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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING: WHEN FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS REACHES ITS CLIMAX IN NATURE

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ABSTRACT

*The following research paper explores the theme of women's empowerment in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972). It looks into women's and nature's common experience of patriarchal oppression as well as ways of identification with each other in the attempt to resist it. The research work delves into the different forms of victimization and disempowerment women, and in the vanguard, the protagonist, undergo in the world of the novel and then shows possibilities for empowerment through nature. As such, one point of focus in the study is to reveal the protagonist's consciousness of her victimhood position but also her involvement in changing it by leaving aside weakness and advocating in its place empowerment as an alternative. The work foregrounds the protagonist's journey out of society to nature as an enlightenment and discovery errand that raised her awareness of her position as a socialized figure and the need to restore her natural self. The paper explores eco-feminism as a theoretical framework highlighting the interconnectedness of women and nature's experiences in androcentric societies and thought.*

KEYWORDS: Margaret Atwood, Canadian Feminism, *Surfacing*, Disempowerment, Consciousness, Empowerment, Nature, Eco-Feminism.

DISCUSSION

Power can be considered as a compelling force orchestrating individuals and society in two different directions: either as a creative agent in so far it addresses the collective concerns of the majority or as a destructive agent if it is manipulated by an elite group or a nation to oppress the majority. To cope with their victimhood in case power is concentrated on one edge of the weighing scales, the powerless attempt to reach out for power by turning down the power systems that oppress

them or by empowering themselves through other means.

Within feminist thought and theory, feminist authors bother about the ways patriarchy stage-manage women's lives and exercise its power upon them. They are involved in the ways women are objectified by essentialist attitudes and beliefs¹. Accordingly, a considerable number of feminist writers lay bare the reasons behind women's victimisation but also craft ways to disrupt the victimhood position being subjected to. In her writing, Margaret Atwood, a Canadian feminist

writer, displays how individuals are drawn into power relationships that often reveal themselves in center-periphery or domination-victimisation pattern. For Atwood, essentialist attitudes valorising sexism and supporting human or non-human victimisation should be re-thought or deconstructed.

Atwood's second novel, *Surfacing*, published in 1972, examines power relationships built on a hierarchical division between men and women, nature and culture. The novel displays society's assimilation of the essentialist attitudes placing man together with culture at the apogee of the hierarchy as a subject and women and nature at its bottom, defining them as objects to be controlled and dominated. Yet, it also offers ways to disrupt the hierarchical pyramid to impose balance upon it. Accordingly, the following paper looks into the ways patriarchy works out victimization upon women and the strategies the female figures undertake to cope with it in *Surfacing*. It reveals women's loss of their natural selves and their taking on socialized ones under essentialist attitudes and cultural norms. It foregrounds women's identification and communion with nature as an empowering strategy to reach self-consciousness and, ultimately, get rid of the socialized self imposed on them.

Margaret Atwood is one of the canonical figures in Canadian feminist literature and, as David Stouck suggests, she is "the most prominent figure in contemporary Canadian literature" (1998:273). She escalated fame with a prolific literary production that includes novels like *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Lady of Oracle* (1976), *Dancing Girls* (1977), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Tent* (2006), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and also theoretical works like *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) and *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002) among others. In terms of themes, Atwood has tried a hand on a variety of issues of which patriotism and feminism do surface. Indeed, as a Canadian writer, Atwood addresses the American interference in the Canadian land and culture. Also as a feminist, she bothers about the burden of feminism and deals with feminist issues like the politics of the female body, women and madness, and women's struggle with patriarchy. On this, Mukti Upadhyay (2012) writes:

Atwood's novels deal with the hidden subjugated world of women where injustice in society pushes them towards darkness. Margaret Atwood also depicts the internal urge of women to break all conventional identities in order to live with freedom. Margaret also shows many examples where a victim in the novel adopts the path of survival and later enables her identity or self free from any sort of conventional clutches where woman is seen as an object for sexual

pleasure or for doing monotonous household works of washing clothes or sweeping floors. (30)

Surfacing tells the story of an unnamed woman who sets out on a journey in search of her missing father back in her childhood island in Quebec. The actions of the story begin with the protagonist's arrival to her native homeland in the Quebec wilderness, and through a series of flashbacks, we hear that, nine years ago, the protagonist has left her homeland and fled elsewhere with her lover, a music teacher. She went through a disappointing love experience with him and got an abortion. Now back to her childhood island, accompanied by Joe, her second lover, and a couple, Anna and David, she evokes her past experiences with love, divorce and abortion. The protagonist also records Anna's maltreatment and humiliation at the hands of her husband, David.

Surfacing follows the protagonist's surfacing from a victimized into an empowering position after a voyage of enlightenment and discovery that involved her transcendence of patriarchal socialization of women and her recognition of the decisive role of nature in the process of empowerment and healing. By sending her protagonist on an errand to nature, Atwood criticizes the modern Western relationship with nature defined in terms of profit making, exploitation and control and justified in the name of the scientific progress. Yet, she also recovers the romantic association of nature with mysticism, discovery and salvation and reveals the eco-feminist bond uniting women and nature's experiences in patriarchal societies.

Eco-feminism as a theory establishes a connection between the oppression of women in patriarchal societies and the exploitation of nature in Western anthropocentric thought². The leading ideology in the history of Western thought prioritizes the anthropocentric belief assuming the superiority of society over nature, an issue central to eco-criticism as a theory, and also the notion of sexism which views women inferior to men, also an issue important to feminism. Eco-feminism, then, comes as the fusion or the point of interaction between the two theories; feminism and eco-criticism, and their attempt to cope with and address the disadvantaged position both nature and women hold in Western societies. The approach takes into consideration the interplay between nature and feminism and looks into the series of similarities the two categories display and which amount to their oppression. It is, in simpler words, "the philosophy born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the natural environment" (Gautam and Sinha, 2012: 1).

The process of disempowerment of women in the world of *Surfacing* entails the predominance of a socio-cultural system as an active agent exercising its power upon the passive agents, women; it controls women's lives and lays claim to their thought and actions through cultural and societal rules. Of these, they have "to wear long concealing skirts and dark stockings" in so far "Shorts were against the law." Also, many of them "lived their lives beside the lake without learning to swim because they were ashamed to put on bathing suits" (Atwood, 2010: 63) as society and culture do not allow it³. Still, marriage is another form of socialization and imprisonment of women in the novel. The female figures are made to believe that through marriage, they would have perfect husbands, children and happy family life. Yet, they are dishonestly exploited under this institution. In her talking about her experience with marriage, Anna suggests that it "is like skiing down a cliff" simply because for her nothing is sure about marriage and also about the person you marry. For the unnamed protagonist, marriage "hadn't been like skiing, it was like jumping off a cliff" (121) implying the death-like situation into which she plunged through marriage. Within the marriage institution, the two women hold the border position as they let themselves driven to the ideas, the control and the authority of the their husbands who in turn keep exploiting them and make them believe that "it's their power, not their"(202) that reigns.

Commenting on the essentialist and anthropocentric beliefs typical of Western societies and thought, Helene Cixous (1994) argues that contemporary thought "has always worked through opposition, through dual, hierarchical oppositions" which make "all conceptual organizations subject to man" (38). Yet, against the oppositional hierarchy placing power at the hands of man, Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy (1998) claim that eco-feminism is concerned with the reversal of the dominance within the power systems in Western societies and cultures. They write:

Eco-feminism is deeply involved in the criticism of the "dualisms of white Western patriarchal culture, such as self/other, culture/nature, man/woman, human/animal, and white/ non-white, which construct male human identity as separate from and superior to the identities of women, animals, and the natural world. (9)

Similarly, against these oppositional patterns, Atwood, as shown in *Surfacing*, believes that a stable human society and identity can successively be constructed only by the fusion and co-existence of the two oppositional agents; men and women, culture and nature, and head and body. In one instance in the novel, the unnamed protagonist realizes that a divide between body (representing women) and head (representing men) results in damage and death. She claims:

The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong it should not have different words for them. If the head extended directly into the shoulders like a worm's or a frog's without that constriction, that lie, they wouldn't be able to look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets; they would have realize that the head is detached from the body both of them will die. (190)

Patriarchal association of women's role in society with procreation and physical gratification is another form of women's disempowerment. In this context, Simon De Beauvoir (1972) claims that "a woman's purpose in life is to be an erotic object, when she grows old and ugly she loses the place allotted to her in society: she becomes a monstium that excites revulsion and even dread" (122-23). In *Surfacing*, the female body is considered as man's delight and his control in so far he works out his authority on it, while for the female figure, it turns out to be a burden and a source of torment as long as she does not have claims on it. Anna's relationship with David clearly embodies how women are defined in terms of physicality and erotic function and how man's control of the female body amounts to their inferiority and weakness. Within the marriage circle, Anna is obliged to put make up every morning because her husband, David, "wants (her) to look like a young chick all the time, if she does not, he gets mad" (309). Also, in talking about her sexual relationship, Anna confesses to the protagonist that David at times withholds sex and at others hurts her. She says that David "has got this little set of rules. If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I'm never sure" (309). Still, in showing his sexism, Anna argues, David views her as "uncultured and vulgar" (112) and calls her "cunt on four legs" or "tight-ass bitch" (383) reducing her into mere bodily organs. More important than this, David has forced Anna to be naked in front of his friends to record it in his film, "Random Sample", telling her "it won't hurt you, we need a naked lady" (339). David's harsh sexual relationship with Anna together with the film that records her nakedness representatively feature the patriarchal celebration of the beauty culture and the value of female body as a standard of definition and oppression of women in society.

Still, the issues of abortion and contraception that *Surfacing* unveils further solidify the view that the female body is a territory on which not only control but also physical and psychological violence can be worked out. The female figures in the novel reveal that abortion and contraception carry with them female physical and psychological scars and are to be seen as

phallogocentric symbols destroying women. In the course of the novel, Anna tells her friend, the protagonist, that her consumption of the pills has physically damaged her body claiming that “I don’t know anyone who still is any more. I got a blood clot in my leg, what did you get?. They said it would clear up after a couple of months but it did not” (200). Similarly, the protagonist herself has been conducted by her first lover to take an abortion, an experience that traumatized her and sullied her emotionally for a long time. Indeed, the abortion itself illustrates the eco-feminist interconnectedness that associates life-giving with women and nature and life-taking with patriarchy. The protagonist’s lover associates the foetus with animal imagery suggesting that aborting him is like getting “a wart removed. He said it wasn’t a person, only an animal” (122).

The protagonist’s transcendence of these different forms of victimization in the novel first blossom and come on the surface in the Quebec wilderness with her direct communion with nature. Nature turned to be decisive in her awareness of herself as a socialized figure and also in her healing process. Accordingly, *Surfacing* associates psychological and moral degradation with society and celebrates the beauty and the joy of life in nature. Like many protagonists in classic American literature as Huckleberry Finn, Hester Prynne, Ishmael and others, the protagonist shuns society and finds refuge and tranquility in nature. In one instance in the novel, while leafing through the images of an old scrapbook she finds in her family house, she marvels at the beauty and heavenly worth of the natural world:

Page after page of eggs and rabbits, grass and trees, sun in the upper right hand corner of each picture, moon symmetrically in the left. [...] No monsters, no wars, no explosions, no heroism. I couldn’t remember ever having drawn these pictures. I was disappointed in myself; I must have been a hedonistic child, I thought, and quite stodgy also, interested in nothing but social welfare. Or perhaps it was a vision of Heaven. (98)

Here then, the pictures in the scrapbook do represent, in the protagonist’s view point, nature at its original image, morally and environmentally as a heavenly milieu, unspoiled by civilization, wars or man’s destruction. Nature becomes increasingly a refuge from society’s evils and chaos. For the protagonist, this refuge is permeated with a strong sense of nostalgia for a simple pastoral life, tranquility and peace of mind that are lacking in society.

Yet, as a result of industry and technology that are finding their ways in the Quebec wilderness, the natural pastoral life has vanished in the process. Commenting on the changes that took place in the natural environment as she moves through “flattened cow-sprinkled hills and leaf-

trees and dead elm” (21) of the Quebec wilderness, the protagonist records that “the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading” (17), and the trees “never be allowed to grow that tall again, they’re killed as soon as they’re valuable” (18). She is deceived to note the place’s displacement of original purity by industrial elements like “the concrete bridge,” and “the new paved roads” (34). Having reached her homeland, the protagonist discovers that the whole place is mutilated into a diseased and rotting place. She finds it a “foreign territory” (28) and feels sad because “nothing is the same” (31).

Indeed, the degradation into which the place has descended deeply affects her that she associates this death of life in it with the loss of her foetus. She believes that the abortion she has experienced has “planted death” in her “like a seed” (362), and just like the diseased nature, she has carried “death around inside her layering it over, a cyst, a tumor” (365). In identifying her personal loss with nature’s decay and degradation, the protagonist is aware of the eco-feminist relationship which perceives both women and nature as territories to be colonized and controlled by man. In one striking instance in the novel, the protagonist wanders in the woods and catches a view of a heron killed and thrown on earth. The scene greatly affects her and views it as a tangible authentication of man’s inhumanity and sadism. She suggests:

Carrion beetle, death beetle. Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn’t they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn’t be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. (294)

Clearly, the protagonist, as Barbara Rigney (1978) suggests, “sees the heron as symbolic of her own psychological death” (100). In her opinion, the heron is an evidence of the way women are viewed and treated at the hands of patriarchy. As the humiliated dead heron, she believes that men’s only relation with women is to control, subdue and even destroy them. In view of this then, the female encounter with the natural world is intimately bent on identification and sympathy, whereas the male confrontation with nature becomes an encounter with the feminine, an encounter defined in relation to “power, mastery, and total gratification: the all nurturing mother, the all passive bride” (Baym, 1992: 14).

In nature, the protagonist evokes and summons up in tranquility her past experiences with love, marriage, divorce and abortion; she remembers her disappointing experience in love, her disgrace in divorce and more painfully her abortion. Yet, she also understands that unlike the

plants and animals which are growing and thriving naturally on the Mother Nature, she has been stamped out of a societal mold and discovers that societal forms, thoughts, institutions (like marriage) are just stories created by patriarchy to foster hierarchy, difference and maintains power. She says, on her husband, “now I can remember him, fake husband, more clearly though, and now I feel nothing for him but sorrow” (472). She even dares to “slip the ring from [her] left hand, non-husband, he is the next thing [she] must discard finally, and drop it into the fire, altar, it may not melt but it will at least be purified, the blood will burn off” (443). Furthermore, in nature, the protagonist engrosses herself in the natural elements like “the trees, the flowers, the hush of moving water and the rocking motion” (432) and fully identifies with them by transforming into an almost primitive natural state resembling a tree, an animal and even becoming nature itself. She suggests: “I am a tree, I am a tree leaning [...] 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” (456). Following this, the protagonist rejects her civilized name saying that “I no longer have a name” (424) and throws out civilized accessories and clothing and becomes part of nature. She states:

Everything I can't break, frying pan, enamel bowl, spoons and forks, I throw on the floor. After that I use the big knife to slash one through the blankets, the sheets and the beds and the tents and at the end my own clothes and my mothers' grey leather jacket, my father's grey felt hat, the raincoats. These husks are not needed any longer, I abolish them. (445)

Still, gaining control over the body and displacing the negative connotations patriarchy associate with it has also been decisive in the protagonist's transcendence of bodily oppression. Furthermore, she realizes that the female body turns to be woman's disempowerment and burden in case the male figure has claims to it. As such, in her second relationship with Joe, the protagonist tries to have control on her body by having also control over their life as a couple. She manipulates their sexual life to her benefit as she voluntarily uses Joe “as an object in the bed, like a sack or a large turnip” (232) to compensate for the child she has aborted. She decides to conceive the “gold fish” growing in her womb claiming “I cannot know yet; it's too early. But I assume it: if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me. It might be first one, the first true human, it must be born, allowed” (479). In this understanding, one may say that the protagonist sees her empowerment through motherhood, a gift naturally associated with women. Within the eco-feminist thought, this productive potentiality characteristic of both women and nature is of paramount importance in the identification with

each-other. In this context, Deborah L. Madsen (2000) writes:

The relation of women and nature; on the one hand contesting the identification that makes women as passive and powerless as the exploited natural world, but on the other hand, promoting a positive identification of nature with the reproductive capacity of women who share a material commitment to the survival of the planet through the children they bear. (125)

The regeneration through child-bearing anticipated by the protagonist at the close of the novel is in a way symbolic. It refers to the empowerment of women through child-birth but also to the surfacing or the rebirth the protagonist is experiencing. After a contact with nature, and after witnessing patriarchal exploitation of human and non human creatures, she finds new strength in herself and realizes that to survive; she should transcend or reject society's victimization. For her, it is no longer a matter of struggle or the result brought about by that struggle that is victory or failure. Nor is it a matter of withdrawal and surrender, of letting things drawn and coming from the outside. It has to do with the belief in the self to affect one's destiny by transcending victimization and advocating in its place empowerment. She states that “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...the word games, the winning and losing games are finished. Withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death” (478).

In *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood has articulated the suffering and agony of an unnamed Canadian woman who has lost her natural identity as a woman under patriarchal processes of socialization and indoctrination. Using an unnamed female protagonist, Atwood voices the female burden within the Canadian context and universalizes it to include all women's experiences everywhere in the world. *Surfacing* unveils patriarchy's capital dehumanization of women under strict cultural institutions and rules, including marriage, divorce, abortion and aggressive sexual life, but also offers other alternatives to cope with these forms of victimization and strive for empowerment. Instead of simply capitulating to society's enslavement, the protagonist chooses to empower herself in nature, where she realizes the gap between her natural self and the one constructed by society. In nature, the protagonist discerns the power inside her and rejects all forms of socialization trying to rob her from natural identity and thus she repudiates ‘the old belief’ of powerlessness and endorses empowerment as an alternative.

End Notes

¹ **Essentialism** is the belief in the rigidity and fixity of things. In modern gender theory ,

essentialism draws from early views on the meaning of essence, particularly Plato's theory of essences/archetypes. According to the essentialist theory or belief, an essence is something fixed, eternal, and fundamental to the existence of things. In the classification and definition of men and women in society, modern gender theory assumes that men are biologically, socially viewed as superior to women, a fact that is taken to be fixed and unchangeable and ultimately assimilated by traditions and societies. Essentialism is the opposite of modern constructivism, the view that nothing about gender is fixed: everything is constructed and is a product of societies and social groups. (Holstein. James A. Juber F, Gubrium 238).

² **Anthropocentrism** is the belief in the superiority of society and the different socio cultural norms defining it over nature and all the different non human creatures living in it. This belief is based on nature's vulnerability, inertness and its liability to man's control and exploitation. Martusewicz Rebecca A., Jeff Edmundson and John Lupinacci write that "non-human beings are defined as constituting a lower order of life and radically excluded from humans based on lack of reason. Exclusion stresses those features which make them different from humans. Nature is conceived of in mechanical terms such as dead and manipulable, thus outside the ethical responsibilities of men" (86).

³ **Margaret Atwood** (*Surfacing*, Ontario: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 2010) 63. All the subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

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