

The Theory of Ecofeminism vis-a-vis Margaret Atwood's Surfacing

Dr. Jasleen Kaur Nanda (jasleenvirdi@gmail.com)

Assistant Professor, Department of English, GSSDGS Khalsa College Patiala, India



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Abstract: *The research paper deals with the theory of ecofeminism and its various aspects related to androcentrism, anthropocentrism, egalitarianism, and the role of nature in women's lives. Margaret Atwood's novel Surfacing has been taken up for an in-depth analysis of ecofeminism in a literary text. Atwood has highlighted her concerns in this novel regarding mechanization of life in cities, degrading moral values, role of nature in spiritual quest, effect of male domination, and woman empowerment. The novel is an appropriate text for analyzing the theory of ecofeminism and its application in practical life.*

Keywords: Androcentrism, Anthropocentrism, Egalitarianism, Mechanization, Spiritual Quest, Woman Empowerment

Introduction

Ecofeminism is a theory grounded on the structure of domination that exists not only in relation to humans but also in relation to nature. Ynestra King defines that "Ecofeminism is potentially a global movement that is founded on common interests yet celebrates diversity and opposes all forms of domination and violence ..." (Lahar 1). Ecofeminists have argued that women's movements and the ecology movement are mutually reinforcing and together they can develop practices and views which are not based on models of domination. One of the pioneering ecofeminists was Rosemary Radford Ruether and she wrote in *New Woman/New Earth* (1975) that there can be no liberation for women and no solution for ecological crisis if model of domination persists in society. Feminists and environmentalists should unite their ideas to envision a radical reshaping of the agenda of peace. Francoise d'Eaubonne introduced the term *ecofeminism* in 1974 to bring attention to women's potential for bringing about an ecological revolution. She called upon women to replace patriarchy by egalitarianism. She raised many ecofeminist issues like the crisis of modernity, patriarchy as the main oppressor, and the ability of women as being the agents of change. She emphasized upon the woman-nature affinity as a source of strength needed to make the world peaceful and harmonious. She also proposed the need for a new global movement of feminists that would draw upon feminine power to overcome the ecological crisis and to eradicate the systems of male dominance. The research paper attempts to explore the theory of ecofeminism vis-a-vis Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972) in which she has reflected her feminist as well as environmentalist concerns.

Ecofeminism as a Movement to Remove Dualisms

Ecofeminism deals with the contemporary problems related to modern practices and culture. Rise in uncontrolled scientific experiments, environmental degradation, marginalization of women, and violence threaten the peaceful existence of human beings and nature in the present world. Atwood has highlighted these issues in her novels in order to stress upon the gravity of the situation and also to provide a ground for the solutions. Val Plumwood, an ecofeminist, has critiqued that when the four pillars of liberation, those concerned with equality of gender, race, class, and nature stand together, structure of oppression can be shaken. The ecofeminists also identify patriarchy as the main cause of ecological destruction and

women's oppression. The division of society into hierarchical dualisms like culture/nature, reason/nature, male/female, reason/emotion, human/nature, civilized/primitive, attributing more value to the former, also becomes a major factor in the domination of both women and nature.

Male Domination Highlighted in *Surfacing*

Surfacing (1972) is a pioneering novel by Atwood that highlights issues related to ecofeminism. The novel focuses on the dilemma of the protagonist who is trying to understand the complexities of human relationships. At a younger stage of her life, the glitter of city life allures her. She manages to escape from the innocent and simple life of the island in Northern Quebec in Canada, where her parents live. But things turn out to be quite different in the city. The protagonist finds that there is commercialization that plagues the city life. She also realizes that fake relationships and artificiality dominate the modern culture. The protagonist undergoes various traumatic experiences and tries to build false stories in her mind in order to hide those incidents from her own conscience. The news of her missing father brings her back to her ancestral village. It is only amidst nature and its beauty that she is able to gain her new identity. She associates her own exploitation by her lover with the exploitation of sacred land by humans. Her deeply felt concerns for nature and for the freedom of women encourage her to take major steps in the direction of giving a new shape to her life.

Degradation of Environment

The protagonist, while on the journey to her ancestral village with three friends David, Joe, and Anna, in search of her missing father, feels disappointed on looking at the changed environment. She thinks, "I can't believe I'm on this road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south, and I notice they now have seaplanes for hire" (3). The degradation of the environment points towards the rising dominating practices of the modern civilization against nature. Human activities are polluting the water bodies and threatening the marine living creatures. The oil spills from huge tankers and the dumping of hazardous waste into the oceans have increased water pollution at alarming levels.

Ecofeminists believe that nature has been considered as a tool for self-fulfillment by humans and they exploit it for their selfish interests. The resources of earth are being extracted at large scale, without any consideration of the consequences. The reverence for earth as a mother has been replaced by greed that is responsible for depletion of its resources. Various technological advancements, that are helping man in this process, are making the condition worse. The fast pace with which nature is being exploited presents a very grave picture of the state of earth and its resources.

The protagonist in *Surfacing* ponders upon the damaging effects of cutting of trees in the forest. She finds stumps of huge trees that had been cut very evenly with new instruments and she begins to associate her own exploitation with the exploitation of the forest. "The trees will never be allowed to grow that tall again, they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scarce as whales" (43). The new technology becomes an aid in destroying the trees. The protagonist's memory carries the past experience when her child was also killed with latest instruments. It was not allowed to live and take birth.

Mechanization of Life

The protagonist starts feeling that she belongs to that wild island instead of belonging to the city. She resents her profession of being a commercial artist in the city. She had to choose that profession for the sake of earning more money. She is still not comfortable with her choice and it doesn't seem natural to her liking. Her work involves designing pictures for posters, covers or books. She has to compromise with her natural talent and has to design more flashy and stylized pictures. "Though what they like best is something they hope will interest the English and American publishers too" (50). After coming to the island, the rationalism that dominated her life is slowly being replaced by her real self.

Contrast between Village and City Life

The contrast is clearly visible between the life of protagonist's deceased mother on the island as she remembers it and her own life in the city. The mother, absorbed in age old values and traditions, had a connection with nature and that made her a confident and self-reliant woman. She was capable of protecting herself and her family in every possible way. The protagonist migrated to city and took up a profession that she didn't like. She also got pregnant and her lover persuaded her to abort the child. She hated the whole mechanized process in the hospital – "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 snickering practicing on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar" (79). The protagonist realizes that everything and everybody works like a machine in the city. A baby breathing with life is removed from the body like a lifeless object.

The protagonist becomes numb and devoid of feelings after facing the pressure and rationality of city life. "I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time.... I was nothing, but a head or, no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb" (106,109). Joe proposes to marry her but she refuses as she can no longer love anyone. She could never come out of the trauma of the abortion of her child. The anaesthesia of the process had erased all her good memories. After her stay on the island, she comes to know about the hollow relationship between David and Anna which is also numb like her. It is as artificial as the modern society in which they are living.

Relation of Woman with Nature

The protagonist realizes her connection with nature after living on the island for few days. She is deeply upset over the useless killing of living creatures. She can no more gather the courage to kill the fish when they go out for fishing. She feels that she has no right to kill it for any purpose. She frees the frogs that she had caught for fishing and this action makes her think about the frogs on which experiments were performed in her High School lab. The protagonist remembers the comparison of her unborn child to a 'wart' by her lover. "After the slaughter, the murder, he couldn't believe I didn't want to see him any more... others, he said, wouldn't have bothered" (146). He expected gratitude from her for arranging the murder. Simone de Beauvoir writes about the tyranny involved in the abortion of a child, "Men tend to take abortion lightly; they regard it as one of the numerous hazards imposed on women by malignant nature, but fail to realize fully the values involved" (Beauvoir 508).

The protagonist's union with nature makes her feel more alive on the island. She starts regaining her feelings. "... feeling was beginning to seep back into me, I tingled like a foot that's been asleep" (147). The harsh and bitter experiences of the city begin to fade away and they give way to a new and refreshing connection with nature. Ecofeminists also ground their theory on the basis that women have a deep connection with nature and their feminine qualities bring them closer to nature. The protagonist starts dismantling the structures of domination created by men. She unwinds the film of David's camera and throws it into the lake as the film contains pictures that symbolize the oppression of women and nature. The film is made of killed fish, dead heron, chopped tree, and nude Anna, all being a source of amusement for David. Metaphorically, the action of the protagonist connotes the unwinding of the structure of oppression. Aruna Devi comments upon this kind of rebellious act:

The manipulation of male power plays a vital role in puncturing feminine identity in all aspects. Her conflict gets intensified and the rebellious instinct in her makes her usurp the film and throw it in a lake that symbolizes the submersion of women's subjugation. (Devi 114)

Refusing to be a Victim

The protagonist refuses to be a victim. She has gained the power a woman needs, to rise against domination and exploitation. “I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless ...” (197). Her inner being is at peace and she has found solace among trees. She would no longer let men bind her in chains again. R. C. Shiela Royappa comments upon the strength gained by Atwood’s heroines in her novels. She writes, “Atwood’s heroines, when threatened and thwarted by domineering patriarchal structures, assert themselves by acquiring their identity. She rises above gender sensibilities and fights for human dignity in her novels” (Royappa 125).

Gaining Strength from Nature

In the novel *Surfacing*, the spiritual association of the protagonist with the forest symbolizes her being one with nature. She gains knowledge of the forest as the source of fertility and productivity. Her love for nature helps her in discovering her real identity as a woman. She can feel tranquility and peace in the forest. She associates her well-being with the well-being of the forest and her destruction with the destruction of the forest.

Conclusion

Beginning from 1970s, the bond between women and nature evolved in multiple theories. Some feminists argued that woman-nature connection is a male cultural artefact and a tool of patriarchy. Sherry Ortner, an American cultural anthropologist, argued that women should reject their presumed link with nature. In the late 1970s Susan Griffin called for a feminist re-evaluation of the woman-nature connection. She critiqued that although this bond has been criticized as a tool of patriarchy in the oppression of women and nature, it is in fact an empowering bridge for women. Their natural cycles have special significance in their lives that associate them with nature. Ecofeminism forms a bridge between feminism and environmentalism envisioning this bond as significant and instrumental in the betterment of both women and nature.

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