



## Nature, Body & Identity in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*: An Ecofeminist Reading

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### Abstract

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972) stands as a seminal work that links ecological issues with feminist concerns and shows how patriarchal and capitalist systems exploit both women and the natural world. This paper provides an ecofeminist analysis of the text, with special focus on the relationships between nature, the female body, and the development of identity. Through the unnamed protagonist's journey into the isolated Canadian wilderness, Atwood depicts the process of moving from emotional breakdown and disconnection to personal empowerment and unity with the environment. Drawing on ideas from scholars such as Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, and Greta Gaard, the study highlights important symbols like water, the lake, animals, and the broader landscape, which represent themes of healing, trauma, and resistance. The protagonist's decision to reject oppressive structures and adopt a life-affirming approach emphasizes the novel's strong message about the need to free both women and nature from dominating ideologies. The study also critically engages with contemporary ecofeminist debates concerning essentialism, intersectionality, narrative subjectivity, and posthuman ecological thought.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, *Surfacing*, Nature, Gender, Identity, Canadian Literature.

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## INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is widely regarded as an important contribution to Canadian literature and early ecofeminist writing. The story centers on an unnamed woman who returns to a remote island in Quebec along with her partner Joe, and friends

Anna and David hoping to find her missing father. Thus, what appears at first to be a simple search mission soon develops into a complex process of self-examination, memory recovery, and environmental awareness.

Atwood skillfully shows how separation from the natural world can lead to inner

fragmentation, while deep engagement with wilderness can promote recovery and a renewed sense of self. The Canadian landscape is presented not just as a physical location but as a vital element that shapes the protagonist's transformation. Water, in particular, carries multiple layers of meaning related to national identity, spiritual cleansing, and psychological renewal.

Applying an ecofeminist perspective, this paper argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature share the same origins in patriarchal and capitalist thinking. Theorists like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies have explained how both are often reduced to resources for extraction and control. In the novel, the protagonist's struggles with her own body reflect the damage done to the surrounding forests and waters. The text also sharply criticizes the spread of aggressive consumer culture, represented as "American" influence, which endangers both local identity and ecological systems. By the end, the central character reaches a state of harmony with her environment and chooses creation over destruction. This study expands on these themes through detailed examination.

Unlike earlier studies that focus primarily on symbolism and environmental themes, this paper examines how ecofeminist theory, narrative form, Canadian national identity, and the novel's ambiguous ending collectively shape Atwood's critique of domination and her vision of ecological consciousness.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Existing scholarship on *Surfacing* has consistently recognized its strong ecological and gender-related themes. Critics such as Bonnie St. Andrews in her *The Journey Inward: Margaret Atwood's Surfacing* has drawn attention to the importance of water as a symbol of awareness and integration. Bonnie interprets the novel as a psychological and spiritual quest for self-discovery. She argues that the unnamed narrator's return to the wilderness represents an

inward journey into her subconscious, where she confronts repressed memories, guilt, and fragmented identity. St. Andrews emphasizes the symbolic significance of water as a medium of purification, rebirth, and integration, through which the protagonist achieves a deeper understanding of herself and her connection with nature. The essay ultimately views *Surfacing* as a narrative of healing and transformation, culminating in the protagonist's emergence into a more authentic and unified self.

Grace Stewart in her *A New Mythos: The Novel of Margaret Atwood* has connected the protagonist's experiences to mythological patterns of descent and renewal. In *A New Mythos: The Novel of Margaret Atwood*, Grace Stewart examines Atwood's fiction through the lens of myth, archetype, and spiritual transformation. She argues that Atwood reshapes traditional myths to explore modern concerns such as identity, alienation, and self-realization. In her discussion of *Surfacing*, Stewart interprets the protagonist's journey as a mythic descent into the depths of memory and the subconscious, followed by a symbolic rebirth. The novel, according to Stewart, presents a process of emergence from psychological and cultural fragmentation toward a renewed sense of self and harmony with the natural world, thereby creating a distinctly modern myth of regeneration.

Ecofeminist scholarship supplies essential theoretical support. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, in their collaborative work *Ecofeminism*, examine how modern development projects and reproductive technologies distance women from their physical selves and treat nature as a mere commodity. In *Ecofeminism*, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva argue that the domination of women and the exploitation of nature stem from the same patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial systems of power. They contend that modern development models treat both women and the environment as resources to be controlled,

commodified, and exploited for profit. The authors advocate an alternative worldview based on ecological sustainability, gender justice, cooperation, and respect for all forms of life. By linking feminist concerns with environmental issues, they establish ecofeminism as a powerful critique of oppressive structures and a framework for creating a more equitable and ecologically balanced society.

Greta Gaard's edited volume *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* expands this discussion by exploring links between women, animals, and the environment. The contributors explore the interconnected oppression of women, animals, and the natural environment under patriarchal systems. The collection expands ecofeminist theory beyond environmental concerns to include issues of gender, speciesism, social justice, and ethics. Through diverse essays, the volume demonstrates how hierarchical structures that justify the domination of nature also legitimize the exploitation of women and animals. Gaard's anthology thus presents ecofeminism as an inclusive and interdisciplinary framework that advocates ecological sustainability, compassion, and equality among all forms of life.

Barbara Hill Rigney and Stephanie Lahar further analyze the ways in which harm to nature reflects harm to female bodies, particularly through commodification and objectification. In *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*, Barbara Hill Rigney examines how women writers challenge patriarchal structures through representations of female consciousness, rebellion, and psychological crisis. Analyzing the works of Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, and Margaret Atwood, Rigney argues that what is often labeled as "madness" in women is frequently a response to social oppression and restrictive gender roles. Her discussion of Atwood highlights the protagonist's struggle for self-definition and autonomy, emphasizing the

connection between personal liberation and resistance to patriarchal control.

In *Ecofeminist Theory and Grassroots Politics* Stephanie Lahar explores the relationship between ecofeminist philosophy and environmental activism. She argues that the domination of women and the exploitation of nature arise from interconnected systems of hierarchy and oppression. Lahar emphasizes that ecofeminism is not merely a theoretical framework but also a practical movement that promotes ecological sustainability, social justice, and community-based action. By linking feminist concerns with environmental issues, she advocates a holistic approach to social and ecological transformation.

Atwood's nonfiction *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* offers valuable context by discussing Canadian identity in relation to nature and survival. Interviews with the author reinforce her commitment to environmental responsibility and balanced living. Secondary sources, including reader's guides and collections of critical essays, interpret the wilderness journey as a return to primal awareness and a challenge to binary thinking. This paper extends these conversations by focusing specifically on the connections among nature, the body, and personal identity.

The post-2010 scholarship on posthumanism and comparative ecofeminism, such as, linking *Surfacing* to works like Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* further enriches these interpretations. Also, works exploring posthuman ecologies in *Surfacing*, for example, analysis drawing on Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, and Donna Haraway emphasize nonhuman agency i.e. the landscape, animals, and water as active participants rather than passive backdrops thereby reconfiguring human subjectivity through relationality and interdependence. Comparative studies link *Surfacing* to contemporary texts, highlighting its prototypical ecofeminist stance against ongoing

capitalist and patriarchal exploitations. These perspectives affirm how the protagonist's journey critiques intersecting oppressions while offering pathways to multispecies ethics and ecological justice.

Also, it is important to understand that while early ecofeminists such as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva established important connections between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature, later scholars have questioned whether such approaches risk essentializing women by presenting them as naturally closer to the environment. Janet Biehl and Val Plumwood caution that any automatic association between women and nature may inadvertently reinforce the very patriarchal binaries that ecofeminism seeks to challenge. Rather than assuming an innate bond between women and nature, contemporary ecofeminist criticism emphasizes historically produced relationships shaped by culture, power, colonialism, class, and race.

Surfacing always invites a nuanced reading. Atwood does not suggest that the protagonist possesses a natural ecological consciousness simply because she is a woman. Instead, her environmental awareness emerges through painful experiences of bodily violation, psychological fragmentation, and cultural alienation. Although Atwood wrote *Surfacing* before intersectionality became a major critical framework, the novel anticipates such concerns by linking the protagonist's gendered experience to broader structures of colonialism, consumer capitalism, and cultural domination.

### Objectives

1. To investigate how natural elements such as water, forests, and animals symbolize the protagonist's mental and emotional condition as well as broader Canadian identity.
2. To assess the female body as both a target of patriarchal control and a

source of ecological and feminist empowerment.

3. To trace the protagonist's evolution from a fragmented, unnamed self to a unified being integrated with the natural world.
4. To illustrate how the novel promotes ecofeminist ideals by connecting individual recovery with environmental respect.
5. To evaluate the critique of capitalist and patriarchal systems and the vision of alternative, non-hierarchical ways of living.
6. To consider the continued significance of the text in light of present-day environmental and gender concerns.

### METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative textual analysis guided by ecofeminist theory. Insights from key theorists are integrated to deepen interpretation. The study draws on both primary text and relevant secondary sources while maintaining an interdisciplinary perspective that combines literary, feminist, and environmental studies.

### DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

In *Surfacing*, the natural environment plays a central and active role in the protagonist's psychological and spiritual development. The remote island, with its thick forests and large lake, is contrasted with the artificial urban world, presenting a feminine and restorative space that differs from symbols of masculine power. The narrator's repeated immersion in the lake symbolizes a return to origins and a recovery of suppressed memories as she gradually realizes that she is "part of the landscape." (Atwood, 187) In the novel, we find that water is depicted as something refreshing and life-giving which is strongly associated with Canadian identity because of the country's rich aquatic geography. Water functions as a

regenerative force throughout the novel, and the narrator's descent into the lake "I slipped into the water" (p 187-188) becomes an act of purification and renewal. Atwood further emphasizes the intimate bond between self and environment through the narrator's growing awareness that the trees too are breathing "the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark" (p.187) suggesting a living and interconnected natural world.

Also, the damage to the environment closely mirrors the protagonist's personal suffering. There are images of 'the dying birches' (p.1) spreading like a sickness, the cruel display of 'a heron with its neck broken' (p.109), and trapped animals "they'd nailed it to the tree" (p. 109) in the novel all revealing a pattern of victimization. Human intrusions such as noisy motorboats, newly constructed 'the power dam', and logging activities demonstrate the clash between mechanical progress and untouched nature. Gradually, the protagonist realizes that her earlier choices, including the abortion and guilt associated with the destruction of life 'whatever it is, part of myself' (p.183), are connected to this larger pattern of disregard for life. These insights encourage her to question human-centered thinking and move toward a more respectful relationship with the living world. Such intrusions also highlight how 'American' consumer culture and modernization erode both local Canadian identity and ecological integrity.

In her novel Atwood repeatedly draws parallels between the protagonist's physical experiences and the condition of nature. Both are shown as vulnerable to intrusion, fragmentation, and control. The narrator's recollection of her abortion, marked by the painful admission that "I could have said No" (p. 145) and later "I killed it," reveals the lasting psychological impact of the lost foetus, which she imagines as "a dead thing." This personal trauma is linked to recurring images of death in nature, particularly the mutilated "heron" and

the narrator's obsessive search for her father beneath the lake, where she eventually realizes that "it wasn't my father." The trauma of her abortion creates deep psychological effects. Through these interconnected images of bodily and environmental violation, Atwood suggests that personal suffering and ecological destruction arise from similar patterns of domination and disregard for life.

The Patriarchal attitudes in *Surfacing* are manifested in various forms, including the objectification of Anna during David's filmmaking project, where he repeatedly commands her to 'Take it off' because 'he wanted her to.' The novel also critiques social expectations surrounding marriage and motherhood as well as the institutional control associated with childbirth in 'a hospital.' These practices reflect a broader tendency to treat both female bodies and natural resources as objects of management and exploitation. In response, the protagonist undertakes a symbolic process of liberation: 'I tore it up' (p.180) signifies her rejection of restrictive intellectual structures, while 'I smashed the mirror' (p.182) marks a refusal of imposed self-images. As she distances herself from artificial social identities, she begins to experience a profound connection with nature, declaring, 'I am a tree' (p.187). This transformation enables her to perceive herself as part of a living ecological network in which 'the trees are breathing.' She begins to perceive her body as continuous with the living environment: vitality moves through her like sap in trees, and she regains the ability to feel deeply and powerfully. Her earlier drawings of peaceful natural scenes contrast with aggressive masculine imagery, revealing an alternative vision of coexistence. By choosing to conceive naturally with Joe, whom she views as less corrupted by dominant values, she reclaims her creative capacity and restores balance between destruction and generation. Ultimately, by embracing the possibility of motherhood and affirming 'I will have it' (p.184), she reclaims her

creative power and moves toward a renewed harmony between body, identity, and nature.

The protagonist's lack of a name in the novel is very significant reflecting resistance to rigid categories often associated with patriarchal thinking. As she grows closer to the natural world, her way of narrating shifts from limitation and disconnection toward greater flexibility and awareness. Silence, traditionally linked to her mother and feminine experience, emerges as a meaningful form of expression—an alternative language rooted in the body rather than abstract words. This shift allows her to move beyond imposed social roles and access deeper instincts. Also, She comes to understand that she shares a common vulnerability with the land and its creatures under pressures of modernization and external influence. However, she consciously rejects both passive victimhood and aggressive retaliation. Instead, she seeks a creative, non-destructive way of being. Her final sense of oneness 'I am a place' (p.187) represents the culmination of identity formation through ecological immersion. All these developments underscore the novel's argument that genuine selfhood arises not through domination but through respectful relationship with the living world.

While analyzing the text, it is pertinent to note how Atwood's narrative techniques shape the reader's understanding of ecological and feminist concerns. The novel's first-person narration is characterized by fragmentation, discontinuity, and shifting perceptions, all of which reflect the protagonist's fractured sense of self. The lines in Chapter 18 such as "I realized I didn't know what my face looked like." reflects the narrator's alienation from her own identity and suggests a fractured selfhood. Rather than presenting identity as something stable or coherent, Atwood constructs subjectivity through a complex process of remembering, forgetting, and reinterpretation. The text has a non-linear narrative structure which mirrors the protagonist's gradual recovery of repressed memories and transforming the act of narration

into a process of psychological excavation. The lines which appear in Chapter 17 "The divorce was not legal; it was a lie" is one of the best examples of suppressed memory and unreliable narration.

The narrator's account is thus further complicated by its unreliability. For much of the novel, she suppresses the traumatic memory of her abortion and replaces it with a fabricated narrative of marriage and separation. In Chapter 14 we find the line "I could have said No but I didn't; that made me one of them too" shows her gradual confrontation with her abortion and her recognition of complicity within oppressive structures. This distortion of personal history reveals the profound effects of patriarchal power on female subjectivity, demonstrating how dominant social discourses can shape, conceal, and fragment women's experiences. As the protagonist confronts these repressed memories, the narrative becomes increasingly fluid and introspective, paralleling her growing awareness of her interconnectedness with the natural environment. The recovery of memory thus functions not merely as a psychological process but also as an ecological awakening through which the boundaries between self and nature become progressively less rigid.

Atwood's fragmented chronology also constitutes a critique of the linear notions of progress associated with patriarchal modernity and capitalist development. In place of a conventional narrative movement toward resolution, the novel privileges cyclical patterns of memory, return, and regeneration that echo the rhythms of the natural world. Such formal choices challenge hierarchical modes of thought that separate human beings from nature and privilege rational mastery over ecological interdependence. Consequently, the ecofeminist vision of *Surfacing* is embedded not only in its thematic exploration of nature, gender, and identity but also in its narrative structure, which formally enacts processes of relationality, uncertainty, transformation, and becoming.

The ecological concerns of *Surfacing* cannot be separated from questions of Canadian national identity. Throughout the novel, "America" functions not merely as a geographical entity but as a symbol of consumerism, technological domination, militarism, and ecological exploitation. The damaged landscape, motorboats, logging operations, and power projects represent forms of intrusion associated with capitalist modernization.

Atwood's concern with environmental destruction parallels her broader critique of cultural imperialism. In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, she identifies victimization as a central theme of Canadian literature. *Surfacing* extends this concern by portraying both the Canadian wilderness and female subjectivity as vulnerable to external domination. From an ecofeminist perspective, the exploitation of nature, the control of women's bodies, and the marginalization of Canadian identity emerge from similar structures of power. The novel therefore links ecological resistance with cultural resistance, presenting environmental preservation as inseparable from the protection of local identity and autonomy.

## CONCLUSION

Atwood's *Surfacing* offers a rich exploration of the links between nature, the female body, and the formation of identity within an ecofeminist framework. The protagonist's emergence from both literal waters and emotional depths symbolizes renewal and the possibility of living in greater alignment with the natural order. Atwood's work urges readers to recognize the shared roots of gender oppression and ecological harm, advocating instead for approaches grounded in care, balance, and intrinsic respect for all life.

Although the protagonist appears to achieve a profound sense of unity with nature, the ending resists simple interpretation. Her temporary withdrawal from society and

identification with animals and plants can be read as a rejection of patriarchal and capitalist structures. However, Atwood does not present this retreat as a complete or sustainable solution. The protagonist eventually decides to return to human society rather than remain permanently isolated in the wilderness. This decision suggests that ecological consciousness must engage with social reality rather than escape from it. The novel therefore avoids offering a utopian alternative and instead foregrounds the difficulty of constructing non-hierarchical relationships within existing social structures. Furthermore, the narrator's visions and psychological instability raise questions about the reliability of her ecological revelations. The ending remains deliberately open-ended, encouraging readers to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of ecofeminist transformation. Rather than providing definitive answers, Atwood presents ecological and feminist liberation as an ongoing process of negotiation and self-awareness.

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