

## Nature Heals: An Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Bouterra Bouchra  
University 20 Aout 1955-Skikda

### Abstract:

The new environmental developments succeeded in shifting the interest of writers from anthropological interest into ecological interests. Writers become aware of Men's role in the destruction of nature and its damaging consequences. These perspectives helped in the development of ecofeminism, which is a school of thought that gathers between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. This article studies Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* from an ecofeminist perspective showing how women and nature are used, exploited and oppressed by men and their culture. Atwood's novel proves a tight relationship between women and nature. This article is meant to show that the unnamed narrator has suffered through her adult life from oppression. She lived her life with an unstable identity. Her return to nature, however, helped her to find her lost identity. Through her assimilation with nature elements, the unnamed protagonist

succeeded in establishing, asserting and acknowledging herself.

### الملخص:

نجحت التطورات البيئية الحديثة في تحويل اهتمام الكتاب من اهتمام انثروبولوجي إلى اهتمام إيكولوجي. أصبح الكتاب مدركين لدور الإنسانية في تدمير الطبيعة والخطر المدمر الناتج عن ذلك. ساعد هذا المنظور في تطور النسوية الإيكولوجية والتي تعتبر مدرسة فكرية تجمع بين اضطهاد المرأة والطبيعة. يدرس هذا المقال رواية مارغريت أتوود *الطفو (Surfacing)* من منظور النسوية الإيكولوجية مبينا كيفية استغلال الرجل والثقافة للمرأة والطبيعة. تثبت رواية أتوود العلاقة الوثيقة بين المرأة والطبيعة. يبين هذا المقال أن الراوية غير المسماة قد عانت من الاضطهاد طوال حياتها، فقد عاشت حياتها بشخصية غير مستقرة، إلا أن رجوعها إلى الطبيعة قد ساعدها في العثور على شخصيتها الضائعة. استطاعت الراوية من خلال ارتباطها بعناصر الطبيعة في تحقيق تأكيد والاعتراف بنفسها.

The recent development in ecological sciences shifts the anthropological interests into Men's relation to his/her environment, and how he/she interacts with the universe only as a small part of it. The rise of ecological awareness convinced women activists to turn to ecofeminism as the best answer to all kinds of oppression in the world. Women decided to turn to ecofeminism after a long history of a close relationship between women and nature. This relationship was highlighted by the replacement of the natural world by an industrial one. Since they were perceived closer to nature, women were discarded with it by a more mechanical culture. The same relationship made women the best advocates to talk about nature and environmental problems. Susan Buchingham argues that,

The essentialist argument that underpinned some of the North American and Australian analysis proposed that women had a particular relationship with nature by virtue of their biology. Predominantly as actual or potential child bearers and that this proximity to nature qualified them to speak more eloquently on nature behalf. (147)

The relationship between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature is at the center of the ecofeminist thought. The Western tradition devaluates whatever is associated with women and nature at the same basis. Different ecofeminists like Greta Gaard believe that the Western traditions are to be blamed for creating dualisms that separate between men and women, and nature and culture. These dualisms do not stop at the level of separation. They transcend it to oppression. The scientific, industrial and technological institutions that prevailed the world since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pushed nature into a corner and made it unimportant in the lives of humans. It was only used or exploited for the benefit of Men; nature was subjected to the necessities of culture. Because of the nature of the relationship

between women and nature, women were not allowed to be a part of men's sophisticated culture. Greta Gaard insists on the unfair associations that are meant to widen the fuser between the human and the natural and between humans themselves.

The way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture and the mind. (4-5)

Greta shows how the Western traditions are to be blamed for creating dualisms that separate between men and women, and nature and culture. These dualisms do not stop at the level of separation. They transcend it to oppression.

In addition to that, women and feminists turn to ecology because they believe that the first and most damaged casualties of the environmental pollution are women and animals. The feminine body is considered, especially by Western traditions, as a very weak body that can easily be broken; but what were really affected by the environmental crisis were women's and animals' reproductive systems. The patriarchal attitudes that believe that men are superior, better and therefore distinct from animals allow the use and abuse of these animals. These beliefs strengthen in men the ability to ill-treat and kill animals. Women, on a different scale, concerned themselves with animals because they used to treat them with the feminine ethics of love, care and compassion. Carol J. Adams wrote an article entitled "the Feminist Traffic in Animals" as an allusion to Emma Goldman's "The Traffic in Women". As an ecofeminist, Adams attacks even feminists who treat animals the way women were treated by men. She states that, "By choosing the word 'traffic', I imply the similarities in the treatment of disposable or usable bodies exist." (197)

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer who is deeply interested with ecological concerns. M. L. Eileen Brisha states that,

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has in many of her novels, dealt with the issue of women and nature. In an age of environmental crisis, Atwood takes her writing as a mission to do some good, to ameliorate the crisis. In her works Atwood has performed the function of the artist to speak the forbidden, to speak out especially in a time when progress and development are the jarring jingles of Multi-national Companies that are swallowing up the earth and its resources. (2)

Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing* is the best example of an ecofeminist novel that gathers women's and nature's oppression. This article is concerned with highlighting Atwood's ecofeminist attitudes regarding the destruction of the feminine and the natural worlds at the same time. We will also try to see how the heroine of this novel succeeded in healing her wounds through her total assimilation with nature.

*Surfacing* is, more or less, a novel of self discovery. Cristina Nicolaescu states that,

Atwood makes it clear that the unnamed protagonist sets up an inner journey through the nature and during this journey she challenges the idea of women's and nature's inferiority against men and culture. The heroine undergoes a deep process of selfanalysis throughout her investigation. The struggle to find her father becomes an excuse for the inner journey which leads her to natural world and helps her to find herself at the end. (par. 3)

The unnamed narrator started her journey with her lover and two friends in order to look for her missing father. The trip soon transformed into the narrator searching for herself. During

her journey, we come to touch the narrator's sense of victimhood. Her oppression as a woman is related to the destruction of nature, personified in the destruction of her Canadian childhood land. The wilderness she was travelling through was described as a destroyed land that was spoiled by the hand of modernization. The tourists and developers who went into that row place introduced new changes and "developments" that lead to the destruction of the natural landscapes that mark a great importance for the life of the narrator. The novel's protagonist starts to realize that the relationship between nature and men is a relation of exploitation; men use nature for their own benefits. From the very first lines of the book, the narrator shows instances of a dying nature as she states, "I can believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have sea-planes for hire" (3), the narrator relates the death of birches to a disease. Even though it doesn't show, but having this disease spreading from the south proves that it is a social disease.

At the beginning, the narrator related the destruction of nature to Americans. She used to think that Canadians have an intimate relationship with nature that prevents them from destroying it. The narrator said that they were "passing the turn off to the pit the Americans hollowed out. From here it looks like an innocent hill, spruce-covered, but the thick power lines running into the forest giving it away" (6). As she relates innocence to nature, the narrator blames the criminal interference of men. And even though she changed her attitude to cover all the other Canadians who were brainwashed by Americans, she kept thinking that it is the American culture of progression that damaged their thinking. Not just the narrator, but all the other characters, even if they cherish the improvements that civilization has brought to the world, they all believe that those developers were not supposed to be allowed to touch or change anything. David, one of her companion friends, believes that the progression and

development of Americans was supposed to enrich their country, but, throughout the book, he expresses his hatred to these developers who built a new country on the bodies of dead animals.

The narrator dotes on the importance of nature as she remembers the peaceful childhood she had even during a war period. She realized that being away from the new city was a blessing for her and for her family. She remembered this childhood saying,

I had a good childhood; it was in the middle of the war, flecked grey newsreels  
I never saw, bombs and concentration camps, the leaders roaring at the crowds  
from inside their uniforms, pain and useless death, flags rippling in time to the  
anthems. But I didn't know about that till later, when my brother found out and  
told me. At the time it felt like peace. (17)

Thanks to nature, the narrator's war descriptions were just imaginations she draws in her head from what her brother told her. The destructive world caused by the war was just a dangerous myth that nature protected her from.

The unnamed narrator suggests that the ability to hurt nature can be exercised by men and women but not on an equal basis. The narrator remembers her childhood when she used to fish with her brother as a background for her present fishing with her friends. The narrator asseverates that men's main reason behind hunting is the excitement of killing. She even compares between the way she and her brother fish as she states, "my brother fished by technique ....but I fished by prayer.... He got more fish but I could pretend mine were willing, they had chosen to die and forgive me in advance." (78). Even when she was hunting with her friends, she made sure that she is not the one who exercises much damage on the

fish. The Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva relates men's unmerciful hunting to the male patriarchal attitudes. She asserts that,

Yet, patriarchal ideology has made men-the- hunter the model of human evolution, and has thus adopted violence and domination as its structural component. Hunting, per se, need not be violent; most tribal societies apologies to the animals they have killed, and their hunting is constrained by nature's cycles of production and reproduction. It is the elevation of the hunting to the level of ideology, that has laid the foundation of a violent relationship with nature.(48)

The narrator of *Surfacing* seems to respect these rules that were made by the early societies who have more respect for nature and all natural elements. She attacked those who hurt more than what they can eat with violent methods. The protagonist depicts how she is hurt whenever an animal is hurt. Even when she talked about her father who seems a nature man, she showed her disguise as he explains that there was more than one way to skin a cat. The narrator shows that it bothered her very much since she thought, "I didn't see why they would want to skin a cat even one way."(117)

In accordance with nature's oppression, women in *Surfacing* are put into their natural situation by male characters who consider themselves superior to them. David and Anna's relationship can be considered as the best example. In the fourth part of the novel, David ordered a bear and Anna brought him one. The narrator shows that "Anna brings him one and he pats her on the rear and says 'That's what I like, service'" (41). This quote explains that women are considered by men as mere servants. In addition to that, David, occasionally, calls Anna "Uncultured and vulgar"(53). Anna proves her victimhood when she insisted that David was the leader in their relationship, and that she fears him the way a slave child fears her

master. She states that, “He’s got his little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I’m never sure”(156)

In addition to that, the narrator kept assimilating herself to animals in too many occasions; her victimhood was related to theirs. One example is when she was tied to a tree by a group of boys who forgot to release her. This experience made the narrator sense the feelings of entrapped animals. In a second occasion, the protagonist was talking about the experience of having or aborting a baby. Her description made her look like an animal at the hands of its butcher. She states,

They stick needles into you so you won’t hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or sniggering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar. After that they fill your veins up with red plastic, I saw it running down through the tube. I won’t let them do that to me again.(101)

The relation between the victimhood of women and that of animals was highlighted in the dead heron scene. Anna and the narrator were discussed by the brutality of the men who killed this innocent animal, especially since it serves for nothing; they cannot even eat it. David and Joe were excited at filming it with their camera in order to use it as a material for the movie they were making. Furthermore, David obliged Anna to get naked and stand beside the bird so that they can film them together. As she refused to do so, Anna told David that she knew that he was trying to humiliate her.

As David and Joe film the naked Anna next to the dead heron, men’s brutality was highlighted as the force behind women’s and animals’ destruction. Different scholars like



Ambika Bhalla insists that, “Here Anna is described in animal terms and this naturalizing of women shows that in patriarchal culture women are also seen as inferior to men as animals” (3). Anna’s female body becomes a passion of David’s camera the way her identity has always been a possession of his. The female body and the natural elements became commercialized by men’s culture. As the narrator watches Anna destroying the camera as a kind of revolution, she comes to realize that there is no one in this world who can help her to heal and discover herself. On this basis, her return to nature becomes meaningful. The death of that heron is metaphorically related to the narrator’s life. These dead animals as stated by Glynis Carr in her article «Persephone's Daughter: Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres and Classical Myth» are killed for no reason since they are of no importance to men’s life. These animals, just like women, are “tortured and killed as a metonym of human dominance over nature” (131). When she compared herself to that dead bird, she understood that culture was the thing that was destroying her body and identity. She knew that nature would be the only thing that can save her from culture. The uniqueness of this character is related to how the writer assimilates her to other elements that used to be distanced from the human being; “Margaret Atwood offers a protagonist who sees herself as a captive animal encased in the artificial spaces of scientific/technological society” (Norwood,1993.202). These feelings led her to make her mind up and decide to leave the cultured society and escape into nature as the best method for self-assertion.

As she compares between her own destruction and the destruction of her childhood landscape, she came to take her first step in her healing process. Her conciliation with nature started when she realized that she is an anti-nature person herself. As we have stated before, the narrator tended to distinguish between her acts and relations to nature as a female and men’s acts and relations to nature. She leaned on excusing her actions; however, she came to

realize that her abortion is unforgivable. For her, it was the major thing that made her an anti-nature person. The narrator knew that she had no right to end the life of a human being who belongs to that nature. She regretted the fact that she was encouraged by her husband to do so, and she recalled him convincing her to have an abortion since the fetus is not a human being yet; he was still only an animal. The narrator realized that her ex-husband's attitudes excuse the killing of all nature things. Her healing process, therefore, was almost accomplished when she decided to carry another child, and to give birth and let this child grow up in nature as one of its elements. Moreover, "as the animal grows inside of her, she becomes less human and more animal" (Hinz and Teunissen. 1979. 228).

The unnamed narrator decided to leave the 'civilized' world for she started to think that culture and civilization are men's tools to entrap women and imprison them forever. She insisted on being a part of nature as she stated. "I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning" (236).

This statement shows that she has already been a natural element as she abandons human beings to lean on trees. As she was healed, the narrator started to forget all her problems and anxieties. She further states, "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (236). 'I am a nature,' is what she really means. This new human being is devoid from the destruction, instability and insanity that she used to feel before. Natural elements, for her, do not need even to speak since they are a speech by themselves; "The animals have no need for speack, why talk when you are a word" (236). The narrator's attitudes prove her to be a true ecofeminist since she allied with their beliefs including Vandana Shiva (1988) who states that,

Male development is the violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected and interdependent systems, that sets in motion a process of exploitation,

inequality, injustice and violence. It is blind to the fact that a recognition of nature's harmony and action to maintain it are preconditions for distributive justice...Precisely because more growth in the male development has meant less sustenance of life and life-support systems, it is now imperative to recover the feminine principle as the basis for development which conserves and is ecological." (5; 6)

Shiva's principles fit into the novels' context since they celebrate the woman-nature relationship and consider it the answer and the cure to the maleficent results of the male development.

The narrator's life started to change when Joe's love to her becomes meaningless. She stated,

I watch him, my love for him useless as a third eye or s possibility. If I go with him we will have to talk, wooden houses are obsolete, we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to begin. For us it's necessary, the intercession of words; and we will probably fail, sooner or later, more or less painfully (250-251)

As her love for Joe fades away, she started to lose her faith not just in civilization, but even in human communication away from nature. Her decision to live in nature was derived from her faith that the natural world is the only place where she can be fully understood even without talking. While she melts into nature, "She feels herself to be powerful, for she is natural, human and saintly at the same time. She is no more the same person whom one saw at the beginning of the novel she understands the essential pain in the life of her parents and realizes that this is the only truth in her life" (Bhalla, 2012. 5); being in nature allowed a woman, who

was wrecked before, to be strong, free and confident. She chose to abandon the ‘civilized’ life of culture and turned to wilderness to live in peace and harmony with a nature that is considered her source of power. Monica Seger (2010) insists as well that novels like *Surfacing* present “scenarios in which women physically give themselves back to nature in an act of purification, identifying nature as the right, ‘natural’, environment for a woman” (par. 5)

Atwood’s *Surfacing* gathers women and nature under the same umbrella to show the atrocities that face them in a male- developed world. Atwood’s ecological principles do not only highlight the oppressions facing women and nature, but also shows the magical relationship between them. This relationship is the main reason that helped the unnamed narrator to heal the wounds that are caused by culture and men. It has even succeeded in giving her a sense of existence and belonging. Stacy Alaimo (2000) agrees on the idea stating that,

Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* ends up representing nature as a romanticized and ultimately an unapproachable realm. But self consciously “playing nature”, the heroine of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* dramatizes the potentials for alliances between feminism and environmentalism. (140)

The quote shows that the relationship transcends the mere women nature relationship into a realm of activism and resistance.

The novel we have studied from an ecofeminist perspective in this article proves the writer’s attitudes towards all kinds of oppression that separate between men and women and culture and nature. The segregations that are imposed on women and nature at the same basis are the main reason that pushed women to return to nature as a powerful source to empower

their identities. When she escaped men's culture, where she was unwelcomed, the narrator found in nature the thing that can help her to understand, acknowledge and appreciate herself. She transformed from an unnamed narrator into a nature element.

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