

A Postcolonial Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines Atwood's *Surfacing* using the critical framework of postcolonial ecofeminism. The text is interrogated as a complex site of contestation and negotiation of gender, race, colonial history and neo-colonial present as well as the environment. The paper argues that the central trope of the narrative – the search for a father by a daughter – is a signifier for the search and reclamation of identity, roots and oneness with nature.

Keywords: *post-colonialism, feminism, eco-feminism, capitalism, patriarchal and gender-politics*

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“Surfacing is more than any other of Margaret Atwood's novels also is border country, halfway between poem and novel theological treaties and political manifesto, myth and realism. Surfacing is quite possibly the best of all her work.”

- Barbara Hill Rigney

Surfacing expresses itself in its intricacy of structure and flair as well as its thematic fullness. Chiefly labelled as a quest novel in which the speaker experiences a *rite de passage* culminating in the discovery to a new identity.

Surfacing is Margaret Atwood's second novel, in book form in 1972. A political, nationalistic, ecological, and proto-feminist novel, it evidently aided as a way for Margaret Atwood to exhibit her beliefs through her nameless female protagonist, whose life steadily echoed that of Atwood's all through the novel. The novel is similarly well-thought-out to be **post-colonial**, though not in the traditional sense.

Surfacing takes place in Quebec and there is a strong sense of national identity all through the novel, as the key characters often make their hatred for the Americans and their culture that they are forceful on Canadians, very obvious. It may be helpful to be acquainted with Quebec as the only province that is inhabited by people of French descent, which clarifies the language barriers throughout the novel. The key characters were, time and again, hesitant whether or not to use the native language (French) or use their better-spoken English. Seemingly, at the time this book was inscribed, there was a conflict, on the rise, amid people of Quebec and the rest of Canada. America was also stirring into Canada, spreading the hand of **capitalism** across national boundaries. During that time period of the 1960's, the “Quiet Revolution” took place in Quebec. This revolution was a sequence of economic and educational reforms, and there was a change towards a more secular culture which was dreadful and disturbing to the ‘grownup’ population. The “Quiet Revolution” gave Quebec a new political and economic freedom, providing the French citizens of the province a sense of nationalism and a wish to get detached from Canada. It turned out to be obvious that the key characters left before this Revolution, and upon coming back (with their American-like lifestyles and tendencies) they discover that the culture between the French nationalists and the other more-American-like Canadians were torn apart. Atwood mentions this often, but never explicitly says what it was termed. The novel takes place in Canada, and it initiates with the narrator/protagonist, a woman who remains nameless all through the novel, her beau Joe, and a wedded couple, Anna and David. The protagonist has merely known these individuals for a few months, but she required them to drive her back to the home she grew up for the reason that her father is missing. They, at this time, live in a moderately industrial urban area, but her old home where she is returning is on a remote island in a large lake in

Northern Quebec. She travels back to the wilds of northern Quebec where she has spent her childhood and youth. Her travelling back befits a step by step succession into her own past, where body and mind, being rational and conjuring up, were still the same. It too results in the re-immersion into an ancient Canada, where man breathed close to nature and Indian shamans or witchdoctors exercised their power. So her quest for her father grows not only into the discovery of the split in her own personality but also the tragic dwindling, a part of nature and civilisation, in a broad-spectrum. It is not a nostalgic voyage but antagonising one in which all familiar to her is at least briefly dissolved. She states:

“Now we are on my home ground. Foreign territory. My throat constricts [---] Nothing is the same. I don't know the way anymore”.(Surfacing 17) Her childhood realm is now endangered by the growth of civilisation that is spread North, over the Canadian landscape, like a virus. The outer manifestations are “dying trees, new motels, gas stations, missile bases in the woods and new roads”. (Atwood, Surfacing 18) She elucidates:

“They have cheated, we're here too soon and I feel deprived of something, as though I can't really get here unless I've suffered, as though the first view of the lake, which we can see now, blue and cool as temptation, should be through tears and a haze of vomit.”(Atwood, Surfacing 18) The four reach at the protagonist's childhood home, a timeworn and very simple cabin on the shores of a lake. They begin the search for her father. The protagonist looks for evidences that her parents may have left her, which she sooner or later discovers in certain odd drawings of what appears like mythological creatures and a drawing with markings, which the protagonist figures out as settings where these drawings might be. She guesses that this was a hobby that her father picked up after retirement, and she knew it is probably that he expired while probing for these drawings.

The protagonist/narrator often ruminates about her previous years. She narrates stories of her weird childhood with her brother, in what way they were brought up as atheists considering that Jesus was just a historical figure, and God was a superstition. They were, likewise very secluded from community till a later age, and at that way, they had wasted out on learning regular social customs. Her brother was grownup and was time and again her informer on the traditions of the world (or at least, his take on how the world operated). It was her brother that educated her about the happening of World War II, which she else would have acknowledged very little about, bearing in mind, very little ‘actual fighting’ followed on the Canadian ground. She also recalls less caringly on her latest past, which is told in unclear bits and pieces, gradually during the course of the novel. She was seemingly, at one time, married and had a child, but she left them. However, as the novel goes on, her story gets altered to her having an affair with a married man who enforced her in undergoing an abortion.

After having some kind of hallucination in the lake when she goes off unaccompanied to hunt for her father, where she trusts the spirits of the island have revealed her the unborn foetus that she aborted, the protagonist halts on the island when the other three leave. She desires some sort of enlightenment or message from the spirits of her parents. For five days she seems to have lost her mind, thinking she is an animal and living like one, until her hunger and exhaustion help her to regain her sanity, at which point she returns to the cabin and has another unexpected enlightened realisation. She says:

“He said he loved me, the magic word, it was supposed to make everything light up, I'll never trust that word again.”(Atwood, Surfacing 32) Throughout the novel, the Canadian national identity and how Americans have asserted its cultural influence over Canada are the debatable points. This penetration of social and cultural identity is a method of colonialism, at least to Atwood, which is why the novel is frequently categorised as **post-colonial**. At this time, that the protagonist is returning home, she is conscious of all that has altered ever since she ran away to live in the city. She notices that attires have turn out to be more revealing, which she assumes that the church has lost its influence. She too notices the huge extent of “American” add-ons, such as billboards and other commercials and customs. The characters make clear from the start their strong hatred for the Americans and their values. David in specific, tosses out remarks such as, “Bloody fascist pig yanks” and “Rotten capitalist bastards” (Surfacing 56).

The narrative's characters are very unlike from one another, and it looks as if they are each strategically positioned in the novel to direct a different belief of Atwood's. The women in the story, aid as examples of the mode **patriarchal** society treats and looks at women -- the men, then apparently serve as examples of the leading forces in society that dominate them. Another is the query of women's sexual and social part in the **patriarchal** society. Anna and the protagonist at one point talk over contraception and its negative effects (which would have been a big debate at the time), and the procedure of an abortion is tinted in a dreadful light. The social repercussions of makeup are every so often debated, and the idea of a truly ordinary woman being unusual is reflected upon often by the protagonist. The notion of men's power over women is evident with David and Anna, and the false ethics of marriage are also offered through their relationship.

It is only in the second fragment when the narrator re-counts the formative familiarities of her own past which have steered to her inner split and the abusive relationship with one of her college teachers and the abortion causing from it -- hence the novel gets oriented towards **ecofeminism**. In due course, her personal trauma of having been influenced into a life denying negativity is developed as the ruling issue in the novel. The

victimization of womenfolk in a **patriarchal** society grow into the metaphor of the violation of nature over civilization. Arno Hellor rightly remarks that:

“The equation of masculine American aggressive technology with the ongoing violence and murderous indifference towards everything natural is the central leitmotif of the novel.”(Hellor 314)

There is a solid sense of **environmentalism**, as the protagonist has a strong respect for the Canadian wilds, where she got raised. She feels very self-protective of it, and when an American man offers to purchase her property in order to fit it into a vacation hideaway she strongly rejects. She also expresses her strong distaste for the vacationers that often inhabit the lake for angling and camping, several urban expansion, and some technology that has wedged the wilderness of Canada. The heron slaughtered and suspended on its outspread wings by a set of American metal killers is the utmost visible example of this:

“Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like trash? To prove they could do it; they had the power to kill? Otherwise it was valueless, beautiful from a distance but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it”.(Atwood, *Surfacing* 138)[---] “I wondered what part of them the heron was, that they needed so much to kill it” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 141)

But then, in one of the sarcastic points in the novel, these American contented slaughterers turn out to be Canadians and the notion takes on a more universal impact. The narrator exclaims:

“But they killed the heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they are from, my head said, they are still American, they're what's 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, *Surfacing* 152)

This universalising extension of the killer theme is even strengthened by its rising internalisation. The speaker comprehends that even she is diseased with the American virus-“I feel a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hand, as though I had been there and watched without saying no or doing anything to stop it.”(Atwood, *Surfacing* 154) It is this jolt of appreciation that lastly triggers off her choice to overcome negativity and hereafter classify with the victims. The diving act, horror apparition of her aborted foetus amalgamating with the ghostly contours of her drowned and dead father make into a catastrophic ‘surfacing’ gesturing a spiritual rebirth. Parting violence in arrears, she embraces a prototypically feminine procreative feature:

“I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it had been imprisoned for so long [---] in the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god. I will never teach it words.”(Atwood, *Surfacing* 191) Lastly, she understands that her father had breathe his last breath while taking photographs of early Indian petroglyphs buried under the water. Maureen Devine in her book, *‘Woman and Nature’* has rightly inferred this as: “the feminine triumphs over scientific technology, as it were, causing also his death and protecting the exploitation of her hidden secrets. His death sets the protagonist free from all she equates with masculinity so that her woman nature, ‘the natural woman’ can emerge, freed of masculine constructs.”(Devine 5)

Although the protagonist appreciates that together men and women have their bit in the destruction of nature, it is Atwood's book *‘Survival: A Thematic Guide To Canadian Literature’ (1972)* which clarifies how Canadian protagonists fear to be victimised by the untameable bush wilds, frequently dubbed as ‘empty space’ in the colonial discourse. *Surfacing* can be deduced as a spiritual scenery catering the author with essential metaphors. It is not less than an entire re-orientation of Western Man in the course of overpowering the deadly split transported by the process of civilisation. This rebirth into a different fullness, thematised by the novel, links to a new ecological anthropology like Fritjof Kapra established in his book, *‘The Turning Point :Science, Society and the Rising Culture’*. He states:

“With the rise of Newtonian Science, finally nature becomes a mechanical system that could be manipulated and exploited together with the manipulation and exploitation of women. The ancient association of woman and nature thus interlinks women's history and the history of the environment, and is the source of a natural kinship between feminism and ecology which is manifesting itself increasingly.”(Kapra 40)

Atwood practises the ‘Woman- as - Nature’ theme in a couple of diverse modes. The first mode debates that identification of Women - as - Nature is not essentially prolific to the **ecofeminist** cause and the second mode observes women as worldly caretakers. Woman - as - Other propagated from Woman - as - Nature, a joint cultural concept in male consciousness. The protagonist's identification with nature drives past satisfying a time honoured typecast of gender identity and discovers how the alliance of women and nature can be harmful to woman's position in the society as well as the environs' position in politics. As the protagonist has matured up in the ‘Wilderness’, she classifies with it as family and senses accountable for shielding it. She initiates physically identifying with nature and ponders-

“My tentacle feet and free hand scent out the way, shoes are barrier between touch and earth” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 165)

Emma Parker proposes that “because the body becomes the site of subjection for women, Atwoodian heroines experience a strong sense of unease about the body” (Parker 349) and sense relieved to reject masculinity by identifying with a conventionally feminine notion. Erinc Ozdemir in *‘Power, Madness and Gender Identity in Surfacing’* asserts that:

“This thinking implies a rejection of masculinity incorporating reason, discourse, culture and the mind and an affirmation of femininity as the locus of irrationality, silence, nature and the body.”(Ozdemir 66) *Surfacing* expresses how Woman - as - Nature is a substantial part of cultural **feminism’s** essentialist glitches and demonstrates how Woman - as - Nature does not grasp a glorious Gaia-esque personality but moderately establishes Woman - as - Other. Atwood’s flair of forecasting future rhetoric of the **ecofeminist** drive is in full bloom in *Surfacing*. The protagonist manages with several roles futilely either as the male society does not permit her to accept more than one role at one time, or for the reason that it does not permit her to have contrasting roles. She raises the question, as the speaker mentally alters into an animal -- is she altering or simply recognising a deeper part of herself? Fiona Tolan in *‘Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction’* offers a dialectical **ecofeminist** analysis of the protagonist’s alteration when she states:

“...in relinquishing her victimhood, the system of irreconcilable opposites that she has set up offers aggression as the only alternative---the narrator recoils from humanity---and is faced with the uncomfortable fact of her own capacity for human destruction.”(Tolan 110-11) Now the speaker is at one time woman, human and animal and tries to merge these roles. She begs Joe to turn into an animal like her and very finely slides into a Gaia persona. After Joe’s carefreeness she is inept in finding peace holding various roles and the **patriarchal** society refuses to recognise them. She, by no means, queries about the existence of **patriarchy**, rather she merely gets animated when nature is endangered, which exposes a genderless, parental self-sacrifice to the environment. When she senses guilt about the damage of the environment by fellow Canadians, she initiates psychologically transforming into an animal. Although, she contradicts the **patriarchal** culture which identify her as mother and nature, she submits back into the governing paradigm. Fiona Tolan comments on this as:

“...when the narrator does succumb to the wilderness, it is not in triumphant identification with nature but as a reprehensible abdication of her social responsibility.”(Tolan 110)As mentioned earlier, *Surfacing* is well-thought-out as a **post-colonial** novel, though not in the traditional sense for the reason that it usually is a story of a country getting independence from a large country such as France or Great Britain followed by a brutal and bloody war, but Canadian independence from Britain happened slowly. The main character is seen switching from pondering over memories to the present, more or less, constantly. It is also very realistic, if not dramatically so. The motif of hatred for modernisation and industrialisation (all thanks to the “bastard Americans”) is a common one in twentieth-century American literature, but Atwood may be the most passionate on this subject of any that a reader come across. Her appreciation for nature is enjoyed, but felt slightly disturbed at the extent her main character went to in order to reconnect herself with it. Atwood warns her readers that they must be willing to make an emotional commitment to the ecofeminist cause too. By understanding the various conflicts in *Surfacing*, a more dialectical viewpoint must be adopted. Atwood through her multi-layered novel has given **ecofeminism**, **post colonialism** and **gender politics** the much needed fillip. For her, the answer is not that women represent nature but rather that humankind is part of nature and that this logic must be used to preserve all forms of life.

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