

Eco Feminism in Margaret Atwood's Novel Surfacing

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Abstract- Surfacing follows and develops additional the feminist themes of *The Edible Woman*-the complaint against the female sex role and the predatory and aggressive attitude and behavior of men towards women-anti-capitalist; anti-American and ecological concerns continue to be part of the author's radical, perhaps revolutionary message of these early novels. The theme of the heroine's impasse as an artist writer is also ever-present. In *Surfacing* she involves herself in a search for, among other things, the roots of her creativity, buried within her and relating to her past and childhood. In this novel, the enemy is even more clearly outlined, the male, economic technological power structure that dominates and exploits everyone and everything, women, people in general, nature and its resources.

Index Terms- success, emotion, feelings, culture and tradition.

INTRODUCTION

The heroine opposes the structure or hierarchy, setting out on a search for the values in the rent in unspoiled nature. She also explores her psychic depths with an intensity not seen in any other of Atwood's novels. But *Surfacing* is still similar to the other books in that it also constructs a set of opposites, or dichotomies, indicating a clash of values. On the one side are the forces of darkness, so to speak, the capitalist monster, the U.S.A., its technology, corruption, violence, war and death. On the other side we find the victims: women, nature, Canada, animals, peace and life.

The title specifies the nature of the narrator's progress. She comes up, surfaces, at the end of the story after having dived into a lake, literally and representatively. The pattern suggests a rebirth, or even baptism, from which she emerges as a new woman, or potentially so. She goes in search of her father, who is missing, and ends up in a kind of visionary, trancelike state in which she communicates with the spirits of nature. On the way, she is guided

by Indian myths, but goes past even these, finding or envisaging her own spirits, or symbols, which is appropriate for a creative artist. She travels into the Canadian backwoods with her boyfriend Joe and another couple, David and Anna, sixties radicals who themselves suffer from the alienation from nature that they accuse Americans of having. On their expedition an ironic reversal of sex roles occurs immediately. The narrator is the only one who has any experience of the wilderness on beforehand, and she teaches the men how to fish and how to cope in this new environment. Later, she begins to identify her body with the wilderness, threatened by the encroachment of male technology. This threat is seen as a sort of disease that creeps up from the south, destroying everything in its path. But where the narrator and her party are going, there are still some unspoiled areas left. The lake where her parents' cabin stands is especially significant, "blue and cool as redemption" (15). Salvation is somehow to be found in its murky depths, where the father seems to lie drowned. She follows his trail, which leads her to what can perhaps be called the mysteries of a religion of nature. Somehow, her father's spirit is there. As a contrast, the sexism of traditional religion is pointed out as the narrator recalls the old priest of her childhood who had seen to it that the women always wore clothes that covered their bodies.

Many of them never learnt to swim because they had been ashamed to put on bathing suits. Rebellious against these restrictions, the narrator, at the end, goes around naked in the bush, rejecting these anti-female attitudes according to which men give themselves the authority to decide what women can and cannot do. Before she met Joe, her boyfriend, the heroine had had an affair with a married man and had become pregnant. He did not want to leave his family for her sake, urging her to get an abortion. This she did, leaving her hurt and despairing, feeling guilty towards the aborted fetus and betrayed by the man.

She feels compelled to deal with the trauma of the abortion in some way and goes in search of a necessary process of healing and renewal. In the end she allows herself to be impregnated by Joe, and the growth of this new life within her becomes her compensation for the loss of the other child, indicating her saying yes to life again, on more than one level. One might argue that this is not a typically feminist line of thinking, but it may be that she has to have it both ways, in a sense, a baby and a new freedom and self-definition.

Also, Atwood does not shy away from the reality of guilty feelings in a woman who, however justifiable her decision, chooses to abort a fetus. But the heroine's pregnancy is also symbolic of the artistic creativity that is part of her development. She has been the failed, commercial artist who returns to the wellspring of serious art, which is also a form of knowledge. In contrast, David and Joe are mere amateurs and observers, making a film about Canada, or so they think. As so often in Atwood, cameras symbolize a hostile detachment, and the narrator eventually throws both the camera and the film into the lake in a symbolic act indicating her rejection of the men's attitude. Diving into the lake, she is re-enacting her childhood, even going back to the womb to be reborn herself. At the same time she is beginning to create a new life within herself. Thus, both rebirth and atonement occur. Life struggles against death, everywhere. The novel contains chains of images of the many victims of modern society and its rapacious mentality. There are frogs and other small creatures, imprisoned in jars, then killed, worms for bait, fish caught, herons crucified, landscapes ravaged, a brother nearly drowned, the fetus imprisoned in the womb, then killed at the abortion. All are victims of the same inhuman forces, but at the end, the protagonist takes a firm stand against it all "This, above all, to refuse to be a victim" (191). Her quest is originally for the father, but the mother is also important and may have bequeathed something to her daughter in the cabin:

"There might be something for me, a note, a message, and a will. I kept expecting that after my mother died word of some kind, not money but an object, a token" (36).

Eventually she does discover and receive the legacies from her parents and uses them for the purposes of her own regeneration. This is also related to her

recapturing the "savage" relation to nature as a living organism ruled by spirits and suffused with magic and taboo. This is achieved in her final regression into what can be called a sort of constructive or healing madness where she communes with the spirits. A frog, for example, she can now see as one of her "ancestors." In Indian fashion, the border between humans and animals is open, so to speak. This "breakdown" is also her final, real act of mourning the loss of her parents, and the lost child, by giving expression to her grief. What are the essentials of the narrator's quest? It is a search for identity, the influences of the deceased parents, the forces that have shaped her. The father represents nature, Indian myth, the simple, pure life. The mother stands for love, nurturing, as in the vision of her feeding the birds outside the cabin.

The descent into the lake is symbolic of the breakdown, the penetration into the deepest layers of the psyche. Emerging, surfacing into sanity, the heroine has achieved redemption, transformation. There is a pattern of dissolution followed by reintegration on another level. The protagonist finally emerges as a kind of shaman, arriving with new knowledge. The rediscovery of the deities of nature indicates a movement away from the existing, patriarchal religious terms and mythologies. The father-son image is replaced by earth, water, animal life. The narrator imagines herself as an earth goddess, feels united with the land. She also struggles against the old sex role, the expectations of men. She rejects David's chauvinism, as well as Anna's compliance with it, and Joe's conservatism. She demands respect and equality, and real change from her partner. Joe is seen as being redeemable, and her relationship with him may become successful. At least, such a possibility is hinted at the end.

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