a good girl or I will have to take it off for you" (173). Then Joe asks him to "leave her alone" (173). This shows how cruelly David treats a women only because she is his wife and has the power to impose his wants on her. Here Anna is also described in animal terms and this shows that in patriarchal culture women are seen as inferior as an animal by the men. The protagonist refrains from getting remarried when Joe proposes her. She does not believe in the existence of love between husband and wife. For her love and marriage become "the magical words".

Women in the patriarchal society were not only exploited by the institution of matrimony but also religious institutions restricted their actions and freedom as it was the Churchmen who established the rules. Church wanted women to wear long skirts and trousers and mini skirts were not allowed for them. But the protagonist of the novel rejects to wear traditional women's clothes like long skirts and she wore jeans which was against the law. She also says that women who lived beside the lake did never learnt to swim as "they were ashamed to put off bathing suits" (28). Later we come across the protagonist herself wearing bikinis and getting tanned as she visits her home town. By wearing bikini she expresses her freedom and resistance against the men-made rules.

The narrator's most crucial discovery occurs when she dives down into the lake, looking for the Indian rock paintings recorded in her father's drawings. She doesn't find them; instead she sees a strange blurred image which may or may not be her father's drowned body, but for her that image figures something which is assiduously repressed memory of her aborted child. This blurred image surfaces into the protagonist's consciousness. It

signals the beginning of her recovery process. She was mentally destroyed by the very thought of abortion as she considers it to be an act committed against the nature. She believes that by the act of abortion she had exploited the ecological balance. She wanted nature to heal her. So, she decides to abandon her loved ones and move into the wilderness. She believes that only mother earth can protect her. She, all of a sudden runs into the wilderness with an imbalanced mind and confirms to live being one with nature. She develops a deep sympathy for the flora and fauna after her abortion. The narrator realizes that the only solution for her disintegration is through nature. Only with the power of creation, the power for destruction can be reconciled. In order to compensate her abortion, which she believes to be anti-nature, she decides to bear a child and allow the baby to grow as a natural human being in the most natural way. She wanted nature to teach the baby her language and doesn't want the baby to communicate with any other human beings. She returns to the nature in quest of her identity. She says

*"I'm not an animal or tree, I'm the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I'm a place. I have to get up, I get up. Through the ground, break surface, I'm standing now; separate again."* (236)

She believes that in order to be one with nature she has to shed her clothes to become like an animal who is a victim; she becomes "the naked women wrapped in a blanket" (238) like a baby. She starts to have all the raw materials that were edible like mushroom, plants and berries "like a cave man". Now she is no more restricted by the social codes. She finds herself free from all the social norms and prejudices and she also feels that her life has been totally changed. She feels herself to be powerful. She ultimately reaches a stage when "the lake is quiet, the trees around asking nothing and giving nothing" (251). The roles are reversed now and the quest of the protagonist is complete. Having discovered her own power; the protagonist can now confront herself the reality as well as "the pervasive menace" of non violence.

Atwood introduces an unnamed protagonist in the novel may be because she takes it as granted to evaluate feminism and ecofeminism. She expresses how women are marginalized in their personal and professional life. The protagonist's wilderness arises with the support of her ecology. She finds the same exploitation she has faced on the landscape of Canada. Here the ecofeminism works. Atwood creates a deep bond between nature and women. Women's were always compared as birds. Though birds are given great care and affection they are caged or imprisoned just like the women who were interlocked with the supremacy of men. The protagonist as she decides to go back with Joe by the end of the novel shows that she doesn't want to replace patriarchy with women's dominance. She wanted a balance and harmony between men and women. The novel ends providing a promise of better future.

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