

Ecofeminist Study in the Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

Ecological feminism, or ecofeminism for short, is a relatively new way approaching nature, politics and spirituality. The term 'ecofeminism' seems to imply that ecofeminists are mostly 'concerned about the oppression of earth' (Smith21). It is rather revealing when we note Ynestra King's statement that "domination of women was the original domination in human society, from which all other hierarchies- of rank, class and political power flow" (cited in smith 21-22). To put it in a nutshell, the ecofeminists believe that the domination of women over the years is directly connected to the environmental rape and pillage of our planet. Issues of power, domination and subordination are very vital to ecofeminism- paganism, women's spirituality, shamanism and new age ritual is so popular with ecofeminists because they believe that all spirituality was originally earth-based and centered on oneness with nature. Ecofeminists usually express deep feelings for nature. As activists like Arundhati Roy and MedhaPadker do in India, ecofeminists struggle the world over to save the environment and protect the rights of aborigines and the flora and the fauna of the region.

Keywords: ecofeminist, ecological feminism, nature, politics and spirituality

In Atwood's *Surfacing*, the nameless heroine is an ecofeminist. She is presented as a very sensitive person. Going with her companions, Joe, David and Anna, she is on a quest to her childhood home in the Quebec countryside to locate her lost father. It is more or less a psychic compulsion, for she never thought that she would be on that road again. To her shock and dismay, she discovers that the whole place is mutilated and isolated. It has changed drastically during her long absence. She has found to her great shock that people in positions of institutional power are killing the earth. Her beloved native place has become a diseased; rotting place has become a diseased, rotting place because of the power company that raised the lake's water level. It has caused havoc to the flora and fauna of her place. Having once reached her home ground, she finds it a "foreign territory" (08). She is highly critical of the unchecked technological developments. She understands that it will lead to environmental destruction. She notices that the old road has been closed for years and a new road is opened. The new road is paved and straight, two lanes with a line down

the middle. To her unpleasantness, it is already going to gather landmarks, a few advertisement signs, a roadside crucifix with a wooden Christ, ribs sticking out, the alien god, mysterious to her as ever. As she is a radical feminist as well, she is highly critical of the worship of a father god or a transcendent god because such a god is linked, as has been observed by Dorceta E. Taylor, "to the rise of patriarchs, male dominance, wars and the devaluation and destruction of nature" (66).

The heroine feels sad because "nothing is the same" (09). She has had a very unhappy past. She has never forgotten her deep sadness and shame. The man whom she loved and married with the knowledge of her parents proved himself a cheat after making her pregnant. Only later she understood that as Petra Kelly sadly observes, "women are sex toys for men, women's lives count less than those of men: women who assert their independence and power are in some way defective" (118). She realizes that as she has been violated, the sacredness of the Mother Earth is violated and the ecological unity, which means the interdependence of all species, is disturbed.

Though she was born and brought up in that place, the protagonists right now don't know the way anymore. She asks herself, "why is the road different, he shouldn't have allowed them to do it" (10). By 'he' she means her father, an entomologist. A new church has also been built in that place much to the displeasure of Anna and David. Seeing a cultured man, the heroine asks him whether he knows that part of the country, her part. He shakes his head and answers, "they are not civilized" (27). In her part of the village, there used to be only one store, kept by an old woman. In those days she was called Madame, for "none of the woman had names then" (27). She comes to know that there is less number of visitors because there is a rumor that "the lake's finished out" (28). The tourists are going to the other lakes; Claude's father flies them in his seaplane. She understands that the patriarchy is primary responsible for the degradation of nature.

The heroine expresses a deep concern for nature and helps us understand the women- nature connection. The shoreline of the lake unrolls and folds together as she and her companions go in their boat. There is another village after forty miles from there. In between, there is nothing but a tangled maze, low hills curving out of the water, bays branching in, peninsulas which turn into Islands, necks of land leading to other lakes. On a map or in an aerial photograph the water pattern radiates like a spider. It is a sight to see the lake jiggling against the shore. The space is quiet and the lake is flat, silver white. On seeing that, the heroine says, "My ears and body tingle, aftermath of the vibration, like feet taken out of roller skates" (35). Her wooden cabin is built on a sand hill. On the lake side the sand is exposed. There are plenty of red pines, with their barks scaling, and the needles bunched on top branches. She notices a kingfisher is perched on one of them, making its staccato alarm- clock cry. This is plenty of grass in front of the gate. When she walks into the garden, frogs hop everywhere out of her way, they love the garden very much. The garden is close to the lake. The garden has been rearranged. The blossoms are redder than anything else in the garden. The humming birds go into them, hovering their wings a blur. The unattended beans have turned yellow. Inside are pebbles, purple- black and frightening.

She is for a genuinely ecological community. The wilderness fascinates her more than, anything else. Instead of alarm bells, or the traffic, the heroine is woken by the birdsong. She listens; her ears are rusty; there is nothing but a jumble of sounds. To her, they seems to sing "for the same reason trucks honk, to proclaim their territories: a rudimentary language" (45). As she and her companions go through a path, Joe sits down on the ground, for he is tired and breathing hard; "too much city, and the flies are getting to him" (55). Anna too feels so. However, the heroine feels very comfortable. She is immune to the mosquitoes. She thinks, "This (Canada) must be the only country where a botanist can be classified as crucial to the national defense" (66). Looking back she realizes that her father very often would be absent from home and she and her brother didn't get the love and affection from him. The daughter remarks, "All at once I'm furious with him for vanishing like this {...}" (58). Her mother would be busy with household chores so. When young she went in her own way into the Canadian wilderness and sometimes would be swimming for long hours. As she does not get parental love, her goal is to achieve perfect communion with the wilderness. She imagines, "I lean against a tree. I am a tree leaning. I am not an animal or a tree, I am the things in which the trees and animals move and grove, I am a place" (221). As Rosemary Sullivan comments,

When the wilderness at last reveals itself to her, it has the shape of a wolf. She says about the wolf's eyes signifying wilderness- 'it does not approve of me or disapprove of me'. As she enters the wilderness it is her innermost being, her subconscious mind that she enters. The dark pines of her minds are rooted in the wilderness (121).

She feels elated when she sees the colored fishes in the bottom of the lake. The enormous diversity of the fish community fascinates her. She plunges deep into the lake. Surfacing from the deep she communicates with animals and birds and understands their language. She becomes a kind of a mediator between culture and nature. As Roberta Sullivan points out,

In order to get self- illumination she had to reduce herself as much as possible to a kind of animal state that is symbolically both pre-human and pre-birth. She

hopes to recover the archaic language necessary to communicate with the spirits of her parents. Like animals she eats roots and builds an animal like hair shelter abandoning the cabin. She descends into animal simplicity.

She is quite aware that men's domination of women is deep and systematic. Many men and women think that it is something natural and accepted throughout the world. No doubt the oppression of women is so deeply embedded in our societies and our psyche. As the renowned ecofeminist Petra Kelly observes, "Women suffer both from structural oppression and from individual men" (113). But the heroine would be different. She of all people wouldn't allow herself to be dominated by men. She is very well aware that "the ultimate result of unchecked, terminal patriarchy will be ecological catastrophe....."(Kelly 113).

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