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**“AN ECO FEMINIST STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD’S SURFACING”**

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**ABSTRACT:**

*The novel focuses on the dilemma of the protagonist how is trying to understand the complexities of human relationships. At a young stage of her life, the glitter of city life allures her. The news of her missing father brings her back to her ancestral village. It is only amidst nature and its beauty that she is able to gain her new identity. It is in the context of peace, environment, and feminism that the novel ‘Surfacing’ has been analyzed. The need was felt to save the environment from destruction by human beings. Margaret Atwood writes, “But it is increasingly obvious to some writers that man is now more destructive towards Nature than Nature can be towards man; and, furthermore, that the destruction of Nature is equivalent to self-destruction on the part man”*



**KEYWORDS:** Feminist, dilemma, protagonist, complexities, ancestral And environment.

**INTRODUCTION:**

‘Surfacing’ (1972) is a pioneering novel by Atwood that provides ground to analyse the theory of ecofeminism and its peace politics. The novel focuses on the dilemma of the protagonist who is trying to understand complexities of human relationship. At a younger stage of a life, the glitter of city life allures her. She managed to escape from the innocent and simple life of the island in Northern Quebec, where her parents live. But things turn out to be quite different in the city. The protagonist finds that the evils are deeply grounded in the life-style and mentality of people in city. She realizes that fake relationship and artificiality dominate modern culture. The protagonist undergoes various traumatic experience and tries to build false stories in her mind in order to hide those incidents from her own conscience. The news of her missing father bring her back to her ancestral village. It is only amidst nature and its beauty that she is able to gain her new identity. She associates her own explanation by her lover with the explanation of sacred land by humans. Her deeply felt concerns for nature and for the freedom of human encourage her to take major steps in direction of giving a new shape to her life. She decides to break the chains of patriarchy and live a free life.

It is in this context of peace, environment, and feminism that the novel ‘Surfacing’ has been analysed. The novel was published in 1972 when the second wave of feminism had begun to show its force. As Malashri Lal writes, “While Margaret Atwood never declared ‘feminism’ to be her dominant ideology, she had already worked out Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature with plenty of emphasis on victim position, oppression, anger the Divine mother and the Bitch Goddess” (Lal 183). The novel ‘Surfacing’ also encompasses similar feminist issues of victimization, oppression, and patriarchy. It gathered quick reputation as a major Canadian classic. The feeling of being victimized can be seen as the prime concern of Atwood in the novel. It becomes evident that Canadians do not want any interference of Americans in their affairs yet they are adopting their ways subconsciously.

Victimization of nature, due to various modern practices and increasing mechanization, is also one of the major themes of the novel. The central theme of the novel is the female protagonist's search for her identity and real self while living in a mechanical and patriarchal society and the role that nature plays during her search.

### DISCUSSION:

Nature has been a persistent theme in the works by Canadian writers. 'Nature' that was once considered as a monstrous giant in Canada began to be seen as victim itself. The need was felt to save the environment from destruction by human beings. Margaret Atwood writes, "But it is increasingly obvious to some writers that man is now more destructive towards Nature than Nature can be towards man; and, furthermore, that the destruction of Nature is equivalent to self-destruction on the part of man" (Atwood 60). The protagonist of the novel, on the journey to her ancestral village with three friends David, Joe, and Anna, ostensibly in search for her missing father, feels disappointed on looking at the changed environment. She thinks, "I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have seaplanes for hire"

'Surfacing', the protagonist's thoughts wander in the past and she ponders over the trauma that she had to go through in the dehumanized city culture. The traumatized past makes her lead a life of hallucinations. She imagines that dominance of her husband in the technologically advanced city had made her feel that her womb was only an incubator. While living in the patriarchal society, she felt helpless about her own baby. She felt about her body as if it was a child-bearing machine. Her husband used to impose all his decisions on her. She imagines that she had given birth to a child although in reality she had gone through an abortion. She thinks that she was used as a source for the production of the child. "... he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use". The hallucinations of the protagonist depict the deeply embedded emotions of a victimized woman. The protagonist thinks that men use women for bearing their children and keep them subdued in the process of reproduction. They do not give them appropriate respect and identity as a mother. She thinks that men want to dominate all the natural cycles and also manipulate them for their interests. Nature has similarly been considered as a tool for self-fulfilment by humans and exploit it for their selfish interests. The resources of earth are being extracted at large scale, without any consideration to the consequences. The reverence for earth as a mother has been replaced by greed that is responsible for depletion of its resources. Various technological advancements, that are helping man in this process, are making the condition worse. The fast pace with which nature is being exploited presents a very grave picture of the state of earth and its resources. Man has even reduced the fertility of the soil by introducing 'monoculture cash crop' farming instead of the traditional alternate crop farming. The deterioration of environment can be seen as running parallel with the domination of women.

The degradation of the environment points towards the rising dominating practices of the modern civilization against nature. The beginning of the novel calls attention towards the degrading environment. Human activities are polluting the water bodies and threatening the marine living creatures. The oil spills from huge tankers and the dumping of hazardous waste into the oceans have increased water pollution to alarming levels. If success of new technologies and industries becomes the cause of destruction of nature beauty and natural ecosystem, then the protagonist's worry is genuine and well-grounded.

The protagonist in 'Surfacing' feels the bad effects of cutting of trees in forest. She finds stumps of huge trees that had been cut very evenly with new instruments and she begins to associate her own exploitation with the exploitation of the forest. "The trees will never be allowed to grow that tall again, they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scarce as whales". The new technology becomes an aid in destroying the trees. The protagonist's memory carries the past experience when her child was also killed with latest instruments. It was not allowed to live and take birth. The protagonist's mother had close association with forest and nature. She was connected to nature so deeply that she had a protective wall against the evils of the modern world. The protagonist remembers about her mother that

"Sometimes she would take breadcrumbs or seeds out to the birdfeeder tray and wait for the joy, standing quiet as a tree, or she would pull weeds in the garden; but on some days she would simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest". Nature was an essential part of her life and her soul found satisfaction in the beauty of nature.

The protagonist starts feeling that she belongs to that wild island instead of belonging to the city. She presents her profession of being a commercial artist in the city. She had to choose that profession for the sake of earning more money. She is still not comfortable with her choice and it doesn't seem natural to her liking. Her work involves designing picture for posters, covers or books. She has to compromise with her natural talent and has to design more flashy and stylized pictures. "Though what they like best is something they hope will interest the English and American publishers too". After coming to the island, the rationalism that dominated her life is slowly being replaced by her real self. The protagonist realizes that the stressful work culture of the profit market compels a person to be involved in the artificial jobs, keeping at stake one's natural talent. Atwood hints at the gloomy picture of professionals in the modern industrialized world. Karen J. Warren calls the modern job system as a "dysfunctional system." Robot Alan Sessions emphasizes that these mechanized systems are unable to meet the real needs of people. "... a great deal of what people today compensate for his work related, weather from stress or lack of meaning on the job or from other problematic dimensions of their lives that are related to work". The contrast is clearly visible between the lives of the mother on the island and the daughter in the city. The mother, absorbed in age old values and traditions, had a connection with nature and that made her a confident and self-reliant woman. She was capable of protecting herself and her family in every possible way. The daughter migrated to city and she took up a profession that she didn't like. She also got pregnant and her lover persuaded her to abort the child. She hated the whole mechanized process in the hospital- They stick needles into you so you won't feel anything, you might as well be dead big, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technician, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or snickering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar". The protagonist realizes that everything and everybody works like a machine in the city. A baby breathing with life is removed from the body like a lifeless object. Modernization dominates the souls of people and drags them away from nature.

Atwood indicates in 'Surfacing' that man finds pleasure in activities like cutting trees and killing other creatures because these activities confirm his power over nature. David clicks photograph for 'Random samples' that are symbolic of his progress. The samples contain the photographs of the interior parts of a fish and chopped log of tree. David and Joe feel proud of their achievement. "... they stuck the axe in the log, after several trees, and took turns shooting each other standing beside it, arms folded and one foot on it as if it was a lion or a rhinoceros". They have overpowered something, so they are feeling victorious by displaying their superiority. The protagonist begins to realize that human beings do not have the right to kill other living beings. She ponders over the act of killing fish and reaches to the conclusion that it is an inhuman act. "We didn't need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they called it, these were no longer the right reasons". Atwood points out that man is violent and non-tolerant in his relationship with other living beings on this planet. Men have also been violent against women and have dominated them. A research upon "Why are Men violent?" quotes, A man grows up thinking he is better off than the fairer sex.... Men also fewer outlets for their anger. They don't share what's on their mind and rarely cry, which comes out in form of anger or violence". The protagonist in 'Surfacing' feels that Hitler is still alive; alive in the behaviour of man. The sight of a dead heron and the realization of its senseless killing, disturb her mind repeatedly. She thinks that there is always an explanation given to justify wars and riots but the death of the heron had no explanation and the act was done only for having pleasure.

The protagonist looks at the scrapbook pictures drawn by his brother when he was small. They represented violence that characterizes men's nature even at an early stage of their life. The picture contained "explosions in red and orange, soldiers dismembering in the air, planes and tanks; and a man-eating plant, engulfing a careless victim, a balloon with help in it squeezing out of his mouth like bubble gum". Her own scrapbook had illustrations cut from magazines- "They were ladies, all kinds: holding up

cans of cleanser, knitting, smiling, modelling toeless high heels...' There were drawings made by her that displayed eggs, rabbits, grass, trees, and flowers. There were no monsters, no wars, and no explosions in the pictures drawn by her. The pictures were symbolic of her love for nature, just like her mother.

### CONCLUSION:

At a younger stage of her life, the glitter of city life allures her. She manages to escape from the innocent and simple life of the island in Northern Quebec, where her parents live. Atwood calls the attention towards the fact that the destruction of the forests is occurring at an alarming rate in the world. The densest biological diversity in the world is found in the central America's rainforests. Two-thirds of the forests have been destroyed by capitalists. The private control of the natural resources sustains the industrial economy of rich countries. These countries extend their access to poor countries for natural resources and other products in exchange for the monetary help they give to them. The agriculture has been also turned into 'scientific agriculture' which is in reality a western patriarchal model of agriculture. The overall control has been shifted to multinationals for fulfilling agriculture needs. Instead of organic manure, fertilizers produced in the factories are the only source. Instead of proper cropping patterns used for pest control, poisons are used for killing pests. The centuries old knowledge of agriculture is vanishing and replacing itself with green revolution or reductionist pattern of agriculture. When the 'Green Revolution' began in India, nature and women, the primary producers of food, were replaced by profit oriented scientific methods. The role of women and the natural methods that maintained the soil fertility were not taken into consideration.

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