



RESUSCITATING ECOFEMINISM IN *SURFACING*

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doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.74.08



ABSTRACT

Surfacing a masterpiece novel penned by Margaret Atwood in 1972 depicts the subjugation of civilization by west as a masculinity dogma over women and Nature in parallel. The novel is about the decadence and declination of the main ideas of enlightenment of Rationalism, development and prosperity into brute subjugation, colonization and split between culture and nature. The novel *surfacing* is the true representation of ecofeminist literature. Atwood has clearly dismantled and deconstructed masculine principles of rationality, violence and logic over the feminine principles of connection, non-violence, nature and culture.

Keywords: Subjugation, masculinity, nature, enlightenment, colonization, ecofeminist.

The novel is narrated by nameless heroine who is an unsuccessful artist in the Toronto city. She has left her family and husband long ago. The anonymous central protagonist of the story is an ecofeminist who arrives to the unprogressive island, Northern Quebec, where she evolved to inspect for her missing father. The protagonist recognizes the difference between her natural self and her bogus compose-only when she comes across nature. The ecofeminist bang is seen steadfast in the novel by protagonist's arrival in the natural world. Her acquaintance with nature boosts her sensibility of victimization of women. Like a true environmentalist, she pronounces the earth her actual home, for she believes in the biological world all life is interlinked through food chains, food webs and ecosystem filled with multiplicity and inter-racially. Since the novel acquaintances problems referring to feminism and environmentalism, the novel incorporates illustrative bookish instances of ecological feminism where strength and tyranny openly suppress both the feminine world and the natural world. Even the dialect, incidences and

characters in the novel reflect a world that suppresses and subjugates not only the feminist but also the nature.

Since childhood, Atwood has an innate, inherent and intrinsic bondage with nature and *surfacing* clearly bears the stamp of that bondage. The leitmotif of ecological consciousness plays a momentous role in the sacred and spiritual making of the protagonist of the novel as she sets forth on, "a journey into the past, into her history, her origins, in order to explore her own identity" (Kaur, 56). Ecofeminist concerns are seen at the very outset of the novel where the protagonist is driving back to her ancestral home town looking for her missing father. She talks about victimization of Canadian landscapes at the hands of Americans whom she sees as the patriarchal dominators she sees as the patriarchal dominators to the Mother Nature and her inbred, natal and indigenous Canada. Atwood senses Americanism as the epidemic disease that is callously and ruthlessly desolating the Canadian landscapes and natural ecology. Thus, at the heart of

the ecofeminism is the notion that 'nature is fragile and threatened' which is crystal clear from the imagery of dying white birches. The narrator describes the bareness and bleakness at the very onset of the novel:

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... It is swelled enough to have a bypass, that's success. (Atwood,1)

Surfacing thus deals with the destruction and exploitation of Canadian wilderness by so called enlightened and rational people. The nameless narrator is bewildered by the changes in Canadian landscapes by the foreigners while searching for her missing father after several years. To her: "The familiar smell of road dust fuming behind and mixes with the gas-and upholstery smell of car". (Atwood, 13)

From the beginning to end, the readers are reminded of the ecological inside out. Throughout the novel, the narrator co-relates the exploitation of Canadian landscapes with women at the hands of masculine authority and power. She puts alongside and notices similarities between Non-American (David) and Americans, both of whom exploit and colonize Canadian ecology. David on one hand exploits Anna while on the contrary Americans exploit Canada. For her America is not a country but a wild instinct in men to exploit both ecological and feminine world. The narrator is shocked by the changes which took place over the course of years by the nature of men. During the journey towards homeward, she observes, "Nothing is the same. I don't know the way anymore" (Atwood, 10). Fiona Tolan argues, "In accordance with ecofeminism, the narrator identifies herself as a woman with nature and therefore perceives herself as threatened and victimized" (Tolan, 43). She believes that women and nature are destroyed by men only for their merriment. The well-known and prominent ecofeminist, Petra Kelly beholds, "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". (Kelly, 118)

As is evident from the novel, the protagonist's life gets changed by a man who dominates and exploits her both physically and emotionally. He imposes an abortion on her and then leaves her which imprints a deep impact on her psyche. She becomes paranoiac, schizophrenic and finally descends into madness Madeleine Davis aptly remarks on Atwood's heroines as, "Atwood's fictional female bodies become battlefield where anxieties relating to wider power structures are written on to female flesh (Davis, 58).

The unreliable narrator in *surfacing* shuns off neo-colonialism in every manner and form and sets for journey to a pre-colonial era so as to self-introspect herself and her identity as a Canadian woman. She brings forth the pre-colonial and the neo-colonial Canada to differentiate Canada as it was when she was a child and as it is now when it is a colony.

Atwood displays and arrays the ecological destruction by deforested and deserted scenario as the rocks are blasted, trees are cut down for the commercial use and the narrator visualizes it as:

The two roads joining here but widened, rocks blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air, needless reddening-past the flat cliff where the election slogans are painted and painted over, some faded and defaced, other fresh yellow and white... (Atwood,13)...The trees will never be allowed to grow that tall again, they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scarce as whale. (Atwood, 55).

Margaret Atwood while exploring some core features of ecofeminism within the context of historical Canada deals not only with hierarchal dualities between the patriarchal and matriarchal world but also brings to light the world but also brings to light the conceptual dualism regarding wilderness from the colonial and colonized perspective. She rejects the colonial fabrication of myth of wilderness as empty space or something dreary and desolate; instead portrays geographical

wilderness of Canada as connatural, tranquil and sublime. The rallying cry of ecofeminists is that women are more inclined towards nature as well as towards the problems of society. Men don't realize that each and every element in nature is interlinked with one another. If something is destroyed in nature, the other things are doomed to be affected by it no matter sooner or later. In a patriarchal driven society the mental outlook of the people towards mother earth is echoed and reflected in the mental outlook towards the feminine body.

Atwood's *surfacing* is a vivid depiction of men's despotism over nature. The protagonist of the novel time and again gives us visual pictures of ecological disturbance through meaningless killing of Heron and Fish both at the hands of Americans as well as Canadians. It is only patriarchy which in Czar like figure debases, deprive and degrade women by making them passive pawns, sexual tools and ornamental things. Men want to manipulate both female body as well as natural environment. In the novel while drawing parallel between the act of fishing by David and the protagonist's seeing of fish as a 'whole'; it is the patriarchy in the form of David who tries to kill fish, thus meddling ecology and bringing destruction to the nature, while in parallel the protagonist's continual search for wholeness finds its manifestation only in that natural fauna which David is after. He is continuously longing to kill the fish for sport. Carson has appropriately and aptly put it as, "They (Fish, Birds, Nature) reflect the web of life or death that scientists know as ecology" (Carson).

The killing and hanging of heron with its outstretched wings becomes the metaphor not only of victimization and violence of Mother Nature but also of the brutality and desolation of it at the hands of human civilization. The narrator utters this with a sudden burst of strong feeling as:

Why had they strung it up like a lunch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like trash? To prove they could do it, they had power to kill? Otherwise it was valueless, beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be trained to talk, the only relation

they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. (Atwood, 149).

The narrator feels blindsided and bewildered when she comes to know that the heron killers are none but Canadians. The tragedy soon turns more gruesome and takes more divesting shape as the narrator proclaims:

But they killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they are from, my head said they are still Americans, they're what is in store for us, what we're turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. (Atwood, 165)

In the passage it is declared that cultural imperialism is compared to virus that multiplies and brings destruction and violence to the nature. The fish and the ruthless killing of heron is the symbol of colonized at the hands of colonizers.

Woman is portrayed as an adult's toy and intimacy product who is christened by numerous names by hierarchy like 'property', 'wealth', 'sex-toy', 'and object', 'other'. She is seen as an object to satiate men's instincts. Her body is presented as erotic, amorous and filthy thing. As is evident from the novel where David points out at the protagonist's body with profanity, "It turns me on when she bends over. She's got a neat ass. I'm really into the whole ass thing. Joe, don't you think she's got a neat ass?" (Atwood, 114).

In the novel, during the lake scene Anna is forced by David to come in front of the camera and undress her clothes for Random Samples (a documentary) cinematography when Anna refuses, he tells her that one should never be ashamed of herself of sharing one's wealth. He calls her darling, a good girl, a twatface. He conquers in clicking her nude photographs. He makes a good fortune out of her and says, "come on, we need a naked lady with big tits and a big ass... she's an exhibitionist at heart...we all (men) love it, you ashamed of it? That's pretty stingy of you, you should the wealth; not that you don't". (Atwood, 172)

Thus, David's Camera has abducted Anna's female self. It has caught within its illuminated lens her distorted self eternally and immortally. The Camera is thus a phallic symbol presenting the image of masculine power over the feminine body. Camera is thus a weapon of exploitation of female body. Thus David has used a silent tool (pornography) to disrespect his wife. Woodcock articulates:

Camera and photography play a crucial role in both the action and the metamorphic structure of *surfacing*. The very act of filming becomes a negation, an offense against life, when David uses it deliberately to humiliate his wife Anna proposes to humiliate the narrator in the same way". (43-44)

The relationship between David and Anna is incompatible and antipathetically. They have a bad chemistry. Their relationship is full of stress and strain and off balance from the very beginning of the novel. David acts as the tyrannical, czar like and dominating male character. For him Anna is a robotic figure. She is a machine who works on the instructions of David. He wants her to wear make-up so as to look beautiful to lure people around her. As the narrator tells Anna; "you don't need it (make-up) here" and then adds, "there is no one to look at you", to which Anna soberly replies, "He doesn't like to see me without it" (Atwood, 51-52). Furthermore, David has set rules for Anna which she should abide by as she reveals to the protagonist that if she ever tries to break or transgress them, she gets severe beatings: "He's got his little set of rules. If I break one of them, I get punished, except that he keeps changing them so I am never sure ... He likes to make me cry because he can't do it himself" (Atwood, 156).

In *surfacing* both ecological and feminine world are directly oppressed by power and domination. It deals with the imperative and indispensable tenet of ecofeminism by confessing that two contrary and dualistic worlds occur in the patriarchal society. These two contra worlds are Masculine and Feminine principles. The former represents the power and the later powerlessness.

Atwood practices woman-as-nature leitmotif in multitudinous ways. She believes that women's identification with nature is necessarily productive to the cause of ecofeminism. As women are being treated as earthly caretakers. Women are constituted by masculine consciousness as 'female', 'other', 'second sex' which bursted forth as 'woman as nature' as it is only nature which nurtures woman and she feels safe and secure only in the lap of nature. On the one hand narrator truly shows her love for nature as she collects the branches from the dead tree instead of young ones in order to use them as firewood, while on the other hand we see Americans (patriarchy) throwing cigar butts into the lake, "the other American throws his cigar butt over the side (Atwood, 81)". Thus polluting the natural habitat of fauna and several other species. Also, in the text, contradictory to humanness towards nature by females, there is inhumanness by males for instance, while the narrators brother bottles up the insects, she lets them go back, gives them freedom as she finds inbred and innate connection with nature.

As the novel unfolds, we find that the protagonist of the novel gets tormented and traumatic at the hands of men and patriarchal dominance; be it her husband who imposed an abortion and divorce on her or her lost father, which resulted in her becoming psychopath. The protagonist is caste away into fragments due to the experience of divorce as she says, "A divorce is like an amputation, you survive but there is less of you". (Atwood, 49). The quest for identity or wholeness of being is at the heart of the novel as the protagonist loses a part of herself in the form of abortion, "whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it ... It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it". (Atwood, 183)

Surfacing was penned down in the ear of 70's when the issue of abortion was being debated and fussed everywhere in the west. Even the female bodies were refused of medical care. The narrator exemplifies this abominable tragedy with this expression, "A section of my own life sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled" (Atwood, 57).

After losing a part of herself in the form of abortion, she starts a quest for her identity, her true being and wholeness. This wholeness she finds only in the nature in form of fish, thus finding natural objects as a perfect whole or in other words finds nature complete in itself.

Patriarchal intimidation and viciousness find its culmination in the character of the narrator's ex-husband (although he doesn't have any direct appearance in the text). He appears to be a pachydermatous character as he doesn't feel any kind of remorse while commanding her wife (the narrator) to abort her child as she narrates:

He said I should do it, he made me do it; he talked about it as though it was legal, simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was not different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary, I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn't; that made me one of them too, a killer. After the slaughter, the murder, he couldn't believe I didn't want to see him anymore, it bewildered him, he resented me for it... (Atwood, 185)

This intimate act of abortion reflects the subjugating and dictating nature of her first-husband:

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. (Atwood, 38-39)

The conspicuous thing to mention over here is how women are treated by men. They are taken to be as machines to manufacture products (babies) only as per the instructions of their technicians (men) and their requirements. The narrator eventually is forced to deny her motherhood and to accept the roles specified for her by the patriarchal hegemony.

Atwood also explores how the sacred bond of marriage is institutionalized in a male dominated society. It turns out to be a trap where it and love, the two magical words are nothing but means of justification for the exploitation of the second sex. Moreover, marriage in western civilization is sort of a scale which measures women's normality as the protagonist of the novel marries her first husband to prove herself as a normal human being. The protagonist beautifully describes it, "I'd proved my normality by obtaining (ex-husband); I wore his ring, too big for any of my fingers, around my neck on a chain, like a crucifix or a military decoration" (Atwood, 62). She co-relates her marital accessories with military decoration of a soldier who ultimately has to crucify himself for his people as in the novel she crucifies herself for her ferocious husband, though unwilling. Thus, exploring the sacred bond of marriage as an audacious endorsement, for a woman to be crucified at the hands of his man in a male driven society.

Atwood is continuously longing for reproductive rights of females. She is depicting helplessness of female body from very conception to parturition. Even at the time of parturition, her body becomes a specimen for experiments at the hands of doctors, technicians and students. As is pertinently textualized by the narrator as:

... They shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don't let you see ... they want you to believe it is their power, not yours. They stick needles into you ... your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practicing on your body... (Atwood, 101)

David and Anna's relationship also seems to be a compromise rather than a sacred bond. David marries Anna out of lust rather than love. We become acquainted with this fact when the protagonist questions David regarding his marriage to Anna, David replies:

I know what you are thinking ... but I'm all for equality of women: she doesn't happen to be equal and that is not my fault, is it?

What I married was a pair of boobs, she manipulated me into it, it was when I was studying for the ministry, nobody knew any better then. (Atwood, 148).

Atwood exposes the magic world; 'love' to be nothing but a means for men to satiate their lust. Men see female bodies as sexual objects rather sexual toys to be played with and get away from only when their physical desires are fulfilled Emma Parker believes that, "because the body becomes a site of subjection for women, Atwood Ian heroines experience a strong unease about the body".(Parker, 349).

The narrator after being incapable to find happiness and love in her holy matrimony with her first husband, seeks to find it is relationship with Joe but that also turns turtle as with the passage of time their bond becomes emotionless and monotonous. The narrator describes this frigidness as:

In the early morning Joe wakes me, his hands at any rate are intelligent, they move over me delicately as blind mans' reading Braille ... they repeat patterns he's tried before ... and my body responds that way too ... It's almost like a coat of arms: two people making love with paper bags over their heads, not even any eye holes would that be good or bad (Atwood,83).

Due to this dispassionate love making, she declines Joe's proposal to safeguard herself.

In a male dominated society, everything is dominated and manipulated by the men only including the language. Atwood's protagonist substantiates this fact by saying, "language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole".(Atwood, 187) which in other words mean that she wants to be a natural object a fish. She says that there is dichotomy between head (man) and body (woman) only due to the language which is used as an analytical tool by the society. She longs to re-unify the head and the body, "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 (language) that creates the illusion that they are separate ... the

language is wrong. It should not have different words for them. (Atwood, 95).

When narrator's ecofeminine consciousness extends and spreads to its climax, she eventually dissolves the boundaries between human (herself) and non-human world. She personifies the tree with herself and spells out; "I lean against a tree, I am a tree-leaning" (Atwood, 236). She finally finds solace in the natural world only. She shuns off her clothes and even puts off her shoes "my tentacle feet and free hand scent out the way shoes are a barrier between touch and earth" (Atwood, 213). She starts to eat mushrooms, berries and plants to testify that she is one with natural world. She altogether rejects to fall into the trap of patriarchy that at beginning destroyed her. She descends deeper and deeper into the forests. After connecting her life with mother earth, she feels metamorphosed into the nature, "I remember the heron; by not it will be insects, frogs, fish and other herons. My body also changes, creatures in me, I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply" (Atwood, 217).

The narrator explores and espials veritable self only in the natural ambiance which videlicet bespeaks that nature has therapeutic for her. On top of it, she discerns connect, being truly absorbed in nature, as she gets certain epiphany of ancestral connection while diving into the lake. She in the chapter 24 of the novel acknowledges, "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (Atwood, 236). Emma Parker validates this point of view in the following colloquy:

Her rejection of and return to (nature) society is reflected by what she eats. When she rejects culture and retracts 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. (Parker, 350).

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