

Wilderness, Identity, and Ecological Awakening: A Deep Ecological Study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* offers a powerful literary exploration of ecological consciousness that aligns closely with the principles of deep ecology. This paper explores nature as a space of contention and destabilization to mirror the fractured consciousness in the novel. The novel relies on the memory gaps and fractured consciousness through which Atwood frames a postmodern subjective narrative of psychological fragmentation, juxtaposing the ecological disruption. The paper analyses *Surfacing* as resistance against the contemporary narrative of anthropocentric progress through the technological invasion of non human world. It attempts to study the unchecked intrusion of tourism, technology and capital exploitation of natural resources and landscape, and unveils the inflicted violence upon animals and various unprecedented consequences of human reliance and dominance over nature. The protagonist's finding solace in the wilderness is studied as a rejection of established cultural fixities and patriarchal fabric in society. Eventually, the paper will establish Margaret Atwood's novel as a genre-defining work of deep ecological criticism that foregrounds the psychological and environmental consequences of technological development to reconsider the contemporary fluctuating relationships between humans and the non-human world. The narrative of the novel is framed around an unnamed narrator's psychological and spiritual journey into the

wilderness, where her immersion in the natural landscape unfolds different aspects and the rejection of anthropocentric development and modern rationality. The novel focuses to critique the exploitation of nature and natural beings through technology, consumerism, and patriarchal culture. The paper analyses through the character of the narrator a symbiotic relationship within nature and human beings; her gradual identification with animals, trees, and the landscape signals a collapse of the human-nature binary and reflects the deep ecological emphasis on biocentrism and ecological interconnectedness.

Keywords:

Deep ecology, ecocriticism, biocentrism, human–nature relationship.

Introduction

Nature has always remained an interesting topic for writers to explore in their writing. In the initial phase, they use to explore nature as an entity accompanying the holistic development of human beings. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie or The New Heloise* (1761), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1878) and *The Return of the Native* (1891) are among the early works that explore nature as one of the themes. In the later period, D.H Lawrence's novels *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920), and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) depict various aspects of nature and their effects on human existence. In the post war era, environmental degradation became a central topic under the threat of rapid industrialization and increasing concerns of nuclear hazards. Novels like Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) shift the narrative towards activist ecological consciousness. During the period of the 1980s and 1990s, ecocriticism came into recognition with the publication of novels that challenge the established notions of anthropocentrism. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993), and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) explore the nature as an agency and reject the human domination of non human world. Thereafter came a phase where ecocritical texts explore interconnectedness, gender issues and the interrelationship between gender and nature. Barbara Kingslover's *Prodigal Summer* (2000) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) vehemently critique the patriarchal, capitalism and established species hierarchy.

Writers like Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* (1997) explore environmental exploitation, injustice and destruction of landscape through colonial exploitation. Moreover, different ecocritical works have explored the themes and concerns of nature and human relations with ecology, from initial glorification of romantic human-centered narratives of nature to ecocentric stories to mirror the growing ethical engagement with the emerging environmental issues through literature.

Deep Ecology is a philosophical movement propounded by Norwegian critic Arne Naess in the 1970s. It challenges the anthropocentric approach by propagating the significance of living beings, irrespective of their contribution and utility to humans. Authors like Lawrence Buell propounded these ideas through the identification of criteria for environmentally oriented works, focused to decentralized the human subjects and promote a consciousness for the ethical treatment of the non-human world. The term “Deep Ecology” was first popularized by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the article, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary” (1973). He referred to “biospherical egalitarianism-in-principle”, which he described as “an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom. Its restriction to humans is ... anthropocentrism with detrimental effects upon the life quality of humans themselves... The attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master-slave role has contributed to the alienation of man from himself” (“*The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. A summary*”). Further, Naess states to emphasize a deep ecological perspective, “the right of all forms [of life] to live is a universal right which cannot be quantified. No single species of living being has more of this particular right to live and unfold than any other species” (*Ecology, community and lifestyle: outline of an ecosophy*). Moreover, Peter Madsen describes the term deep ecology as:

...deep ecology, environmental philosophy and social movement based in the belief that humans must radically change their relationship to nature from one that values nature solely for its usefulness to human

beings to one that recognizes that nature has an inherent value. Sometimes called an “ecosophy,” deep ecology offers a definition of the self that differs from traditional notions and is a social movement that sometimes has religious and mystical undertones. (Peter Madsen)

Furthermore, Dristi IAS, a reputed coaching institute, known for elaborating the difficult concepts to students in a simple and crisp manner, defines the term “deep ecology” as:

Deep ecologism believes that humans should radically change their relationship with nature.

Its proponents reject shallow ecologism for prioritizing humans above other forms of life, and subsequently preserving the environmentally destructive way of life in modern societies.

It maintains that by sustaining this lifestyle, shallow ecologism further widens the inequalities between countries. [Original Format]
(DristiIAS)

Whereas, the above provided description focuses on highlighting the constant exploitation of the non-human world by the human beings through exploitative measures to establish dominance in the name of growth and development. Mads McElgunn, a Director with the Ecological Landscape Alliance (ELA), defines deep ecology as:

Deep Ecology is an environmental practice and social movement based on the belief that humans must radically change their relationship with nature from one that values nature solely for its usefulness, to one that recognizes that nature has an inherent value. This may sound like an impossible, uphill battle, however, this community is one that is abundantly curious and concerned with our ecological landscapes. (Mads McElgunn)

McElgunn emphasizes on the need to establish a symbiotic relationship between nature and the human world, to explore the ways of development which stimulate the growth of both the human and non-human world. Moreover, the

Ecological crisis can be categorized into three layers: environmental crisis (population explosion, natural disasters, epidemic diseases, wrenched animals, human extinction), social crisis (gender crisis, loss of language) and spiritual crisis (loss of culture and loss of belief). The renowned biologist Dr Stephan Harding has developed the concept of “holistic science”, combining the features and principles of ecology and deep ecology. Contrary to materialist, reductionist science, holistic science explores the natural system as a living whole. He opines, “We encourage ... students to use [their] sense of belonging to an intelligent universe (revealed by deep experience), for deeply questioning their fundamental beliefs, and for translating these beliefs into personal decisions, lifestyles and actions. The emphasis on action is important. This is what makes deep ecology a movement as much as a philosophy” (Stephan Harding). The causes of crisis reflected in the *Surfacing* are human manipulation of nature, wrenched animals, gender crisis, loss of culture and loss of belief. The novel *Surfacing* is an expedition of a girl in search of her father on a distant island away from city life. The way Atwood describes the landscape of the Island, human activities to depict the deteriorating nature, makes the novel one of the best in terms of ecocriticism. The motive behind setting the novel on a distant island is to expose the prevailing distressful conditions in the society. In the first chapter of the novel, during their journey to the island, the readers’ attention is diverted to the human exploitation of the non-human world and the natural resources.

Discussion

Atwood’s novel *Surfacing* warns human beings about environmental exploitation through the depiction of scenes of human devastation of the natural world. Atwood stimulates the ecological consciousness in the readers, leading them to think about the ways to avoid the destructive path of the exploitation of nature and non human world. She expresses her concerns and warns the people to reflect on the path man has pursued, and look beyond the prevailing dominance of technological and increasing human reliance on it, and seek it as an ultimate solution to every conventional mode of human culture. In *Surfacing*, during the narrator’s journey to the island, Atwood meticulously describes the landscape destruction caused by human

exploitation for their greed. The narrator was born amidst the beauty of nature but brought up in city life, when she returns to the birth place, she observes a lot of changes in the topography of the place. As Cheryll Glotfelty writes in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), "All ecological criticism share a fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xviii). Glotfelty establishes a interconnection between the human culture and the physical world. The disturbance in the human culture results in the inevitable ruptures in the ecosystem. Atwood effectively depicts the landscape and topographical details to establish a connection with the characters and the surrounding landscape. The witnessed exploitation of the non-human world traumatized the narrator about the prevailing destruction of the physical elements of nature and their over-exploitation by human beings, human alienation from nature and how humans are destroying the physical world without contributing anything to it. The author purposely depicts the deteriorating landscape to establish a symbiotic relationship between human beings and nature, their interdependence on each other for fulfillment of basic requirements to maintain their existence. The narrator finds the non-human world as a part of her existence and an unequal connection with natural entities. She enthusiastically expresses, "The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word, I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning, I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head against the ground, 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" (*Surfacing* 131). The exploration of fluctuating human connection with the non-human world remains a major concern in the novel. The narrator brought up away from the natural connection, finds peace and a soothing bond with the landscape, which she has witnessed during her childhood amidst natural elements. She finds the nature as part of herself, the basis of her existence. She went directly to the garden for vegetables after reaching the cottage, in dire need of something to eat. She emphasizes the human reliance on nature to provide solutions to every need and problem of human life. There is no doubt that from time immemorial, man has been dependent on nature, but in the

last few decades, the way man exploits the natural resources is alarming. Deep ecologists argue:

...anthropocentrism, a worldview that contains an instrumentalist view of nature and a view of humanity as the conqueror of nature, has led to environmental degradation throughout the world, and thus it should be replaced with ecocentric (ecology-centred) or biocentric (life-centred) worldviews, where the biosphere becomes the main focus of concern.
(Peter Madsen)

Similarly, the novel critiques the exploitative activities of human beings to meet the demands of an increasing population. They discover unconventional methods to increase the production for the human population, but compromising the required balance in the non-human world. In the 7th chapter, the author emphasizes the significance of earthworms in making the soil fertile for production. The detailed description of earthworms not only underlines the beneficial aspects they contribute to the soil but, also different dimensions of the non-human world which humans are destroying merely to achieve the required fertility to feed the masses. The use of fertilizers and pesticides severely harms the growth of essential components of the natural ecosystem. The author depicts an increasing imbalance between the two worlds; to prioritise and blossom the human world, human beings subordinately exploit the non-human world through their unsustainable activities and methods. Moreover, the destruction of the aquatic ecosystem is portrayed in the novel through the fishing incident. Fishing is described as an activity pursued to fulfill both human requirements and entertainment purposes. Atwood highlights the contemporary exploitation and destruction carried out by human beings in the name of fishing activity. Through fishing, Atwood explores the constant deterioration of aquatic ecosystem by the greedy human dominated world, "they are the kind who catch more than they can eat..." (*Surfacing* 144). The use of current and dynamite during fishing is criticized not only as a reason which destroys the aquatic flora and fauna, but also as being responsible for the water pollution and disruption of the aquatic ecosystem. Furthermore, *Surfacing* describes human cruelty towards birds that get hit by the

electricity wires or where human beings shoot them with guns in the name of hunting. Atwood endeavors to propagate the necessity of basic living rights to everyone, whether, it is human beings or other non-human beings. She demonstrates the innocence of animals or birds as a unique aspect of natural life, which humans have destroyed through their exploitative activities. Living creatures are depicted as equally important for the environment, but humans are killing them with deforestation, electricity and other technologies. The line, "...as they hit it, brought it down, flapping like a crippled plane", sufficiently reflects the cruelty and brutality of human beings towards natural creatures (*Surfacing* 92). Eco critics often talk about the environment and its components; living and non living, in the *surfacing*, the way humans exploit the natural resources and brutally kill the living creatures is depicted as an invitation to alarming consequences for the human and non-human world. The dead Heron is portrayed as a symbol of the innocence of the non-human world, which humans recklessly destroy through their corrupt mindset. Moreover, Heron is known for its white, neat and peaceful look. The white colour of the Heron is itself used as a symbol of peace. Atwood's main focus in undermining the incident of Heron's death is to highlight the killing and destruction of peaceful and innocent creatures and nature. She underscores the existential crisis of the innocent creature, where man, for his own interests and benefits, exploit the non-human world. She emphasizes to explore the possibilities of co-existence of the human and non-human world for a sustainable future. In the novel, America is portrayed as a developed nation, a representative of modernization, responsible for the destruction of the natural world. The human quest to achieve modernization, development and civilization through continues exploitation of natural resources is presented through the portrayal of Americans as mongers of destruction. These lines from *Surfacing* describe the American mentality towards the non-human world in the best way, "But they had killed the Heron anyway. It doesn't matter what country they are from, my head said, they are still Americans..." (*Surfacing* 93). The narrator talks about the mentality which Americans propagate in the world, the modern mentality of exploiting the natural resources to the extreme. The cruelty of the contemporary human beings or the Americans toward wildlife is

compared to that of Hitler of Germany, at one point in the novel, the narrator says, “I was asking are the Americans worse than the Hitler?” (*Surfacing* 93). A concern towards the death of Heron is reflected in the novel, through the death of the Heron, the author reasoned on the cause of merciless killing of wild creatures. She expresses:

I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands, as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it: one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd. The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human. In a way it was stupid to be more disturbed by a dead bird than by those other things, the wars and riots and the massacres in the newspapers. But for the wars and riots there was always an explanation, people wrote books about them saying why they happened: the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted. (*Surfacing* 94)

She continuously contemplates the exploitation of non human world throughout the novel. She highlights the idea that people write books to explain wars or riots, but no one cares to write about the cause of the killings of animals or birds by human beings. As she finds no appropriate cause or reason behind the killings of these innocent creatures, she exclaims, “The death of the Heron was causeless, undiluted...” (*Surfacing* 94). Furthermore, the narrative is framed to criticize the destruction of natural resources and creatures, whereas human beings are symbolized as the consumers and propagators of death in the novel. The innocent creatures have been compared with Christ, like Christ, they are sacrificing themselves for human beings. The human race is depicted as the one who is substituting its death with the death of innocent creatures. Human beings are killing different animals, domesticating them to add comfort and fulfillment of their petty desires. Atwood meticulously describes human beings as the consumers of death and innocent creatures as equal to Christ, as they sacrifice themselves for humans and eventually resurrect in their stomachs to give new life and energy. In the novel, the narrator expresses:

No gods to help me now, they're questionable once more, theoretical as Jesus. They've receded, back to the past, inside the skull, is it the same

place. They'll never appear to me again, I can't afford it; from now on I'll have to live in the usual way, defining them by their absence; and love by its failures, power by its loss, its renunciation. I regret them; but they give only one kind of truth, one hand. No total salvation, resurrection, Our father, Our mother, I pray, Reach down for me, but it won't work: they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human. Something I never gave them credit for; but their totalitarian innocence was my own.
(*Surfacing* 137)

She expresses her sense of alienation and segregation in the modern world, overshadowed by questionable existences. The narrative gradually shifts to her personal dynamics in fluctuating relationships between the dominating human and the ever-vulnerable non-human world. One of the main themes of *Surfacing* is to explore human alienation and increasing dependence on the use of unconventional and harmful methods by replacing the conventional sustainable ones. The novel depicts that natural substances and conventional methods are being replaced by artificial things and unconventional methods, which are hazardous both for the environment and human existence. In the first chapter of the novel, the description of 'Bottle Villa' is used to highlight the human quest to replace natural things with artificial and harmful waste created by them. The author explores the conventional methods, as in ancient times, houses were made of mud and straws which adjusted temperature according to the weather, cool in summer and warm in winter. These houses were not only suitable for humans but also had no side effects on the environment. On the contrary, contemporary human beings seek the replacement of every natural and conventional thing with the help of science and technology. The reliance on these replacements makes human lives a little convenient and comfortable, but also responsible for causing natural disasters and different health issues. The 'Bottle Villa' not only stands as a symbol of the replacement of natural things with artificial ones but also reflects the immediate need to explore ways to strategically treat and reuse hazardous wastes created by the human beings. The 'Bottle Villa' is used as an example to depict the sustainable and strategic use of harmful wastes like plastic to

safeguard the natural resources and environment. The narrative of the novel is focusing to provide meticulous details about the emerging changes in the ecology and households in the villages. Moreover, the increasing attraction towards the urban lifestyle among rural people is depicted in the second chapter of the novel. The author focuses on depicting the constant migration of people from villages to the cities by leaving the old conventional methods to adopt the new ones to look more civilised and modern. In reference to the contemporary need to balance modernization and traditional cultures, David Harvey opines in his essay "From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Conditions of Postmodernity" (1993), "The final victory of modernity is not the disappearance of the non-modern world, but its artificial preservation and reconstruction" (11). During her visit to uncle's home, the narrator notices various changes in the lifestyle and increased reliance on advanced technologies, which disturbs her psychologically. The technological development by negating the conventional lifestyle and methods is depicted as a betrayal, "Madame makes tea on a new electric stove, a blue ceramic Madonna with child hanging above it; when I glimpsed the stove on my way through the kitchen I felt betrayed, she should have remained loyal to her wood range" (*Surfacing* 10). Atwood seeks to unveil the exploitative and opportunistic nature of human beings through their constant detachment from the non-human world and conventional lifestyle merely to look civilized and modern. Furthermore, the widening gap between the non-human world and human beings not only affects their connection with the ecosystem but also makes things of daily use expensive, which were earlier grown at home. Commodities like eggs and bread are costly in the villages as compared to urban areas because of people's disinterest in producing the things of daily use at home. The modernization has transformed contemporary human beings into detached beings from nature, they are no longer interested in domesticating cows and hens for the fulfillment of their daily needs. They are losing their cultural identity and connection to nature, and deprive themselves of participating in the process of production at grass root level. Harvey shares a similar idea in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the origins of Cultural Change* (1989), where he states, "...the problem of authenticity is

itself peculiarly modern. Only as modern industrialization separate us from the process of production and we encounter the environment as a finished commodity does it emerge” (123). The main focus of the author throughout the novel is to depict the alienation of mankind from nature and active participation in the deterioration of natural resources. Moreover, she effectively conveys the alarming concern of humans’ over-reliance on technology and innovation to become modern and civilized but they lose the overall connection with nature, which is the root cause of their deprivation of finding solace away from their natural ecology. The narrator, who is bound in social constraints and norms, never feels the connection to the advanced artificial society constructed on the fabric of contemporary developments in the field of science and technology. Eventually, she finds solace and comfort in the nature away from artificially created human world. The author creates a comparison between two different situations through the duality experienced by the protagonist in two different places. Being frustrated and devastated in the urban life, she feels solace and contentment alone on the island amidst the beauty of the natural world. After returning to the native village of her father, where she spent her childhood, she experiences a sense of belongingness in the conventional lifestyle and amidst nature. Harvey expresses, “The search for an authentic relation to nature among many radical and ecological movements is the cutting edge of such sensibility” (*The Condition of Postmodernity...* 232). Atwood’s primary focus throughout the novel is to highlight the irreplaceable place and significance of nature and natural resources in human life. She vehemently criticizes the human quest of constructing new colonies and skyscrapers by compromising the ecology and nature. Moreover, she underscores the human interference in creating an imbalance in the natural world, which is responsible for disrupting the basic structure of human existence. Nature has been depicted as the only solution to the contemporary problems associated with human lives. The protagonist is portrayed as struggling amidst the abrupt cultural changes, but gets rid of psychological and physical trauma when being left alone on the island, where she feels a sense of belongingness. Moreover, she realizes:

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been. The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death. (*Surfacing* 138)

Furthermore, her character is portrayed as a rebellious one who breaks the barriers created by civic societies in the form of languages to connect with each other. Though the natural world is depicted as a pious one, without the human corruptions, without any pressure of indulging in competitions to win and lose the races created by human beings. The novel presents the natural world as ideal for human beings, which contrasts with the depressing and exploitative traits of the human-made artificial world. Simultaneously, focuses on depicting the natural world as the sole abode and companion of human beings. Similarly, deep ecologists believe:

...the self should be understood as deeply connected with and as part of nature, not disassociated from it. Deep ecologists often call that conception of human nature the “ecological self,” and it represents humans acting and being in harmony with nature, not in opposition to it. According to Naess, when the ecological self is realized, it will recognize and abide by the norms of an environmental ethic that will end the abuses of nature that typify the traditional self, which is trapped in anthropocentric attitudes. Moreover, the ecological self will practice a “biocentric egalitarianism,” in which each natural entity is held as being inherently equal to every other entity. (Peter Madsen)

Ultimately, the narrator is depicted as retreating into the wilderness after she rejects the imposed social structure and other cultural identities created through a fabric of patriarchal society and rationality. However, her retreat into the wilderness does not provide any instant relief, but it underscores the consequences of exploring the boundaries between the natural world and the human-made technologically

advanced societies. Moreover, the depicted natural elements and landscapes in the novel function as a space to express resistance and a site to awaken ethical consciousness. The author provides an open ending to the novel, which reinforces the narrative to propagate an awakening of eco-postmodern ethic that focuses on the requirement of awareness and responsibility over exploitation, control and mastery. The narrative is framed to combine the ecological crisis with postmodern consciousness and techniques to explore the present environmental discourse to explore the contemporary fragmentation, complexity, and moral ambiguity in the modern advanced societies.

Conclusions

The novel explores the unnamed narrator's spiritual and psychological journey into the Canadian landscapes, where her immersion in the natural wilderness leads to a complete rejection of the anthropocentric values and modern rationality. *Surfacing* as a deep ecological text, critiques the expanding domination of nature through technology, patriarchal culture, and consumerism to expose how these forces parallel the exploitation of human beings. Atwood defies the established values to depict nature as a passive backdrop, on the contrary, she presents it as a living presence and living entity full of intrinsic values independent of human use. The narrator's gradual association with the ecological components and landscape mirrors a collapse of the human-nature binary and the deep ecological emphasis on biocentrism and ecological interconnectedness. The narrative explores language, logic, and social structures interlinked to the modern technologically advanced civilization to demonstrate their inadequacy in apprehending ecological truths and values, which leads the narrator to find meanings through silence, instinct, and companionship with the natural world. Eventually, the novel frames a narrative that envisions a necessary ecological awareness as a process of ethical transformation to create a mutual survival through humility and respect between the human and non-human world. Moreover, *Surfacing* emerges as a critical text raising awareness about deep ecology, environmental crisis,

alienation and requirement of a more sustainable, non-exploitative mode of co-existence.

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