

Self-realization through Nature: An alternative narration in Margaret Atwood's *surfacing*

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Abstract

Ever since the origin of mankind, men have been assigned the role of hunter/ gatherer/ farmer/ bread winner of the society, thereby relegating women either into the confines of domesticity or to the areas of lesser importance. Growing consumerism and materialism of the 20th and 21st century has resulted in a similar fate for nature. As nature was mostly seen as the embodiment of all the characteristics that women possess, there are frequent references to this in literature. Theorists like Chellis Glendinning believe that our separation from nature goes back some 20,000 years ago to the time when humans shifted from being a gatherer/hunter culture to domesticating plants and animals. The ideological shift that occurred during the 18th Century European Enlightenment is discussed by Carolyn Merchant, who describes how the organic cosmology that had helped protect nature for centuries was overturned by the scientific and cultural revolutions of the Enlightenment. She focuses on the emergence, over last two hundred years, of a scientific, technological and capitalist ideology obsessed with 'progress'. Judith Plant believes that pre-industrial Western society used organic metaphors to explain self, society and nature. These metaphors served as 'cultural constraints' because the earth was understood as alive. The scientific revolution of the Enlightenment replaced these organic metaphors with mechanical ones. The Universe was no longer understood as a living organism, but as a machine, and nature became perceived purely as a resource for human use. Women, children, low-income individuals, people of colour, and residents of the Global South are particularly vulnerable populations whose rights to a healthy and sustainable future must be vigilantly respected and safeguarded. Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's one of the finest novels, *Surfacing*, highlights the problem from both ecological and feminist approach. *Surfacing* is the story of the unnamed narrator who returns to Quebec after years of absence to search for her missing father. The text reveals an intersection of many questions related to deep ecology and feminism. Critics have observed the environmental dimension of Atwood's work in general and *Surfacing* in particular. While *Surfacing* resists simple conclusions about gender and nature, it repeatedly shows that patriarchy exploits the earth and the female body in similar ways. Registering multiple positions simultaneously, *Surfacing* suggests that women have a special bond with the earth, posits that there are limits on this bond, and offers that men, too, can have symmetry with nature. Throughout *Surfacing*, moments of gender exploitation are layered with images of the domination of nature. The text offers continual reminders of the degradation of nature, especially through images of destroyed, slashed or marked trees. Continually, the commodification and exploitation of the land is overlaid with that of the female body and vice-versa.

Keywords: Self-realization, Margaret Atwood's *surfacing*

Introduction

*...then heigh ho, sing heigh ho, unto the green holly,
This life is most jolly...*

When Shakespeare made Lord Amiens recount the benefits and pleasures of a pastoral life in 'As You Like It' to Duke Senior as well as to the Elizabethan audience, hardly did he realize that six centuries later, man would still be seeking asylum in the lap of nature despite being inhabitant of a civilized and modern society. Men, especially artists, have always desired an escape from modernity for a simple and instinctive way of life, as evident in Shakespearean comedies where the characters—kings and commoners alike—when confronted with hardships in life sought refuge in the pastoral settings.

Pastoral, the genre that has expressed this vision since antiquity, is an obvious place for the literary or artistic expression of environmental concerns... a basic pattern in the genre is the retreat and return cycle... Flight from the urban peril is followed by a consoling pastoral interlude, which heals the characters and readies them for return to the city. (Waugh, 540)

The eighteenth century England witnessed the revival of

romanticism in literature and hence, retreat towards nature. Romanticism, which emerged as a reaction against modernisation and industrialisation as well as philosophical rationality, looked upon modern life as estranged from nature and celebrated the rediscovery of man-nature bond with an expression of joy. What began as romanticism took the shape of environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s represented by works like US writer Annette Kolodny's *The Lady of the Land* (1975), "a feminist study of the literary metaphor of landscape as female" (Waugh, 530). Environmentalism took its shape in reaction to observations like how perilous environmental damage had become and also to show concern towards human health, shortage of food and the question of shelter of man as well as animals. These concerns also involved a threat to wildlife and wilderness due to excessive and destructive ways of consuming natural resources. Also, major threat to environment is due to industrial pollution, deforestation, chemicals traces and modern forms of communication. Such concerns were evident in literature too with a number of writers employing various metaphors to represent nature in its exploited form. Sometimes these metaphors would be the human body and at other times the estranged bonds and relations between individuals. One particular work that stands

out in highlighting this unnamed bond between the protagonist representing humanity in general with her natural environment. The advent of Margaret Atwood on the firmament of worldwide literature added a new dimension to the almost non-existent yet steadily growing Canadian literature and soon she became an agent of Canadian creativity. Atwood whose only aim was to become a writer soon found that it was not only difficult but also impractical for her to realize her dream as a writer's career particularly a woman writer's career was uncommon in Canada of the 1950s. The problem was that of a non-existent and indistinct Canadian Literature. What was available was British Literature and as such there was no tradition to join. But her insightful perspectives on cultural, psychological and social issues, to which one can add her complex personal experience, laid the foundation of her imaginary microcosms and very soon her first book of poetry titled *Double Persophone* was published and was awarded the prestigious E.J. Pratt Medal for poetry. During the period of the development of postmodernism in the literary spheres, she started with *The Edible Woman* (1969), enriching literature with new narrative perspectives, in a manner similar to John Fowles who, in the same year, published his well-known *The French Lieutenant's Woman* that brought new postmodern elements to the limelight. She carried on with her literary voyage with her masterpiece *Surfacing*, followed by *Lady Oracle*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Blind Assassin*, *Alias Grace*, etc. Northrop Frye, well-known Canadian critic and a teacher of Atwood, calls it an "extraordinary novel which perfectly represents her own critical review of Canadian themes" (Prabhakar, 99). Constance Classen and David Howes describe the aim of Atwood's writings in following words:

... the Canadian identity is represented in Margaret Atwood's writings, but rather it provides a guide for the exploration of how different aspects of Margaret Atwood's work and life can be interpreted as expressing and reflecting the Canadian concern with dualisms, boundaries and self-other definition. Or, to put this exercise in more Atwoodian terms, it offers "wilderness tips" for negotiating a Canadian course through part of the vast Atwood forest. (Classen & Howes, 4)

Margaret Atwood was born in November 1939 to Margaret Killam Atwood, a teacher and Carl Edmund Atwood, a scientist and entomologist by profession who specialized in insects and whose research and fascination with insects made the family stay in the Northern part of Canada for many years. This is the part of Canada that is known for its bushes and wildlife. Atwood and her brother, Harold, definitely considered it to be an advantage to live among the bushes, in proximity to nature, a place she has returned to again and again in her works. In fact, it seems that she knows the Canadian bush and wildlife like the back of her hand. The protagonist of her novel *Surfacing*, too, returns to northern Quebec, to the remote island of her childhood, to a log cabin situated near a lake, called Bottle Villa, in search of her missing father. On her return, she finds that the wilderness exerts an undefined, elemental hold on her and she is dragged into it hardly realizing that what she had been looking for in this wild part of the country, is actually her own past and her own lost self. *Surfacing* begins with the unnamed protagonist, a young girl in her mid-twenties, visiting her childhood home along with her friends Anna and David and her boyfriend, Joe.

Her first observation en route, is regarding the degradation of all things which were once beautiful and natural. She relates the battered and bruised nature with her own body that has undergone a similar mutilation in the form of an abortion on the insistence of her previous lover, who happens to be a married man and her professor. She observes, "...the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south" and "But this is still near the city limits; we didn't go through, it's swelled enough to have a bypass, that's success" (3). The mocking tone at the onset of the novel, about the kind of success the country is moving towards, as also the interference from the south, that is, America, sets the ball rolling. Atwood believes that Americans are the 'noisy neighbours' with whom the Canadians are uncomfortably attached and who are drilling everything unnatural and 'pastiche' into the Canadian culture. Atwood writes in "Solstice Poem" that our

geography
is crumbling, the nation
splits like an iceberg, factions
shouting Good riddance from the floes
as they all melt south (Atwood 1978: 82)

Some of the major themes of the novel *Surfacing* are indeed contrasts and dichotomies between different concepts, ultimately touching upon the contrast between Canadian bicentrism and America's concentrism. These contrasts are between Canadian/ American, French/ English, Man/ Woman, but more specifically between Wilderness / Civilization. On the surface the prominent duality remains that of Canadian/American which has been expressed vocally through major characters of the novel. The protagonist sees Americans as a "disease spreading up from the south", blighting the Canadian landscape with their materialist, predatory values (3). Her travelling companion David is an ardent Canadian nationalist, for whom the Americans are "bloody, fascist pig Yanks", threatening to invade, brutalize and dominate Canada (6). The dominating position of Americans in contrast to the subordinate position of Canadians in the novel runs parallel to the dichotomous position of humans in relation to subordinate position of the wilderness. David, who is most critical of the Americans, retorts that a "split beaver" would be an appropriate national emblem for Canada, as well as being a symbol for a woman (151). Ironically, however, while David decries the American domination of Canada, he celebrates the male domination of women and the human domination of the wilderness, as both excite and tantalize him. The narrator is repulsed by the mutilated bodies of animals by hunters she encounters in the bush as well as by the insensitive treatment Anna receives at the hands of David. She is also disgusted by the imperious presence of the Americans in Canadian forests who hunt animals mercilessly and if they do not like their trophy, they go and hunt more. Indeed, "American", for the narrator, is a state of mind rather than a nationality and ultimately, the term signifies someone with a particular set of characteristics, because Americans, like "body snatchers", can take over your brain without you even knowing you have changed your identity (129). It is not really surprising to her, therefore, when two hunters she thought were American turn out to be Canadian. They are "American" inside.

A close reading of the novel reveals that for the author the most important "other" in *Surfacing* is the wilderness. On way

to Bottle Villa, the narrator notices the sign "Gateway to the North" which is an Atwoodian signal that the protagonist is about to undergo a transformational experience. She feels that she is about to open up and soon realizes that she is being occupied by the wilderness. "Other signals occur throughout the novel in images of echoes and reflections. The protagonist is ripe for such opening up because she is fractured to begin with" (Classen & Howes). In the beginning of the novel her friend Anna asks her if she has a twin, because some of the lines on her hand are double (4). Later the protagonist recalls being cut in two as part of a magician's "trick with mirrors". "Only with me", she says enigmatically, "there had been an accident and I came apart" (138). What she means is that she has become distanced from her childhood, an important part of herself of which she has literally forgotten, through the process of becoming "civilized" and trying to fit herself into what seemed an appropriate, if alien, cultural role.

The transformation of the protagonist begins when she reaches the cabin and discovers that her father had been making a record of local Indian pictographs. The pictographs, with their animal/human forms, suggest to her the possibility of shape-shifting. She is intrigued by these shape-shifting pictographs and goes for a solitary swim. On reaching the deep waters she watches her own shape changing in the water, and encounters instead her father's corpse. This traumatic experience the protagonist finds in herself the ability to face the fact and reconcile with the loss of her unborn child and that her "husband" was a married lover with children of his own (101, 141-144).

The protagonist is hurt by all the animal hunting and she compares the hunted animals to Christ. "The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people, hunters in the fall killing the deer that is Christ also. And we eat them, out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life" (179). She feels "plant-animal" filaments spreading inside her body. In a primitive animalistic ritual she incites her lover, Joe, to make love to her in the moonlight. This love making, she is confident, will lead to her impregnation and finally she will be absolved of the crime of killing her unborn child. "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long..." (209). She is now ready to begin her journey into the wilderness, into the "sacred places" of the Indians, into her own self-identity. "I no longer have a name", she says, "I tried for all those years to be civilized but I'm not and I'm through pretending" (168). Before she sets out into the bush, she turns the cabin mirror to the wall, turning away from her old, entrapping, reflection. The discarding of her old identity is accomplished when she swims in the lake and leaves her "false body", represented by her clothes, floating on the water. Naked, she makes herself a lair of leaves and branches and feeds on wild plants. When she goes back to the cabin and turns the mirror around she sees a new woman, face "dirt-caked and streaked", hair "stuck with leaves and twigs", a "natural woman" (245, 248).

As she decides to put back on the trappings of civilization the protagonist assures herself that she will no longer be a victim. She feels strong within her new authentic, but still dual, identity as she imagines within herself the new life of the child she has conceived with Joe. Now is the point when a dialogue will have to begin between herself and Joe in place of the old

pact of silence, a dialogue which "will probably fail", but which has to be attempted (250-51).

Further reading of Margaret Atwood's works reveals that the unnamed protagonist of *Surfacing* has much in common with the protagonist of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. In both cases the protagonists find themselves enchanted by the wilderness, and it is only after this reconciliation with nature that they can feel at home, whether within themselves or within their country. The bush is an integral part of Canadian life and a part of protagonist's childhood experience from which she has moved away and which she therefore has to rediscover for self-approbation. The journey in search of her own identity, in fact, mirrors Canada's search for its self-identity. The transition from childhood to youth is actually the protagonist's transition from a life spent in the lap of nature to civilization which models itself on an alien cultural image. Also, this change is Canada's attempt to deny its wilderness and model itself after foreign civilizations. "As an adult the narrator, like Canada, begins to become aware of and feel uncomfortable with the false identity she has created for herself. Both go in search of their roots, of their ancestors (symbolized for the narrator by her missing father)" (Classen & Howes).

On having discovered this new identity the narrator is ready to outstretch and extend herself. She now decides to establish new relationships with the outside world. This asserts the novelist's opinion that Canada should dissociate itself of its former identity as a dependent colony and undertake a full role in modern world affairs. At the end of the novel the narrator is ready to strike a dialogue and enter into a real relationship with her boyfriend, Joe and gives a new dimension to her life by deciding to give birth to a new life. The novel is full of overlapping images and echoes that signify and represent the need for the full range of binary contraries introduced along the way to enter into dialogue with each other; beginning, perhaps, with the French and English Canadians who have so much trouble communicating with each other at the start of the book. Though the present success of Canadian literature is something to rejoice about, in the past, it hardly turned any heads because of the lack of advertisement and of motivated writers who would plead its cause before the entire world. Atwood decided to make a deliberate effort at converting her native literature into a priceless jewel by bringing it to the attention of the Canadian people, first and then to the entire world. She fulfilled her task through the writing of *Survival*, in which as Hilde Staels emphasises "she excavated an important part of the culture" (Parlog, 2). "The heroine of *Surfacing* struggles against the technologically oriented men. The novel also carries the average Canadian's prejudice against Americans. Here America is depicted not as a nationality but a state of mind", writes Antum Amin Panjwani (25). Thus, Atwood put in every effort in order to point out the paramount role of the Canadian literary bequest which offers an alternate narrative to the dominant literature of the world. Atwood describes the role of literature in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, "Literature is not only a mirror. It is also a map, a geography of the mind" (18-19). She represents the geographical psyche of her protagonists in her works. Her protagonists are in a perpetual struggle for self-realization and self-approbation and ultimately gain freedom through self-emancipation. *Surfacing* is a novel about self-realization and

an assertion of the protagonist through her reconciliation with nature. *Surfacing*, thus, is the story of self-realization, hence, life-realization.

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