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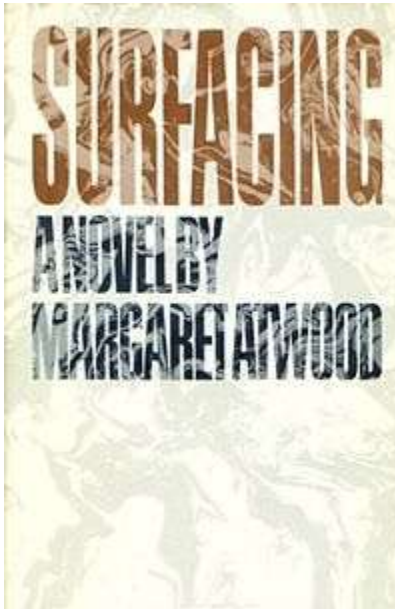
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Self-Discovery through Nature in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

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Self-Discovery through Nature in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Destruction of land and environment and its consequences on living organisms is one of the modern problems that we are facing today. Eco-feminism derives an idea that all living organisms must be seen in relation to their natural surroundings. Margaret Atwood, a Canadian writer, has depicted the exploitation of nature and women in her novel *Surfacing*. The nameless protagonist or the narrator of the novel is an ecofeminist. The heroine goes to her birthplace in search of her lost father. She finds the place a “foreign territory”. The heroine has deep sympathy towards nature. She finds that her birth place is being violated by Americans and Canadians in the name of civilization and this is leading to environmental degradation.

She realizes that as she has been exploited by the man whom she married, the sacredness of our planet earth is also exploited. In the process of her journey through nature, she understands the association between nature and women. In her struggle against oppression and domination, she associates herself with the natural world, with the landscape and with animals, and realizes both nature and women are the objects of domination. Her journey through wilderness gives her the ability to see things clearly.

In the final part of the novel, the heroine identifies herself with the natural world. She acquires a new identity and refuses to become a victim. She refuses to go back to the city. She wants to be free from the evil effects of materialistic and technological world. The present study attempts to recall the importance of returning to nature in order to experience harmony and peace in and around oneself.

Eco-Feminism and Margaret Atwood



Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Atwood

The term *Eco-feminism* seems to imply that Eco-feminist writers are mostly concerned about the oppression of women and the oppression of earth. The paper analyses the relationship between women and nature by examining nature as a capable means for women's self-discovery in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*.

The Story: Degradation of Nature in Male-constructed World

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is one of the most prolific writers belonging to Canada. Like the other novels of Atwood, *Surfacing* chronicles the heroine's struggle to begin her life anew. The unnamed heroine or the narrator is a commercial freelance artist, a talented painter of moderate success. The novel starts with the divorced heroine traveling from the city towards her family cabin near a remote Quebec lake. She is in search of her father, a botanist. She goes with her lover Joe and her friends, David and Anna, a married couple. Joe is a teacher teaching pottery and ceramics and David teaches communication in an Adult Education Programme. They have come to the island with a camera as David and Joe have planned to make a movie. They intend to take shots of strange and interesting

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things they come across during the course of the journey. The film will be titled 'Random Samples'.

As they come nearer to the town they pick up the essential needs for their stay in the cabin. The narrator is overwhelmed by memories and images from her childhood. She is disappointed to note the changes, the paved roads, the new metal, the concrete bridge etc. she finds the old church deserted. The place is losing the purity and genuineness of her recollections. She has found to her great shock that people in power are destroying the earth. She notices that the old road have been closed for years and a new road is opened. The heroine feels very sad because 'nothing is the same'-Atwood, *Surfacing* (09). She was born and brought up in that place, the heroine doesn't know the way anymore. She asks herself, 'why is the road different, he (father) shouldn't have allowed them to do it'-Atwood, *Surfacing*, (10).the heroine expresses a deep concern for nature and helps us to understand the connection between nature and women. She has had an unhappy past. The man whom she loved and married proved himself a cheat after making her pregnant. She understands that as she has been exploited, the holiness of the planet earth is also exploited.

The desert attracts her more than anything. The journey into the wilderness is a chance for her. She wants to experience nature. She rejects to go back to the city as a male-constructed woman without any change. Then she decides to turn into a natural woman and lives in a natural way there. The narrator is tired of civilization and does not want to pretend anymore. She wants to get rid of all the burdens of civilization.

"It's true, I am by myself; this is what I wanted, to stay here alone.
From any rational point of view I am absurd; but there are no longer
any rational points of view." -Atwood, *Surfacing* (173)

The narrator cares nothing about reason anymore. The heroine is woken by the singing of birds instead of an alarm. She gets the experience in her lifetime to come into contact with nature and learn about it. Unlike her unfeeling companions, she believes and

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senses nature with ease. As she stays in the rural environment, she feels a kind of safety “How have I been able to live so long in the city, it isn’t safe, ” the narrator says, ‘I always [feel] safe here, even at night’ - Atwood, *Surfacing* (70). In comparison with the stifling city, the narrator lives and breathes at ease on the island. For the narrator, living in the city is as if bearing numerous kinds of burdens.

The narrator lives happily on the island rather than the city. For her, life in the city is so difficult. She is unaccustomed to the pressure of modern life.

“In the night I had wanted rescue, if my body could be made to sense, respond, move strongly enough, some of the red light-bulb neurons, incandescent mole-cules might seep into my head through the closed throat, neck membrane. Pleasure and pain are side by side they said but most of the brain is neutral; nerveless, like fat. I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it”. - Atwood, *Surfacing* (112).

As days go by the city bred David begins to like that place very much. Gazing up the sky he says, “We ought to start a colony, I mean a community up there, get it together with some people, break away from the urban nuclear family” - Atwood, *Surfacing* (105). Such a sight of heaven on earth is threatened when the American, Bill Malmstrom brings out his proposal of buying the farm from the heroine in order to use it as a kind of “retreat lodge”. She refuses to sell it to him.

The narrator goes to fishing with her friends, and eats artificial food on the natural land; she even has a sense of complicity. A sense of crime rises gradually in her mind because she is aware of her taking part in doing something bad to nature.

“We knelt down and began to pull at the weeds; they resisted, holding on or taking clumps of soil out with them or breaking their stems, leaving their roots in the earth

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to regenerate; I dug for the feet in the warm dirt, my hands green with weed blood”
- Atwood, *Surfacing* (77)

Unfounded Hate

After realising her own complicity, she then turns to hate what the Americans do to the natural island and even compares them with dogs. In the novel, Americans are associated with machines, pollution and senseless killing. She blames American hunters for the death of the heron. The animal, killed for sport and pleasure is left on the island, mutilated and hanging in a tree. However, the hunters are Canadians, people from her own country, destroying their own landscape and wildlife. Therefore, the narrator, as a Canadian, takes part in the destruction process, not by killing animals herself, but by believing that Canadians, like herself, are innocent. They should preserve the beauty of the environment rather than destroy it.

“After we landed we found that someone had built a fireplace already, on the shore ledge of bare granite; trash was strewn around it, orange peelings and tin cans and a rancid bulge of greasy paper, the tracks of humans. It was like dogs pissing on a fence, as if the endlessness, anonymous water and unclaimed land, compelled them to leave their signature, stake their territory, and garbage was the only thing they had to do it with”. - Atwood, *Surfacing* (111)

People unscrupulously do things bad to nature in order to demonstrate their power. They repeatedly devastate and plunder the landscape with their own will and neglect the mutual relationship between humans and the land.

Women are so humble that they can do nothing they really want to. The narrator’s best female friend Anna provides the best example to present this inferior situation. Anna is depicted as a vulnerable character. She suffers from the fear that her husband does not love her enough. This obsessive alarm keeps her continuously nervous; she gets up before all and puts on make up so that David would not see her without make up. Anna embodies the role

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of victim. Within her marriage with David for nine years, she is submissive all the time. She does her best to please him from stem to stern. She is never in control of her life; instead it's David in control of her life. Anna is a "passive recipient and not an active agent" -Atwood, *Surfacing* (42). She makes herself fit in with all David's demands. David's and Anna's married life is not as ideal as the narrator thought. The narrator realizes that the relationship between David and Anna may be dissolved.

Preserving and Protecting the Land and Ecosystems – Self-Quest

Preserving and protecting the land and ecosystems have always been on Atwood's mind, and *Surfacing* reflects this concern. Ecological awareness is a constant theme throughout the novel, and the importance of nature in the protagonist's development expresses this newfound perception. Atwood exposes her protagonist to a self-reflective journey through nature. The heroine is initially in a state of inner apathy incapable of absorbing or generating human feeling. She has the divided self that almost threatens her own sanity. The deep rooted cause for this is the guilt and anger she suppressed in her subconscious mind. The ruthless way in which she allowed her child to be aborted in her young days transformed her completely. The suppressed reality finally surfaces when she confronts her father's dead body in the lake. The protagonist subjects herself to a deep process of self-analysis throughout her quest. Using the search for her father as an excuse, she sets off on an inner journey. In the end, she finds herself. In the novel, the connection between woman and the land is established between the novel's protagonist and the Canadian wilderness. There is an interconnection between them, which leads the female character to undergo an empowering and rich experience.

Theoretical Foundations of Eco-Feminism

Eco-feminism is based on the theoretical foundations of feminism and environmentalism. Feminism, analyses why women are treated as inferior to men; environmentalism, in turn, shows interest in detecting why nature is treated as inferior to

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culture. From the environmental movement, eco-feminism derives the idea that all living organisms must be seen in relation to their natural surroundings. In her struggle against oppression and domination, she combines herself with the natural world, with the landscape and with animals. To be able to establish a connection with her past, she begins, then, to go further and further into the island, deep into the wilderness. Perhaps, with the help of nature, she will be able to make the right decisions for her future. As the narrator goes deep into the wilderness, she begins to see herself as part of the landscape. Nature and civilization, women and men are not absolutely opposite. The narrator puts herself in the entire natural world. She immerses herself in the lake and gets a redemptive power and then finally gets a totally new vision towards life.

“A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted in the sides, no, antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliffstone, protecting spirit. It hangs in the air suspended, flesh turned to icon, he has changed again, returned to the water. How many shapes can he take. I watch it for an hour or so; then it drops and softens, the circles widen, it becomes an ordinary fish again.” -Atwood, *Surfacing* (193).

Effect of Technology, Pollution and Human Lust

The world of nature that surrounds the narrator and her companions is disregarded by technology, pollution and human lust. The narrator determines to accept the restrictions in the city and the obstruction of civilization. However, this time, she is different. She is ready to fit herself into the world. She does know that as a human being, coming back to the city is inevitable. The narrator is conscious that she will never be a woman like Anna. She has to resist. She has to fight. She has to walk her own path. . Nothing can conceal the fact that humans are part of nature. Man and Nature cannot be divided. Even the narrator chooses to come back to civilization at the end of the story does not deny this idea. Human beings exist in the natural world. They should give thanks and preserve it with all efforts. Without the support of natural system, it is impossible for humans to uphold themselves well.

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