



## MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*: AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

The contemporary literature is breathing within a new threat of ecological disaster. Ecological feminism or Ecofeminism is a relatively new way of approaching nature, politics and spirituality. Ecofeminism term first used was by Françoise d' Eubonne a French feminist in her book *Le féminisme ou la mort*. Later it is accelerated by a number of ecofeminist critics among who foremost are, Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Greta Gaard, Karen J Warren, Mary Mellor etc. The term ecofeminism seems to imply that ecofeminists are mostly, concerned about the oppression of women and devastation of earth. It seeks to establish that all systems of patriarchy across the world justify their domination of suppression on both parallelly with women and nature. The issues of subordination, power and domination are very vital to ecofeminism. Ecofeminism usually expresses deep feeling for nature. At present scenario and context all over the world the ecology and women are exploited equally. Under the impression of technology and physical development the nature and its assets are spoiled and violated. Everyday thousands of trees are cut and many animals and birds are killed and died. Every now and then many living creatures are getting the victims of this advance technology; for instance, today's decreasing ratio of lions and tigers and disappearance of sparrows due to mobile radiation show a threat to the nature. Women too, in such so called modern and advance world are tortured and spoiled, may it be an example of an assault of a girl in Guwahati or the extraction of a foetus in Parali in Beed district. In short, ecology and women are subject to the domination of patriarchal society. Therefore, the present paper would attempt to locate ecofeminist aspects through the novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood.

**Key words:** Ecology, Feminism, Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Oppression

### INTRODUCTION

The contemporary literature is breathing within a new threat of ecological disaster. Ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism. Ecological feminism or ecofeminism is a

relatively new way of approaching and encompassing nature, politics, religious studies, philosophy, art, biology, literature, spirituality and women studies. The term seems to imply that the ecofeminists are mostly concerned about the oppression of women and oppression of the earth. Greta Gaard posits, "Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which

authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities and species in the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature.”(Gaard,1) In other words, ecofeminist thought is the notion that all oppressions share common roots. These roots stem from patriarchal and hierarchical structures that stress duality, or dominance of one over the other.

The issues of power, domination and subordination are very vital to ecofeminism. Paganism, women’s spirituality, shamanism, and new age rituals are so popular with ecofeminists because they believe that all spirituality was originally earth-based and centered on oneness with nature. Ecofeminism usually expresses deep feelings for the nature; in a way to the ecofeminists, “nature is a feminist issue”. (Warren, 04). To put into a nutshell, the ecofeminists believe that the domination of women over the years is directly connected to the environmental dismay and exploitation as Karen J Warren says, “The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalizing them.”(Ibid, 12) In other words, exploitation is justified when nature and animals are given female characteristics or qualities and vice versa.

A number of writers have contributed to the development of the theory as Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, Maria Mies, Marry Mellor, Karen J Warren, Noel Sturgeon etc.

Thus the novel which I am chosen is a very subtle embodiment and example of ecofeminism. In Atwood’s *Surfacing* the nameless heroine is an ecofeminist. She is presented as a very sensitive personage. She goes with her companions Joe, David and Anna, on a quest to her childhood home in the Ruebec countryside to locate her lost father. She never thought that she would be on the road again. To her shock and dismay, she discovers that the whole place is mutilated and isolated. It has been changed drastically during her long absence. She has followed her great shock that people in the positions of the institutional power are killing the earth. Her beloved native place has become a diseased, rotting place because of the power company and other mills raised the lake’s water level. It has caused havoc to its flora and fauna. Having once reached to her home ground, she feels it as “a foreign territory”. (Atwood, 9) The protagonist as heroine of the novel and her companions appear to be very critical of the scientific and the technological

advancements and its evilness on the nature and the human predicament. The old road is closed and new road is constructed paving so much of land there. David with a sarcastic and disappointed tone says, “Rotten capitalist bastards” (ibid, 9). Proceeding further, they find many trees cut and bulldozed over, the rock blasted and a big road with different plates having different slogans on it. Under the spell and impression of physical, scientific and technological development, man irrespective of natural flora and fauna is destroying it. Instead of the nature and its scenery there appears the plate written on it as MOTEL, BAR BIÈRE, BEER, etc.

In the village where the protagonist and her family used to live, now the place is occupied by the railway tracks, car dockyards, roads, motor garages, buildings etc. etcher once cows and horses used to live, there she finds a garage. She realizes that the holiness of mother earth is violated and the ecological unity means the interconnections of the species, is disturbed. She asks herself, “Why is the road different, he shouldn’t have allowed them to do it” (ibid, 10) A new church also has been built in that place as the symbol of love and devotion to the God. Thus the question rises as, constructing such buildings is really the devotion to the God? In fact, the nature and its assets itself is almighty and thus at the cost of its sacrifice, these materialistic buildings are vague, useless or meaningless. In the village, there used to be only one store kept by an old woman in those days who was called Madame, for, “none of the women had names then” (ibid, 29). In fact, running the business by a lady itself may be prohibiting as there was a single store run by a woman or may women not be supposed to have their own self-identity and to will have to console themselves by accepting such common nouns or names. On their way the protagonist looks a woman with sleeveless skirt and she goes into a reverie that an old priest must be gone as he used to disapprove short clothes, for as shorts were against the law, and many of them lived all their lives even though beside the lake but without learning to swim. (ibid, 27-28) Women were banned to wear clothes as they wished, whereas men were free from it. Perhaps it would be an obscene and unethical thing before man made rules.

Further instance shows as how the women are marginalized on the different grounds. Anna, a second woman character in the novel appears to be fastening and putting on make up to please her husband David,

so that he would not disappoint and think for other counterpart. The protagonist asks Anna, "you don't need that here,'... 'there's no one to look at you". (ibid, 51) Anna replies it with low voice, "He doesn't like to see me without it". (ibid, 52). In a way, it is Anna's fear and trepidation in her mind that, she should not lack in keeping David pleasant, should not any way cause his disappointment. The protagonist latter wants to know about the relationship of Anna and David, how Anna and David live with peace and harmony and manage the relations between them. She asks Anna, as the dialogue goes between them:

'How do you manage it?' I said...

'Manage what?'

'Being married. How do you keep it together?...

'She said you just had to make an emotional commitment, it was like skiing, you couldn't see in advance what would happen but you had to let go' (ibid,56)

The protagonist thinks seriously and mirrors herself over the thought and belief of Anna as what herself had to let go and what she missed in her own life. This event clears one thing that, the female who emotionally sacrifice her freedom at the feet of their counterpart male, their family relationship would remain smooth and happy. While speaking further with Anna, protagonist tells to her of her aborted child as it was begotten from her former lover. She falls victim to his force and extracts out her own innate part of life from her womb, she kills it. Under the pretext of her lover's will and temperament she cuts off her own soul from her own body. She so sadly laments to Anna, "I have to behave as though it doesn't exist, because for me it can't, it was taken away from me, exported, deported. A section of my own life, sliced off from me like a Siamese twin, my own flesh cancelled. Lapse, relapse, I have to forget". (ibid, 57) Ultimately what she faces is a deception and betrayal of that lover with her. In short, she falls to be the victim of her lover's will to abort it and undergoes a deep agony and its pathos. As 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". (Kelly, 112-19)

The novel delineates and develops into a deep ecological endanger focusing on the different scenes, showing the dismay in the nature. The protagonist looking towards the cutting trees; seriously speaks out, "I'm anxious every opening between two trees looks like a path." (ibid, 59) David earlier once says, "It's better than in the city". (ibid, 47) In a way, due to the technological advancement in America, the nature, biodiversity and flora and fauna are decaying and degrading day by day. Atwood tries to cover and vividly displays the wide subduing aspects in the society by men on nature and women. By a number of different ways she touches this issue of ecology and women subordination. Atwood tries to depict the black or dark psyche of the people as they for amusement play with and kill the animals. The novel contains the full of images showing the nature and its treasure victim of modern society and its rapacious mentality. There the frogs and other small creatures, are shown to be imprisoned in jars, then killed, worms for bait, fish caught, herons crucified, landscapes ravaged, a brother nearly drowned, the fetus imprisoned in the womb then killed at the abortion ; all as the victims of the same inhuman forces.

The worms are played with and ultimately eaten. They are sold like the apples in season as VERS 5C, on roadside signs, sometimes VERS 5C, and VERS 10C in inflation. Frogs are also the medium of playing as, protagonist says, "I take out the little frog, the ultimate solution, and hook it on..." (Atwood, 75) The fishes every now and then are drawn out of the water anywhere and are eaten. The animals and birds are hunted by using different techniques and modern weapons like gun, arrows, bullets and many times by the stones. The Heron bird is shot and killed, the protagonist speaks out, "I couldn't tell how it had been done, bullet, smashed with a stone, hit with stick." (ibid, 148). In a sense, the birds are killed for the man's entertainment and self-motives. The nature, its animals, birds and insects are threatened by the encroachment of technology. And which is much influenced and dominated by male, as women generally don't kill animals or birds or they are much close, innate and tender with the nature. Realizing the crime committed by people protagonist says, "We were committing this act, violation for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation" (ibid, 153).

Simultaneously linking and connecting the events Atwood focuses on the female subordination on the parallel line in the novel. The two female bodies as

protagonist and Anna-her companion, are the embodiment of female subjugation. At different stages both face the male dominance by one or the other way in their life. The protagonist presently is living with Joe. There is good and smooth relationship between both of them and try to seek the pleasure out of it. But still Joe thinks of their getting marriage. Joe may be thinking that once they get married, he will be free to behave as husband ordering and controlling her. Thus he insists, "We should get married, Joe said... 'Why? I said, we're living together anyway. We don't need a certificate for that'... I think we should", he said". (ibid, 109) It suggests that the marriages may be a token and the monopoly of male to treat female anyway.

The same instance is with Anna, as her husband David tries to take her naked photo for TV channels. Anna doesn't like it at all but still bullyingly David forces her and tries to impose his own will on her, while she appears to be a cultured, rational and an ideal woman. But however, David in order to earn certain money and fame, he tries to mislead her as he asserts, "Come on, we need a naked lady with big tits and be ass'... Look, will you leave me alone? 'Anna said. 'I'm minding my business, mind yours, why don't you'... 'Don't think I don't know what you are trying to do'... 'You're trying to humiliate me'. 'What humiliating about your body, darling?'... 'We all love it, you ashamed of it... You should share the wealth.'" (ibid, 172) In short, women are the prey and subject to male force and dominance. As the renowned ecofeminist Petra Kelly observes "women suffer both from structural oppression and from individual men". (Kelly, 113)

Atwood in later part of the novel reshapes the condition of women creating the resistance power in them in so called the male dominated society. She depicts protagonist as modern belle, powerful, strong to fight and withstand against the evils in society. She is showed to be a recognized, identical and empowered personality. She ultimately finds her identity, her rebel role: "above all to refuse to be a victim. Unless I do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless...withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death". (Atwood, 249) She is ready to struggle against any difficulty and hardship in her life. She will make only the nature her innate friends, she says, "I lean against a tree, I'm tree leaning". (ibid, 236) She even is ready to beget a new child in her

womb, so it would again surface her as she was dived so deep beneath the surface and regains the place of position in society.

The setting of novel is fit with the present condition of women and environment in India. As female are subjugated by many ways for example, the serious matter of abortion of female child which was taken place at large amount at Parali in Beed district and at a number of other places in India. The ratio of female in India as per the census of 2001 and 2011 is as 933 in 2001 and 940 in 2011 in Maharashtra it is 922 in 2001 and 925 females in 2011 and the number of 0-6 age group is 914 comparing with the male. In the newspaper also every day we read about the exploitation and marginalization of women for different purposes on the different grounds. As the study report of Ministry of Statistics and program implementation published by an English newspaper The Times of India on 4<sup>th</sup> of Dec.2012 says, that 46% of females (15-19 years) are not involved in any kind of decision making. Around 40% women have no access to money. Cruelty by husband and relatives continues to occupy the highest share i.e. 43.4% among the crimes committed against women in 2011, followed by 18.8% molestation. In 2012 women occupied only 08 out of 74 ministerial positions in the Union Council of Ministers. Women can't even decide whether they can go to doctor or pop a pill. Married women living in rural areas take 26% of the decisions regarding obtaining healthcare for themselves and 7.6% for purchasing major household items, 10% decisions are taken by females regarding visiting their family or kin. The situation even in urban women is no better like the rural women. 29.7% take decisions regarding access to healthcare and 10.4% for purchasing major household items. And 12.2% can decide whether to visit family and friends. In short, at present too, women are marginalized at every walk of life by different ways.

It is also the case with the ecology as its assets and flora and fauna are disturbed by man under the name and pretext of physical, material, and technological developments. The different developments have caused tremendous problem on the living creatures as an instance of the birds endangered by the mobile, radio, TV and multiple radiations.

In short, Margaret Atwood very subtly and artistically has characterized the novel from ecofeminist point of view touching the modern issues and problems. All the

events and elements are developed focusing on the subjugation of women and exploitation of nature equally by this androcentric or patriarchal society. There is utter need to change the psyche and have a wide view to look towards women and the nature in the world.

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