

## AN INNER TRIP: WOMEN AND NATURE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*

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### ABSTRACT:

*This article studies the relationship between women and nature by analyzing nature as a possible means for women's self-discovery in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*, having as a theoretical reference notions of contemporary ecofeminist literary theory.*

KEY WORDS: *ecofeminism, Canadian literature, wilderness, self-discovery.*

Margaret Atwood has written a number of works throughout almost thirty years of literary writing. Her fame and recognition culminated with her winning England's prestigious Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin* in 2000. However, *Surfacing*, written in 1972, remains a strong and important reference in Atwood's substantial body of literature.

Regarding environmental issues, *Surfacing* has become a landmark in Canadian literature as it addresses the issue of environmental awareness and exposes the fact that Canada, at that time, was already suffering from the impact that modern technological society had on the Canadian landscape. 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.

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Part detective novel, part psychological thriller, *Surfacing* is the story of a woman who goes in search of her missing father on a remote island. The unnamed protagonist of the novel returns to her parents' rustic cabin in the northern Canadian wilderness, accompanied by her boyfriend and another young couple with the mission to investigate the disappearance of her father. But when the father remains lost, they decide to stay on the lake for a week. The isolated setting serves as the catalyst for conflict and dangerous choices.

I found in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* the possibility of developing connections between women and nature through an ecofeminist perspective. In her novel, Atwood exposes her protagonist to a self-reflective journey through nature, challenging the stereotypical and biased association of women and nature with inferiority. The ecofeminist struggle can be perceived when Atwood addresses the domination of women and nature by recognising the oppression imposed by the patriarchy, and also through the character's inner journey and embracing of nature. The protagonist undergoes 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 to, in the end, find herself.

Atwood, in the novel, makes use of the landscape to serve as a source of self-knowledge as the female protagonist goes back in time and place and tries to recognise the meaningful and symbolic signs in the wilderness. In *Surfacing*, her construction of the concept of the wilderness—both physically and mentally—expresses her own concern with the cultural myth of the wilderness she has inherited. Such a myth helped shape Canada's identity and became a source of inspiration for Canadian authors.

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. Such interconnection may be associated with Ecofeminism, which has as its basic principle the notion that patriarchal thinking is harmful to nature and to women. In this case, women and nature are viewed in similar terms. In traditional Western thought, both women and nature are seen as objects that must be dominated. Ecofeminism introduces connections between these two worlds, reinforcing the need to overcome the division between human and nonhuman worlds. It seeks to repair this

gap between humans and nature, showing how society, especially patriarchal society, tries to oppress, dominate, and overcome both. Ecofeminism is based on the theoretical foundations of feminism and environmentalism. Feminism, broadly speaking, analyses why women are treated as inferior to men; environmentalism, in turn, shows interest in detecting why nature is treated as inferior to culture. From the environmental movement, ecofeminism derives the idea that all living organisms must be seen in relation to their natural surroundings. From the feminist movement, ecofeminism takes on a criticism on gender roles and hierarchical dualisms such as dominant/subordinate, culture/nature, and men/women. Ecofeminists have explored the symbolic association and devaluation of women and nature that appears in religion, theology, art, and literature. Some theorists draw specially on literature to reveal these women-nature symbolic connections.

To understand and perceive the ecofeminist aspect of *Surfacing* it is necessary to consider the protagonist's embracing of nature as a locus of possibility. In her process of surfacing she undergoes a shift of perception when she returns to the wilderness, learning to embrace the illogical, the natural, the irrational, the mystical. In her struggle against oppression and domination, she associates herself with the natural world, with the landscape and with animals, experiencing the important connections between women and nature as objects of domination and subjugation.

Like other works by Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* can be read on a series of levels, and one of the many possibilities is an analysis through an ecofeminist perspective for the encounter of woman with nature in the novel triggers an inner journey. Going back to her place of childhood—the northern Canadian wilderness—to search for her missing father is, in fact, an excuse to search for her own past: a past buried deep inside her repressed memories.

Ecofeminist critics argue that two defined, contradictory, and dualistic worlds exist in traditional patriarchal society: the feminine and the masculine. The feminine principle represents the mother, Mother Nature, the body, irrationality, emotion, intuition and mysticism. The masculine principle, on the other hand, represents rationality, logic, separation from nature, the head, intellectualism, language and concrete reality. However, Gaard and Murphy point out that ecofeminism is deeply involved in the criticism of the "dualisms of white Western patriarchal

culture, such as self/other, culture/nature, man/woman, human/animal, and white/nonwhite, which construct male human identity as separate from and superior to the identities of women, animals, and the natural world" (Gaard and Murphy, 1998: 9).

The protagonist's awareness of these dualistic worlds appears early in her life, as the narrator remembers that it was her father who explained everything to her. Her father is the one who has all the answers, as he personifies the logical and rational world of the patriarchal society. For instance, in *Surfacing*, the female protagonist struggles to function in the masculine dominated society, feeling cut off from her emotions and denying her roots. As a result of this struggle, the narrator confronts these dualistic concepts. The character fights the belief in the split of the head—traditionally a masculine element—from the body—a feminine element. Reclaiming the body as a whole is relevant for ecofeminism, especially because human identity has been traditionally linked solely to the mind, while the body is often animalized, naturalized, and feminized, in order to be viewed as inferior.

As head and body, society and the natural world have been set apart from each other. As a reflection of this separation, the characters in the novel rely on modern technology, and believe themselves to be above nature, failing to perceive the lessons nature has to offer. From the humans came the need to control the dam, for example, and also the destruction of old trees. Atwood constantly reminds her reader that the environmental destruction permeates the whole setting of the novel as marks of a civilised nature are clearly portrayed.

Throughout the novel we perceive the narrator's struggle to find out to which world she belongs. In order to emphasize this struggle, Atwood draws on the use of a series of doubles: life and death, ghosts and guides, culture and nature, male and female. The ultimate duality would be the protagonist's public mask and her private self. The character stages a struggle with herself trying to find out which world she must inhabit. The protagonist's dualistic self will begin to merge only after an interconnection with nature.

The protagonist begins, then, to deconstruct her version of reality and of herself. She always thought that she was safe in the city, away from her old life in the wilderness. However, life in the city was even more damaging than her times on the island. Pondering on the differences between city and nature, she wonders how

she has managed to stay in the city for such a long time, since she never felt safe there, whereas in the bush she is considered an expert in nature survival. 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, as if it were welcoming her back, or as if she had never left it.

It is possible to say that the turning point, the major discovery in the novel, happens when the unnamed narrator dives into the lake, where she finds a shadowy image that might be her father's body, but in fact she sees it as the body of her aborted child. The abortion has an enormous impact on the narrator's life, and she has blocked this tragic and traumatic memory. She turns this tragic incident into a tale, spending a long time weaving a fictional narrative, believing that she was married and that she had simply abandoned the child. The negative impact of the abortion takes control over the protagonist. It is, then, inside the lake that the narrator of the novel confronts her ghosts. Her vision down the lake liberates all her memories. She remembers what happened in her adolescence, her pregnancy, and her abortion. Suffering from such a trauma in an early age made her block this event from her memories. After her revealing experience inside the lake, the protagonist goes through a process of self-discovery, in which she rejects the tale she, herself, created in order to deny both her past relationship with a married man and the abortion. After this experience she surfaces, now able to confront reality and aware of her complicity in the events of her life.

As a part of her healing process, the narrator begins to identify with an animal: a dead heron. The killing of the heron presents a sort of ecological parallel to the narrator's personal experience. 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. It is also through the recognition of this guilt toward the killing of the heron that the

protagonist begins to avoid victimisation and to accept her own guilt in another series of events. Finding the dead heron and reflecting on this particular episode is a turning point for the protagonist. She begins a process of withdrawal from society, in which she rejects all the social games.

The rejection she experiences toward the killing of the animal (heron) is the beginning of her transformation process. This change in perception only occurs in the last chapters of the novel, when her intuitive self takes over. The main character in the novel has to immerse herself in nature in order to regain peace. The way that Atwood uses the idea of having to go mad in order to find peace of mind is extremely provocative. Outsiders would label her psychotic, but *Surfacing's* narrator's breakdown is, in fact, a breakthrough. Her experience in the wilderness refocuses her, giving her the ability to see things clearly. She gains strength from the wilderness in order to make a new start. In the last pages of the novel the female protagonist sees the natural world as her equal, as she states that she is a tree.

*Surfacing* follows the female protagonist's awakening from an alienated stage to an integrated one. She explores nature, escaping into the wilderness, facing her past and making important decisions about her future. The end of the novel can, then, be perceived as a beginning, but as a new beginning. The narrator does not need to hide behind a false past since she can now cope with her traumas and losses. Her whole experience in the wilderness takes her to this new beginning. The Canadian wilderness is her place of personal expression. In the novel, the female protagonist emerges, better yet, surfaces, with a new acquired identity, an identity she found in contact with the Canadian wilderness. Her escape into the wilderness is her way of dealing with that which oppresses her. After all that she experiences, she may not feel sure about her future course of action, but her individual triumph in the wilderness is an accomplishment that consolidates her newly acquired identity. The protagonist has had to redefine herself in her own terms, not following the traditional patriarchal notions that subjugate women, and above all refusing to become a victim. After her inner trip she may allow herself to look at nature as an ally and as an important part of herself.

RESUMO:

*Este artigo estuda o relacionamento entre as mulheres e a natureza como meio de possibilitar a auto-descoberta feminina na obra *Surfacing*, de Margaret Atwood, com base na teoria literária ecofeminista contemporânea.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *ecofeminismo, literatura canadense, natureza selvagem, auto-descoberta.*

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