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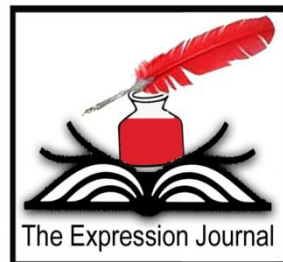
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ECO-FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*

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Abstract

The most vexing problem that man confronts today is the degradation of land and environment and its impact on human existence. The power and domination directly oppress both the feminine world and the natural world. The unnamed protagonist of the story *Surfacing* is an eco-feminist who returns to the undeveloped island, Northern Québec, where she grew up to search for her missing father. The nameless protagonist comes to realize the charm between the natural self and the artificial construct only when she encounters nature. The eco-feminist impact is discernible in the novel by the protagonist's return to the natural world. Her association with nature kindles her consciousness of victimization of woman. Like a genuine ecologist, she makes the earth her literal home for she knows that in the natural world all life is inter-related teaming with strands of diversity and complexity. *Surfacing* pertains to feminism and environmentalism. Even the events characters and language unfold a world that oppresses and dominates both femininity and nature. In this research paper I would like to explore the in-depth study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* from an eco-feminist perspective

Keywords

Degradation, Eco-Feminist, Victimization, Environmentalism, Chauvinism, Patriarchal Pressure.



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Eco-Feminism is a new way of approaching nature. Eco-feminists are gravely concerned about the oppression of woman and the oppression of the earth. They stoutly believe that the domination of woman over the years is directly connected to the environmental rape of our earth. Thus problem of power domination and subordination are key point in eco feminist. The term eco - feminism is a combine of ecology and feminism. Its basic premise connotes the ideology which authorizes oppression based on race, class, gender sexuality and physical abilities is the same ideology which relates to the sheer oppression of nature. It also focuses on the interconnection between sexism, the domination of nature, speciesism and other social inequalities.

The Canadian writer Margret Atwood deals with the burning issues of women and nature in her fictional universe. The novel *Surfacing* dwells on the emergence of the feminist and ecological movements and presence aptly the central concerns of the time: oppression of the women in the male chauvinistic society and exploitation of environmental nature in the social scenario having stupendous technological strides are the main thrust of her fictions. The nameless protagonist is a commercial artist who returns to her birthplace after a long span of time. She is accompanied by her three friends who are Ann, Joe and David. The story meanders through the search of the nameless protagonist who is searching for her father, which is a pretext for her search for her interior self which is observed through her submersion into nature and towards her mystical vision. She becomes an emblem for all those who are searingly exploited and abused thanks to their powerlessness. At the end, she comes to realize that nature furnishes her no identity, and she readies herself for motherhood and for reintegration into social ethos.

In this process she exposes the dualism and inconsistencies in her personal life and her patriarchal society. In this relentless struggle to reclaim her identity

and roots, the unnamed protagonist embarks on a psychological journey that ushers her directly into the natural domain. The Protagonist comes to realize the charm between her natural self and her artificial construct when she comes in touch with nature. While searching for her missing father in the wildness, she comes to recognize the extent to which nature has been victimized by the Americans. Her awareness of herself as a victim parallels this recognition. Men indulge in the spree of destruction of nature and woman just for fun. The nexus between nature and woman amounts to sheer exploitation. The eco-feminist Petra Kelly remarks "Woman are sex toys for men, woman's live countless than those of men; women who assert their independence and power are in some way defective". (118) She comes to realization that she has been violated the sacredness of the mother earth is violated and the ecological unity, which connotes the independence of all species is disturbed. Atwood exhibits man's abuse and woman's use of nature in surfacing. The opening sentence of the novel *Surfacing* unfurls the demise of white Birches:

I can't believe I am on the same road again, twisting along the past 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 in surfacing is noticeable as a disease stemming from technological strides and expansion which Atwood brackets with Americanism. The narrator harbours sympathy for the dying birches emblemizing nature is interpreted as a Canadian trait and this stands a contrast with the two Americans who ruthlessly killed the heron. But they turned out to be Canadians. This compelled Atwood to assert that, "If you look like them and think "Like them then you are them". (*Surfacing* 112) The unnamed protagonist has a reflection of her own tragedy in the Quebec landscape. She ventilates her grave concern for nature and helps as understand the woman-nature relationship. In her homeward journey she unearths that "nothing is the same I don't know the way anymore". (*Surfacing* 12)

She has been in alienation 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 doesn't 'know the way anymore.' Atwood reminds us that ecological degradation provides the backdrop whether it is to control the dam or do the destruction of older trees: "The trees will never be allowed to grow tall again; they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees bare scares as whole." (*Surfacing* 55)

Fishing in the lake an apt trope which suggests entrapment. Soon, the female protagonist comes to realize that in her capacity for evil; she herself has not been different from them. The illusion of her pristine childhood innocence is shattered to smithereens and she recollects a childhood game- the stabbing of a doll-which forebodes her abortion. The novel harps on the differences between natural predation and the hunting by the man which is done for the thrilling excitement of killing. This aims at the alienation of modern man from the natural world. Vandana Shiva pinpoints that it is not hunting which leads to violent

relationship with nature: "it is the elevation of hunting to the level of ideology which does so." (Shiva 50)

The narrator invites attention to at least two such Wanton acts of killing: The shooting of the heron and the explosions at the lake by Americans who come for fishing. The narrator feels herself hurt by whatever harms she notices meted out to the natural environment and animals as well. She is fed up with Joe and David's filming of the fish's inards. She does not intend to kill the fish herself, the second time: "I couldn't anymore. I had no right to. We don't need it our proper food was tin canes. We were committing this act, violation, for sport and amusement or pleasure, recreation. These were no longer the right reason." (*Surfacing* 120) The word has been used in an ironic vein. Then she releases the frogs into the lake and this sparks off cascades of memories relating to the release of the frogs bottled by her brother. His subsequent wrath embodies her first lesson in the patriarchal pressure. The aborted child is recalled as a bottled frog. Her childhood drawings comprise rabbits with their coloured egg-houses and all that is normal and green. This stands in a telling contrast to her brothers, drawing of war and death and a grown up his calling is one that encompasses violating the planet.

The relationship of Anna and David is replete with tensions. David is acting as the all powerful and dominating male creation who endeavours to spurn Anna. Through David, the novel *Surfacing* invites our attention to the oppression of women in a male chauvinistic hierarchical order and oppositional roles empowering men at the expense of women. Like nature the female body is envisaged as a resource to be colonized and commercialized. Anna who is running to the Lake Nude and sand spattered recalls the female protagonist of burnt leeches crawling to the lake, a portion of childhood game. During the lake scene in which David compels Anna to strip off her cloth for the random samples, he alludes to her as, "Darling...a good girl" "ok twat face" and desires to put her picture in beside the dead bird". (*Surfacing* 135) He is successful in taking her naked snapshot. Here Anna is depicted in animals and this naturalizing of women showcases that in patriarchal social structure women are eyes as inferior commodity to men as animals. Her first vehement protest against the patriarchy which is structured on the market value of female body is symbolically articulated through the destroying of the camera films. David's camera has outraged Anna's female image, it has captured her distorted self within its luminous lens. The Camera is employed as a phallic symbol, incarnating the male power over the female body. So it acts in Anna like a "bazooka or a strange instrument of torture". (*Surfacing* 136)

The animal victims in the novel are worthy of comparison with women as victims. David wishes Anna to pose nude beside the dead heron. She is likened to a tree in this episode. David's Joke about the split beaver is very intriguing. And the fact that the beaver is the national symbol of Canada fuses the victim status of the beaver of women and of Canada. The beaver was an appealing lure to European fur traders and colonized first, and then to American capital. The beaver image has evocative connotations of pornographic seductions of women and of Canada's.

Chronicle as a land seduced and colonized by England and then by the US. The Moose family at the gas station underscores the commercial exploitation of sentimental domestication of nature. The narrator's first lover employs photographs of his wife and kids: his "Stuffed and mounted family" (*Surfacing* 149) to make her abort her child.

The narrator self image animal victim is first suggested when the boys tie her to the tree in school and forget to free her. She has a feel that she becomes an "escape artist of sort's expert at undoing knots" (*Surfacing* 72). She looks out her liberation through a regression to primitiveness which encompasses total involvement in environment to the extent of living like a wild animal. In her vision her mother turns into a Jay and her father into a fish-like creature. The eco-feminist influence is suffused in the novel by the protagonist's moving to the natural landscape. Before her "Surfacing" takes place, she undergoes an overall metamorphosis in perception and consequently learns to embrace the natural world healing herself in this way she undergoes experience of oppression and domination of male chauvinistic universe lacking the power to fight for survival and passively consent to abort her kid. This unnatural act of her abortion exhibits the empowering and domination nature of her ex-lover:

(The unborn Child) 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, and he wanted a replica of himself. (*Surfacing* 34)

The abortion reflects the eco-feminist thought that, the implication of a culture based on the devaluation of life giving and the celebration of life taking are profound for ecology and for women. "Her ex-lover feels no emotional rapport with the child, for him it is simple, like getting a wart removed. He said it wasn't as person, only an animal". (*Surfacing* 144) Atwood harps on the fact that men exploit the bodies of woman for their needs. They even contain the process of childbirth which nature has duly assigned to woman.

The protagonist queries the inordinate exploit of reproductive technologies. The modern gadgets, in the guise of assisting woman, strips her of the ability to sense her bodily rhythms. Hence, she does not want the child to be taken out with a fork "Like a pickle out of a pickle Jar". (*Surfacing* 80) The Impact of the fertility controlling pills on the protagonist's eye is of blurring her vision, also becomes momentous in this context. The novelist has tried her utmost to establish a relationship between the bruised and wounded self of the nameless protagonist and the blighted the damaged landscape of the island in Quebec. Her going to Quebec along with the three friends made her peep into the life of things and in the process she scrams herself away from all her friends as well as the American-Canadians who indulge in senseless and ruthless cruelty to birds trees and fish.

Like a genuine ecologist, she makes the earth her literal home for she fully knows that in the natural world all life is interrelated, hemmed in by diversity and complexity. She is not scared of anyone. There is none to exercise bossism over her and violate her physique. She is at one with the pious Mother Earth. She brushes aside all her civilization as it is bulldozing the biosphere. She may recreate a

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culture that embraces to seek harmony with natural phenomena. The novel triggers vexing issue pertaining to feminism, environmentalism and ecological feminism. Even the Events, language and characters mirror a world of oppression. We encounter both feminity and nature in the novel. The real Journey has the 'Surface' meaning while deep meaning consists in the voyage of self-discovery and assertion of individual identity. There is a linkage of ecology with feminism and make the novel an eco-feminist novel par excellence

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