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SURFACING: AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Ecofeminists hold the belief that patriarchal society's values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature. Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*, published in 1972, can adequately be defined in terms of ecofeminism. In this paper I have tried to show how the nameless protagonist of the novel has discovered her true identity, her real self by establishing a connection between her wounded self and the damaged landscape of the island near the border country in Quebec, and how she finally turns herself from victim to hero, turning patriarchal space inside out so that it no longer can limit her being. At the same time this paper also addresses the issues, with reference to *Surfacing*, pertaining to women and nature and shows how social sciences like literature can develop environmental-friendly generations.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Nature, Stereotype

Introduction

Ecofeminists argue that patriarchal society's values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature. In 1974, an influential essay by Sherry B. Ortner, 'Is female to male as nature is to culture?' sought to explain, in terms of structuralist anthropology, the presence in diverse cultures of the idea that women were subordinate to men. The underlying idea, Ortner discovers, is that woman is close to nature. This helps to explain the acquiescence of women in their own subordination: they accept the general logic of human domination of nature. Beliefs that legitimate the operation of women also legitimate environmental degradation. This is ecofeminists key insight. Feminist environmental justice campaigner, such as Vandana Shiva, point out also that women and

children are disproportionately vulnerable to environmental hazards.

Kolodomy's *The lay of the Land* examines the way in which colonial nature writers in the USA represented the Land as female. Some ecofeminists argue that the identification of women with nature should now be seen as a source of strength. Others, such as Janet Biehl, are wary of any strategy that, by accepting women as essentially less estranged from nature as men, and problematizing rationality too prohibitively, risks leading women back into the old cultural spaces. Notable examples of ecofeminist criticism include Martyi Kheel's critique of the masculine 'heroic' genre into which many fictional representations of environmental problems fall and Gretchen Legler's analysis, of the transgressive erotic in contemporary women's nature writing.

In the words of Joyce Nelson: “ecofeminism bridges the gap between ecology and feminism: strands of analysis which have existed side by side over past few decades without necessarily intertwining. By making explicit the connections between misogynist society and a society which has exploited ‘mother earth’ to the point of environmental crisis, Ecofeminism has helped to highlight the deep splits in patriarchal paradigm” (Nelson 15). Greta Gaard maintains that, “Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basis premise is that the Ideology which authorizes oppressions, such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities, is the time ideology that sanctions the oppression of nature” (20). In a broad sense, Ecofeminism seeks to do away with all kinds of oppressions, and holds the belief that no attempt to liberate women will be successful without a similar attempt to liberate nature from the onslaught of modern technology and colonialists.

In a number of novels, Margaret Atwood deals with women’s experience in a male-dominated world. She presents the women character as the victim of male-dominion and oppression, trying to create a female space for themselves. These characters refused to play second fiddle to man and challenge the so-called theory of male-superiority. Atwood seem to hold cudgels for women. Linda Hutchinson is right in saying that, “in all her writing, Atwood shows herself to be the tireless explorer and exposé of cultural clichés and stereotypes, in particular of those that affect women” (Hutchinson 313).

This paper attempts to take an in-depth study of Margaret Atwood’s novel *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.

A Journey of Self-realization

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 identity and she declares herself ready for motherhood and for reintegration into society. In this process, she unmasks 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 that 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).

Surfacing is divided into three parts and this division corresponds to shift in tense from present (Part 1) to past (Part 2) and again to present (Part 3). At the surface level the story in the novel by the unnamed protagonist is plain and simple: It describes a trip made by a female protagonist, her boyfriend Joe and two other friends, Anna and David, a married couple, to a small island in distant part of North Quebec. While the Protagonist's friend treat the trip as a break from city life and a short holiday. She seeks to find out what has happened to her father, who after the death of the protagonist's mother, used to live alone on the island, and has lately been reported missing. As a child, the protagonist worshipped her father a logical and scientific man, as a God; identifying with him rather than with her mother. The journey revives her memory of the unhappy past from which she feels estranged and brings to her mind the recent traumatic events – a painful relationship with her art teacher, a married man and the forced abortion. The art teacher who was determined to crush her artistic talent and sensibility by denying her the opportunity to grow as an artist, finally played a trick on her concealing his marital status he presented her a wedding ring and convinced her of his intentions to marry her. The protagonist was taken by his word and got pregnant in the process. Then she understood the exploitative behaviour of a lover who forces an unwanted pregnancy upon her and took it as a part of sexual colonialism. Although she had an abortion willy-nilly, she felt during her pregnancy that the foetus in her womb belonged not to her but to her art teacher, that 'he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator... after it was born I was no, more use' (*Surfacing* 37-50).

That is the reason why she wanted to fill her womb again with the help of Joe, her boyfriend. "I will get pregnant", I said, "it is the right time" (*Surfacing* 157). But she did not intend to marry. David and Anna's relationship frightened her. Anna

is stripped naked for the purpose of film 'Random Samples' by her husband David and his friend Joe, the cameraman. Man and women are not shown as complementary to each other, but as victimizers and victimized respectively. The protagonist having perceived this decides to stay back on the island alone. This helps her to overcome passivity and casts her in a new role of self-assertion with individual identity. She states, "I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been. The word games, the winning and losing games are finished: at the movement these are no others but they will have to be invented withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death" (*Surfacing* 206).

At the deep level the novel can be interpreted better in terms of eco-feminism. Take, for instance, the opening sentence of the novel: "I can't believe I am on this 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* 7). 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, which symbolizes nature, is taken as a Canadian trait and this is contrasted with the two Americans who cruelly killed the heron. But these two Americans turned out to be Canadians. This prompted Atwood to say that, "if you look like them and talk like them and think like them, then you are them" (*Surfacing* 129).

The protagonist in *Surfacing* observes that all over the world in patriarchal societies, not only state-policies, but also books and toys of the children are gender-biased. When she looks at her brother's scrapbooks in Canada, she notices that even drawings/scrapbooks of the children are gender-biased. In her brother's scrapbook, there are "explosions in red and orange, soldiers dismembering in the air, planes and tanks... and swastikas... [and] explorers on another planet[s]... spaceships" (*Surfacing* 90). As opposed to this, in her scrapbook there are "illustrations cut from magazines and ladies of all kinds: holding up cans of

cleanser, knitting, smiling, modeling toeless high heels and nylons with dark seams and pillbox hats and veils" (*Surfacing* 91). After having been exposed to these images for so long as a little girl, she wanted to be "a lady" or "a mother" when she grew up. And she adds "either was safe and it was not a lie, I did want to be those things". But when she grows up and becomes a mother, she faces another facet of reality and says: "I never identified it [the baby] as mine; I didn't name it before it was born even, the way you are supposed to. It 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; after it was born I was no more use" (*Surfacing* 34). What is significant here is that the usage of "it" in the passage instead of s/he or my baby. She does not give an identity to her baby. In doing so, she denies her motherhood and the roles given to her by the patriarchy.

Apart from the images of the ladies, there are also some images of the natural elements such as "eggs, rabbits, grass and trees, flowers blooming, sun and moon" (*Surfacing* 91) in her scrapbook. After having a comparative look at the scrapbooks of her brother and of herself, she concludes that there are "[n]o monsters, no wars, no explosions, no heroism. I couldn't remember ever having drawn these pictures. I was disappointed in myself: I must have been a hedonistic child, I thought, and quite stodgy also, interested in nothing but social welfare. Or perhaps it was a vision of Heaven" (*Surfacing* 91). This passage in *Surfacing* coincides with the ecofeminist claim that women are more sensitive towards nature and the problems of society. Thus, women are more altruistic and as it is indicated in the words of the protagonist maybe more romantic: "perhaps it was a vision of Heaven" she says. This Picture (without wars and the destruction of nature) is too good to be true. Afterwards, when she sees her hometown, she gets very upset as industrialization changes it.

Atwood has made an attempt to create an empathic 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 (David, Anna and Joe) made her to 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 the butcher's window, desecrated, unredeemed. It smiled worse... the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted" (*Surfacing* 129).

She realizes though belatedly that no human being can help her in discovering her identity (i.e., 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.

The nameless protagonist finds a reflection of her tragedy in the Quebec landscape. In course of her homeward journey, the protagonist discovers that 'nothing is the same. I don't know the way anymore'. She has been alienate 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'. 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 - surface meaning and the deep meaning, link ecology with feminism and makers, the novel an eco-feminist novel.

The protagonist finally refuses to be victim. 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 male or a female child but she has made her mind to assert herself by allowing the foetus to grow. She says:

"I cannot know yet; it is 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* 206).

With the protagonist's determination to give birth the child, the novelist has hinted that germination will take place and the implication is crystal clear – that's both women and nature will be protected provided they defend themselves against the onslaught of men over them.

Conclusion

Since the novel *Surfacing* addresses the issues pertaining to feminism and ecology, the novel constitutes a representative literary example of eco-feminism. The novel observes an interrogative stance towards the patriarchal hegemony in the universe. The protagonist realizes the gap between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she encounters nature. The search for her missing father in the wilderness serves as a pretext of her search for her inner-self which is observed through her gradual submersion into nature and towards mystical vision. The protagonist seems fully transformed and determined to surface in her full powers back into the world of culture and transforms herself from victim to hero, turning patriarchal space inside out so that it no longer can limit her being. The protagonist rejects the male construction of the feminine woman and changes into a natural woman.

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