

## **ECOFEMINISM: AN EXPLORATION OF ENVIRONMENT AND FEMINISM IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S 'SURFACING'**

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**Dr. Alok Chandra**

Poet and Critic

Former Research Scholar

Dept. of English

Nava Nalanda Mahavihara

(Deemed to be University), Under Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India

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### **Abstract:**

'Ecofeminism' denotes the analogy between the destruction of natural environment and the exploitation of females due to the patriarchal pattern or hegemony across the society. The Canadian novelist and environmentalist, Margaret Atwood, in her novel 'Surfacing' incorporates her ecofeminist concerns through an unnamed protagonist in order to set both woman and environment free from exploitation and negligence so that there would be a perfect balance or harmony in global ecology and society. The uncontrolled exploitations of the environment such as, cutting of green/healthy trees in both rural and urban areas, killing of animals, misusing of ground water, spreading poisonous gases/smoke in the air of the atmosphere, polluting the sources of water, increasing incidents of wildfires by the selfish humans, bring severe consequences on the earth, often manifested in the forms of massive and frequent earthquakes/landslides, acidic rainstorms, heatstroke's with high intensities, melting of the Himalayan glaciers, etc. The present paper explores the relevant environmental and feminist issues of the novel and brings to light the correlation between female and nature. A woman is more eco-centric than man in terms of the environmental conservation. One can't expect about the privilege of an ecotopia on the earth unless the humanity uproot gender bias from society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Ecology, Ecofeminism, nature, environment, analogy, exploitation, patriarchal, harmony, empowerment.

### **Introduction:**

Margaret Atwood is a very renowned ecofeminist writer of Canada and the novel 'surfacing' unravels the unnamed protagonist's constant relegation and alienation in a patriarchal world. When the readers dive deep into the beginning part of the story which relates to the Canadian protagonist's childhood phase, they come to know that she was not properly nourished by her parents. She was struggling for love and care in her family and

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both her father and mother showed passive response in knowing the true nature of her childhood dreams and aspirations.

The narrator/protagonist is unknown but by virtue of a lively description of the crucial moments of her own life she successfully evokes the readers' sympathy and becomes a universal character. The exploitation or misuse of the natural environment by the capitalists or technocrats is similar to the subjugation and oppression of female gender in a male centered society. Margaret Atwood's 'Surfacing' is packed with the images of the invasion of the Canadian soil and the degradation of her natural landscapes by the foreign intruders. Hunting of the animals for sports, leaving trash scattered all around the area, deforming the natural structure of the villages with the installation of tourist cabins, Intensifying the effect of pollution through repeated explosion of missiles, etc, all these activities have been accurately observed and described by the narrator of this novel to pinpoint the pervading ecological crisis. Both the protagonist and the physical environment are the victims of the patriarchal bias, for she was forsaken by her own father the green habitats of her country have mercilessly been encroached and plundered through the male domination hailing from a foreign land. Fiona Tolan, a senior lecturer in the Dept. of English at Liverpool John Moors University writes: "In accordance with ecofeminism, the narrator identifies herself as a woman with nature and therefore perceives herself as threatened and victimized".(F. Tolan, P. 43.)

Margaret Atwood realistically raises her strong protest to draw the mass attention towards the uncontrolled American expansion in her country and she uses her novel as the most reliable instrument to make the citizens of the Canadian land get awakened in support of her environmental dogmas or ideologies to restore ecological diversity.

David is a close friend of the protagonist and even he himself express his resentment for the American invasion for the fresh water of Canada. But it is ridiculous to observe that although he publicly expresses his worry for the American technological expansion and the over- consumption or exploitation of the natural treasures/products of his country, he doesn't let himself get rid of his habit of playing the baseball. He has already become a slave of this game and it is due to his utter craziness that he often displays himself as a blind follower of Woody Woodpecker. To be frank, women are in anyway not less sensitive than their male counterparts in terms of the environmental conservation. It is the universal truth that a woman is an embodiment of love, dedication, compassion, etc. She is well aware of the fact that she is dependent on nature, for she collects fuel stuff for its usage in cooking the food for her family members. During the time of famine or emergency, she repairs and decorates her house with bamboo sticks in order to protect the entire family from heavy rains and heatstroke. She plays the role of a dedicated mother in her earthly life and nourishes her children with profound love and care. Similarly, she knows the concrete reality that the Earth

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nourishes and protects the entire humanity with infinite natural treasures which are in her possession. Therefore, our Earth must not be limited to enjoy the status of being one of the planets of this universe, instead she has to be revered much by the human beings for her evergreen blessings for their all round developments in all the important phases of their human lives.

In 'Surfacing', Margaret Atwood showcases the cutting of a number of trees by the foreign Invaders in name of establishing mechanized infrastructures. These Invaders are selfish and are infect hollow men not pondering in their minds about the callous consequences of the ongoing destruction of the green and shadowy trees. In the protagonist's eyes, the Invaders are unsympathetic towards the objects of the nature and they often prove themselves as a symbol of cruelty which refers to their uncivilized moralities. They are passive in smelling the real fragrance of the Canadian environment. The continuous demolition of trees and trampling down of useful herbs is doomed to bring pathetic and unhappy situations in the living styles and livelihood of the indigenous people. In this regard, women have to suffer much as they find weave wood-sticks for fuel and also get plenty of fruits from the trees. In other words, the exploitation of forests is infect the atrocity to the feminine gender. Trees are undoubtedly one of the previous natural assets which purify the the polluted air, help in satisfactory rainfalls, ensure the coolness in the atmosphere, provide shelter to birds and beasts, reduces the effect of global warming, etc.

As a female passes through subjugation or discrimination in different phases of her domestic and professional lives, the trees, too, are victimized by the foreign capitalists and hunters who encroach the Canadian border to spread their self-centered ideologies. Margaret Atwood, being the great environmental activist of Canada, projects her deep concern over the extinction of trees in these eye-opening words: " The trees will never be allowed to grow tall again, they' re are killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scare as a whole".(Atwood, P. 55.)

The unnamed protagonist/narrator remains unaware of the real worth of her individuality until she doesn't come to the Northern Quebec in search of her lost father. This particular location is deeply rooted in her life because she was born in the same place and spent her childhood days under the male domination. Child abortion is a social abuse and is definitely a crime. But she couldn't resist her husband's patriarchal decision at this bitter phase of her life. The main reason behind her silence was not having the self realization of her feminine worth and capabilities. A woman must raise her strong voice or protest against this cruel act. But as the story moves on, she merges herself with nature. As a reward of her intimacy with the environment of nature, she is freed from the shackle of the patriarchal compulsions and fears in her life. Now she feels indebted to both living and non-living things/objects of the physical environment. She begins to spend her life with a strong sense of liberty or freedom and now she has the complete self-realization of her meaningful existence

on the Earth. She relishes berries, mushrooms and fruits and treats animals with love, care and compassion. The protagonist feels more committed towards nature. The oppression of female and the destruction of environment are the outcomes of the power politics in a male governed society. In the refuge of nature the protagonist experiences cool and calmness and tells about the dynamic change in her womanly life:

"My body also changes, the creature in me, plant- animal, sends out filaments in me, I ferry it secure between.....I multiply".(Atwood, P.217.)

In 'Surfacing', the narrator also unhides an incident in her school wherein she was tied, like a poor creature or animal, with a tree by her male batchmates. She was conceived of a means of fun and laughter and she was not even released from her bodily pain. This crucial episode of her childhood days in school conveys a social message to those who relegate the worth of a girl child and tortures various animals of the earth. After having a bitter experience in the childhood, the protagonist has now a deep understanding of the atrocity done against the global environmental by the capitalist forces which lead to ecological unrest. It is quite evident after reading the entire novel that the ecofeminist wisdom in the protagonist's life is the result of her constant oppression and discrimination by the patriarchal society. Her eco-friendly attachment towards the species of nature is manifested in the real sense when she is saddened to see the herons getting entrapped by the hunters for their selfish recreation. She expresses her protest against the hunters who violate the ethics of nature and hunt aquatic and non-aquatic species. The protagonist includes fish hunting in her narration to expose the cruelty of the selfish hunters. Vandana Shiva pinpoints that "It is the elevation of hunting to the level of ideology which does so".( V. Shiva, P.56.)

In 'Surfacing', the protagonist/narrator unearths the tension and hollowness between the married couples. During the beginning time of the search of her missing father, she is accompanied by a married couple named David and Anna respectively. In this ongoing search for finding any authentic clue of her father, she gets an opportunity to have a close examination of the extent of the marital love and affection between a husband and her wife. She is totally upset to observe that David and Anna are not enjoying a harmonious conjugal life which is founded by means of respect, love, care, trust, sympathy, etc. The narrator is really pained to know their conflicting words in their conversations. But the narrator herself is victimized by her own husband as she does not have the privilege of a family with her own kids and children. She compares her pathetic condition of deception and exploitation with that of the natural environment. Suitable to the above context, Poetry Kelly writes: "Women suffer both from structural oppression and from individual men". (P. Kelly, P.113.)

### **Conclusion:**

The animals, seas, mountains, forests, lakes, etc., need active humanitarian protection and care for their harmonious existence on the Earth. Similarly, women have to be respected

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in both their families and public public places. The society must come out of the patriarchal bias and it has to be liberal in the sense that every girl and woman are allowed to complete their education and select any job of their individual interest or choice for their livelihood. In this way a female will be a universal symbol of feminine empowerment. As it has already been explored in the present research paper that the protagonist was left in lurch by her own husband and she was deprived of the formation of her own family after her marriage. That's why the society has to discourage any ideology which reinforces gender bias in domestic places. A woman stands for the formation of new ideas or creativity in any domain of society; by sprinkling her love and compassion in her domestic life, she banishes the chance of any drift in the mutual relationship of the members of her family. There is no existence of a well functioning society without an active involvement or participation of females in all the relevant fields of our society. Our global ecology can never reach a state of harmony or perfect balance unless the women are allowed to spend some time in lap of nature. As women depend on the natural forests or woods for managing the basic need of kitchen, they are more sensitive towards the environmental conservation. The novel 'Surfacing' by the Canadian novelist, Margaret Atwood, is grounded on her practical experiences and insights which she gained through a direct communication with the elements of the natural environment.

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