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AN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*

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ABSTRACT

Environmental concerns constitute the need of the hour in the light of the havoc that has been wreaked by humans on their ecology in recent times. If we fail to realise the significance of the impact of the degenerating environmental conditions now, then an apocalyptic probability seems imminent in the near future. Literature, which can be broadly defined as a study of life, is not untouched by the critical changes that manifest themselves around it. Hence, a relatively new branch called Ecocriticism, is gaining currency in literary studies whereby the literary texts are analysed in relation to the physical environment portrayed therein.

This paper attempts to read the novel *Surfacing*, written by the Booker Prize winning Canadian author, poet, critic and environmental activist Margaret Atwood, through the lens of ecocriticism. Atwood has delved not only into the changing ecological Canadian scenario as an aftereffect of what she calls 'Americanisation', but through her protagonist and her journey of self-exploration, Atwood portrays nature as the elemental force that makes a man realise the essence of humanity, and only in oneness with nature, with a complete surrender to the ways of nature and in fully embracing nature as opposed to the manmade materialistic society, can one attain harmony both within and without, and also self-sustainability, as dawns on the protagonist in the course of the novel.

Key Words: Environment, Literary texts, Ecocriticism, *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood, Changing ecology of Canada, Self exploration, Self sustainability, Oneness with nature

In the present scenario of degenerating environmental conditions, an apocalyptic probability seems imminent in the near future. The all-around innovative and technical innovations and developments that have upgraded our standard of living to a great extent have simultaneously wreaked havoc on our ecology. Thus the need for sustainability assumes mammoth proportions if we are to keep the world inhabitable for our future generations. Sustainability will help achieve a balance in the ecology. In this age of 'instant gratification' we refuse to look beyond our needs and desires but this irresponsible attitude has contributed to the steady decline of our environment. Sustainability will provide the key to "how we might live in harmony with the natural world around us, protecting it from damage and destruction" (Mason).

The United Nations Millennium Declaration also talks about sustainable development, at the same time giving due importance to economic and social development as well as environmental protection. The United Nations Agenda 21 “specifies culture as the fourth domain of sustainable development” (“sustainability”) in addition to economic, ecological and political sustainability.

This brings us to the field of literature, being a constituent of culture, and also as literature has always been a rumination of life. It has been a matter of controversy whether it is life that gets reflected in literature or whether it is literature that is an echo of life. But assuredly literature has always kept pace with the changing social, economical, political and philosophical trends and the relationship between the two can be said to be of a symbiotic nature. So it is not a matter of consternation that the growing ecological concerns have also seeped into literary studies.

A relatively new branch of literary criticism, called ecocriticism, is the direct off-shoot of this growing pre-occupation with our environment. The term ecocriticism was coined in the 1970s by the combination of ‘ecology’ and ‘criticism’. It “designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human activities” (Abrams and Harpham 81).

The relationship of literature and nature dates back to the earliest recorded literature in the Western World and can be traced to the Hebrew Bible. The literary genre called ‘nature writing’ was mainly initiated in England in the work of Gilbert White (1789) and in America, in William Bertram’s *Travels* (1791).

As the realization gradually sunk in that we have endangered our very habitat by pollution, exploitation of natural resources, industrialization, urbanisation and over population, there was felt a desperate need to check the same. This earmarked the emergence of ‘ecocriticism’ as a significant field of study, which in turn led to the establishment of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) and its representative journal ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment).

Cheryll Glotfelty, regarded as the founder of ecocriticism in the US, defines ecocriticism as “The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Barry 239). Eco criticism in the US owns its existence to the writings of three main American writers- Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau’s masterpiece *Walden* contains his autobiographical account of self exile from this materialistic world when he lived for two years in close proximity to nature on the shore of Walden Pond.

In England, the Pre-Romantics and the Romantic poets elaborated upon their affinity to nature, the chief among which was Wordsworth who advocated the theory of Pantheism, “The doctrine that God is the transcendent reality of which the material universe and human beings are only manifestations: it involves a denial of God’s personality and expresses a tendency to identify God and nature” (“Pantheism”). The American Transcendentalists also shared this belief and propounded in their writings that “the soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world and contains what the world contains” (“American Transcendentalists”).

Thus, it is evident that nature and literature have been closely aligned but then what is novel about eco criticism is the conviction that “ what is at stake in their enterprise is not only the well being but ultimately, the survival of the human race” (Abrams and Harpham 82). Ecocriticism wants to replace the Western philosophy of Anthropocentrism that regards human beings as superior to their co-existing natural forces which also incorporates the animal world, with Ecocentrism, that delegates equal consideration to all beings, including man.

Peter Barry has discussed the four areas which constitute the ‘outdoor environment’ in nature writing. Area one- ‘the wilderness’ or ‘pure nature’ as he calls it. Area two- ‘the scenic sublime’; Area three- ‘the countryside’; Area four- ‘the domestic picturesque’. He asserts that most of ‘nature writing’, is related to Area two and Area three, whereas Area one - greatly evinced in the works of American Transcendentalists –“ is entered as if instinctively by those who ‘find’ themselves” (Barry 247).

This aspect of nature writing can also be seen, to some extent in the novel *Surfacing* by the Booker Prize winning Canadian author, poet, critic and environmental activist Margaret Atwood. The universal aspects of human experience as portrayed through literature transcend all boundaries of space and time. Thus, though the setting and background of the novel is eminently Canadian, yet the experience and journey of self

exploration of the nameless protagonist, viewed through the lens of ecocriticism, and hence embodying the changing ecological Canadian scenario as an after effect of what she calls 'Americanisation', can easily be read as the story of any one human being irrespective of the boundaries of race, colour, creed and nationality. Atwood portrays nature as the elemental force that makes a man realise the essence of humanity, and only in oneness with nature, with a complete surrender to the ways of nature and in fully embracing nature as opposed to the man made materialistic society, can one attain harmony both within and without, and also self-sustainability, as dawns on the protagonist in the course of the novel.

The novel begins with the nameless protagonist journeying to the outback of Canada with three acquaintances. It gradually emerges that she is going back home after a lapse of many years. Through her remembrances we come to know that her mother is dead, her brother – her only sibling, is living in some other part of the world and her father "a voluntary recluse" (8), who was the only one living in their old home built on a small island, has gone missing. For her co-travellers, David and Anna (a married couple) and Joe (her live-in partner), it is a different experience altogether of getting to know and discover nature at close hand, but for her it is a quest for 'truth'. Explicitly the 'truth' is to find out the whereabouts of her father but the 'implicit truth' is to search her own 'essence' and to make herself 'whole again'. She reminisces about a husband and a child she has left behind, a long time back, and this is what alienated her from her parents who were unable to understand and accept this sort of escapism, as they had brought her up with what she considers as old fashioned values and family feelings:

Their own innocence, the reason I couldn't tell them; perilous innocence, closing them in glass, their artificial garden, greenhouse. They didn't teach us about evil, they didn't understand about it, how could I describe it to them? They were from another age, prehistoric, when everyone got married and had a family, children growing in the yard like sunflowers; remote as Eskimos or mastodons. (184)

Her journey back home makes her perceive all the new signs of development and modernisation that have sprung up even in this remote Canadian outback and the resultant destruction of the environment. Her various observations are as follows: "the white birches are dying"(1); "dead elm skeletons" (5); "cuttings dynamited in pink and grey granite"(5); "Nothing is the same. I don't know the way anymore" (10). On their way, they came across a gas station where four stuffed mooses dressed in human clothes have been displayed. The only lame explanation that the protagonist is able to give for such atrocity is "Those weren't here before" (12) but the others are not able to identify with her pain, for them it is just something out of the ordinary. She compares the old road which was "dirt, full of bumps and potholes; it followed the way the land went, up and down the hills and around the cliffs and boulders" (12), with the new road "paved and straight, two lanes with a line down the middle" (12). On arriving near the village she observes "the two roads joining here but widened – rock blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air, needles reddening" (13). Further signs of development become evident when she talks about the old bridge that had been replaced by the concrete bridge "enormous, monumental, dwarfing the village. It's the dam that controls the lake" (16). Going through the village, she points at the ever increasing urbanization, because as expected the villages had not expanded in proportion to the growing population, "These days the children probably move to the city" (17). Talking with a resident she realizes the harm done to the sea life due to the fishing done for sport. "...business is bad this year ...on account a word is around the lake's fished out. They're going to other lakes..." (30).

She assesses her childhood, spent in the midst of nature in this rural surrounding, away from all agents of human destruction, as having been "a good childhood; it was in the middle of the war, flecked grey newsreels I never saw, bombs, and concentration camps, the leaders searing at the crowds from inside their uniforms, pain and useless death, flags rippling in time to the anthems. But I didn't know about that till later....At the time it felt like peace" (17).

On reaching her cabin, built on a small remote island by her father, it appears to her that the house has become smaller and greyer with years. Anna comments that she must have had a different childhood from the other city dwellers, living in this out of the way place, "It must have been weird.... Cut off from everything like that" (39). For them, it is a novelty to live in such a rural habitat, picking wood, lighting up the fire to cook

food, picking up vegetables from the garden patch. Even the silence seems unusual after the deafening city noises. "Birdsong wakes me. It's pre-dawn, earlier than the traffic starts in the city...." (47). They were not used to sleeping as soon as it got dark and had to do without their regular forms of entertainment like T.V. and thus resort to playing dominoes and cards or simply reading books. The protagonist does not want to stay here in the outback but considers it a filial duty to search for her missing father. However, the flood of memories pulls her backward into her past and forces her to analyse herself, so that she wants to escape and "go back to where there is electricity and distraction...filling the time without it is an effort" (61).

She also feels resentful that her father had vanished without leaving any kind of trail behind him. After her abortion she had severed all contacts with her parents, not even coming for her mother's funeral, but now she had to make an involuntary return to this wilderness where her parents had decided to shift permanently. Her father had wanted to move away from all human society, after his retirement from the job of investigating trees for the paper company or the government. "He didn't dislike people, he merely found them irrational; animals, he said, were more consistent, their behaviour at least was predictable. To him that's what Hitler exemplified: Not the triumph of evil but the failure of reason" (71).

The exploitation of animals is one of the recurrent themes in the novel. In a light hearted discussion David observes, "This country is founded on the bodies of dead animals. Dead fish, dead seals, and historically dead beavers, the beaver is to this country what the black man is to the United States" (46).

Later, when the protagonist takes her accomplices for fishing, she is unable to kill the captured fish for a second time and is forced to confess to herself, "...the fish is whole, I couldn't any more, I had no right to. We didn't need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they call it, these were no longer the right reasons" (154). This appears in sharp contrast to the first time she fishes with her city friends a few days back, where she herself hooks on a live, squealing frog as a bait on the fishing rod and whacks off the captive fish with the knife. Then she describes the incident in the following words, "One of its eyes is bulging out and I feel a little sick. It's because I've killed something, made it dead; but I know that's irrational, killing certain things is all right, food and enemies, fish and mosquitoes" (80).

From this change of heart, we can only presume that the proximity to nature is stirring her conscience and is establishing a deeper symbiotic relation between her soul and nature and thus, she is beginning to see the atrocity committed by the humans on nature in its truer light.

Her newly emergent empathy for nature and animals makes her release the frogs that she had caught to bait the fish. She recalls high school when each frog was dissected for the sake of science, along with the other animals, with their intestines oozing out, plastic pumped into the pickled cat showing red for the arteries and blue for the veins, searching for the brain of the worm. These scientific specimens donated their life to the cause of science. "Anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: We practiced on them first" (154).

This unnatural sacrificial massacre of the animals makes her compare them to Christ because she reasons that they die for us:

Anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ....The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people, hunters in the fall killing the deer, that is Christ also....We are eaters of death, dead Christ - flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life. Canned spam, canned Jesus, even the plants must be Christ. But we refuse to worship; the body worships with blood and muscle but the thing in the Knob head will not, wills not to, the head is greedy, it consumes but does not give thanks. (179)

It was not only the huge atrocities perpetrated on nature, but even the little thoughtless acts of irresponsibility that scarred the beautiful, unruffled façade of nature. On reaching an island the protagonist finds a fireplace built on the shore, surrounded by trash; orange peelings, tin cans and greasy paper, that fills her with disgust; "It was like dogs pissing on a fence, As if the endlessness, anonymous water and unclaimed land, compelled

them to leave their signature, stake their territory, and garbage was the only thing they had to do it with" (140).

The most pathetic incident of merciless killing is when the protagonist comes upon the most blatant example of senseless human action whereby a dead heron had been tied upside down on a tree branch, with its wings open and a mashed up eye. The bird had been killed for no apparent reason. "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" (149).

Her instinctive reaction is to blame the American tourists for this heinous crime, which seems justifiable when she sees further traces of their presence like "Newly broken stubs, wood and pith exposed like splintered bones, ferns trampled...their tractor tread footsteps dinting the mud path in front of me like excavations, craters" (151).

This further substantiates the already deeply embedded catalogue of enormities sketched in the mind of the protagonist from previous confrontations with Americans. She has a host of unpleasant episodes to relate to in the storehouse of her memory. " ...the ones who stuffed the pontoons of their seaplane with illegal fish, the ones who had a false bottom to their car, two hundred lake trout on dry ice...They got drunk and chased loons in their powerboats for fun,... not giving it a chance to fly, until it drowned or got chopped up in the propeller blades. Senseless killing, it was a game" (155).

Looking at their campfire at night fills the protagonist with so much rage, that she curses the Americans and regards them as her natural enemies. "I wished evil towards them: Let them suffer, I prayed" (158). She wanted some kind of natural retribution for their devastation of nature.

Her wrath further heightens when she comes across their smiling countenances the very next morning. She concludes that not only were the 'Killers' stupid, ignorant, reckless, irresponsible, but they also reveled in their power over the lesser animals, and were devoid of all conscience. "For them the only things worthy of life were human, their own kind of human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks, laminated" (163). This makes the philosophy of anthropocentrism come alive through the American attitude.

When she comes to know that these people were not Americans but Canadians like themselves, her anger is not abated. For her, one was an American, an enemy, irrespective of the nationality, if one indulged in slaughtering and butchering nature, because this is what modernisation was doing to the humans - making them inhuman. This process of Americanisation was spreading rapidly like a disease, like a virus, taking control of the brain and the cells, paralysing their innate affinity to nature. "If you look like them and talk like them then you are them" (165). She further goes on to trace out and understand the origin of this amputation from nature, as she surmises that it originated on this planet, and did not come from aliens but from the earth dwellers themselves.

The protagonist realizes the full magnitude of the havoc that has been and will further be wreaked out by this process of Americanisation. She compares the devastating after-effects of this process to the annihilation caused by Hitler, "the great evil, many tentacle, ancient and indestructible as the Devil" (166). Though she now had the consolation of knowing that Hitler was finally gone, but a new evil, just as horrifying and destructive as Hitler, had sprung up, penetrating and exuding all Americans, alias all humans who were bent on destroying nature. This makes the protagonist question "Are the Americans worse than Hitler? It was like cutting up a tapeworm, the pieces grew" (166). On the return journey when once more she encounters the dead heron hanging upside down, smelling worse than ever with the flies revolving around it, she realizes that the exploited animals had no voice with which to seek justification from humans, "I felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands, as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it...The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human" (167). She realizes she maybe over reacting to a stray incident of a dead bird while there were other more serious happenings like wars, riots and massacres, to claim her empathy but she reasons out that there was always an explanation for them whereas "the death of the heron was causeless, undiluted" (167) and that was the most disturbing thing about it.

She talks about her brother's laboratory where he kept some animals trapped as samples for experimentation. Once when some of them died due to starvation or cold, she let out the others. This made him real angry with her and she forbore to repeat this act of compassion in the future. She concedes that she had been a coward then to have let them be exterminated in such an apathetic way by her own brother.

On a note of self analysis and self discovery, she also accepts her own cruelty, when egged on by her brother, the two of them caught the mottled kind of leeches and threw them into the campfire. She says that "I didn't mind that so much, if only they would die; but they would writhe out and crawl painfullyThen he would pick them up with two sticks and put them back in the flames again" (169).

This makes her comprehend that this streak of cruelty, of gaining mastery over the lesser mortals, was an ingrained feature of humans, as manifested in her own childhood behaviour. "It wasn't the city that was wrong...we weren't better than they were; we just had different victims. To become like a little child again, a barbarian, a vandal: it was in us too, it was innate" (169).

In her quest for her missing father, she comes across some sketches done by her father which point to the Indian rock paintings belonging to the Pre-historic age that were probably being explored by him. This gives her an important clue to his probable whereabouts.

She reaches the spot marked on her father's map and dives below into the lake where she has a freakish and alarming experience of seeing a dead thing. "It was below me, drifting towards me from the farthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead" (182).

This plunges her into her past from which she has been running away for so long, and forces her to acknowledge her act of abortion as an act of killing. She realizes that what she had seen under the water was actually the manifestation of her unborn, aborted child. "Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it" (183). She is now able to come out of the escapist cocoon of make believe she has been surviving in, due to the shock she receives on seeing this vision, and candidly accepts her 'husband' as her 'lover', with a wife and children of his own, who had been merely using her for his own ends. The pain and guilt of her abortion had anaesthetized her against all possible future hurts. "I realized I didn't feel much of anything, I hadn't for a long time...since then everything had been glancing off me, it was like being in a vase...." (134).

But this close encounter with death causes her numbness to retreat and she is again converted into a 'feeling being'. "Since then I'd carried that death around inside me, layering it over, a cyst, a tumour, black pearl; the gratitude I felt now....These gods here on the shore or in the water, unacknowledged or forgotten, were the only ones who had ever given me anything I needed; and freely" (185). "...and the gift had been greater... feeling was beginning to seep back into me, I tingled like a foot that's been asleep" (186).

So this then is the great blessing endowed upon her by nature which makes her intact again. This makes her realize the power of nature or of the 'unacknowledged or forgotten gods' as she calls it. She also starts believing that her father had somehow been responsible for her regeneration as he had left the guides and maps to bring her to this very place. She starts thinking that her mother must also have left her a legacy for happiness.

This draws her more and more towards nature and she starts living the pantheistic philosophy that all souls belong to that one universal soul, the soul of nature, which in turn is allied to each individual soul. "If our bodies lived in the earth with only the hair sprouting up through the leafmould it would seem as if that was all we were, filament plants" (192). She then tries to find out ways and means to revert back to nature. She starts viewing all humans as her enemies because "They'd had their chance but they had turned against the gods, and it was time for me to choose sides" (197). She wants to annihilate all humans from this earth, to create more space for the survival of the flora and the fauna. Even the news of the discovery of her father's dead body fails to move her as she begins to comprehend the mystery of life and death. "But nothing has died, everything is alive, everything is waiting to become alive" (203).

To make up for the loss of her dead baby, she knows she must allow Joe, her live-in partner, to copulate with her but she permits him to do this only outside the cabin, in the physical environment, where

she feels herself to be the protected one with her new gained knowledge of the 'power' whereas he is the defenceless one, after which she feels "my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long" (209). As an offering to the 'power' she decides to give birth to her baby by herself in animal fashion without human assistance, and vows to raise it up like a 'god' without teaching it any human language. "I will do it by myself... The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs" (209).

After running away from her friends and eluding their 'city grasp' she emerges from her hiding only after making sure they have left the island leaving her to her natural surroundings. She is happy to be by herself finally and learns to let go of all her past. "I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply" (217).

Now she is able to give in to her grief of being separated from her parents, of putting a barrier between herself and them. She can somehow sense their presence and she wills them to come back to her. It gradually dawns upon her that she must totally surrender herself to nature. This makes her reverse her mirror and then light up a fire to which she makes an offering of all of her drawings, sketches, paint tubes, brushes, her career, her supposed wedding ring and all her material possessions so as to free herself from all bondages. She leaves her cabin to start living outdoors using a blanket as her only covering, waiting for the time till she would develop a fur like the animals, because she feels that "the gods are demanding, absolute, they went all" (231). She starts surviving on whatever natural produce she can find and even starts leaving her 'dung, droppings' on the ground with mud kicked over it. She starts feeling one with nature, "The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word, I lean against 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" (236).

Then one day she has a vision of her mother as she used to look in her youth, feeding the jays and eventually she also turns into a jay and flies away.

People brought along by Joe, to search for her on the island, leave empty handed as she eludes them because when she smells their presence it brings "nausea, It's stale air, bus stations and nicotine smoke, mouths lined with soiled plush, acid taste of copper wiring or money" (239). After this incident she has a vision of her father standing near the fence, and it appears to her that he regrets having violated the laws of nature by intruding upon her by building the cabin and the fences. Now he wants to merge into nature and changes into a fish, returning to water.

The next morning she wakes up with the realization that both her parents have gone back into nature, "back into the earth, the air, the water" (245) and so now the gods have granted her the permission to go anywhere and do anything as she was the "only one left alive on the island" (245) and now she is totally recuperated and liberated from all shackles of her past life.

It becomes evident to the protagonist that nature has acted out its course and made her 'whole' again. But this escapist attitude on her part will not lead to deliverance or salvation, either for her or for nature. She perceives that from now on she is on her own with no external support. "No gods to help me now....They've receded, back to the past, inside the skull" (247). Along with this, comes the determination that she must go back to civilization instead of retreating from it, back to face the 'Americans' who are a very real threat to this world of ours. "They exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (247).

This calls for a momentous change in attitude moving from laissez-faire to total involvement and active intervention in an attempt to check the process of 'Americanisation' i.e. the conversion of people irrespective of geographical segregation, into mechanical robots with their increasing dependence on technology, in a bid to improve their quality of life, but at the cost of degradation and exploitation of the natural resources and disturbance caused to the ecological balance.

She concedes that, "I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been...withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death" (249).

Thus the moral message of the novel comes across loud and clear. We may or may not have a transcendental experience like the protagonist, but nevertheless we must realize that this alienation and abuse of nature has to be stopped at all costs if life has to be prolonged on this planet. The ecocritical reading of *Surfacing* advocates adopting ecocentrism and renouncing anthropocentrism altogether, thus giving due consideration and respect to all forms of life on this earth, instead of viewing man as the superior specie with a right to exploit nature for his own personal welfare, because it is only by surrendering and yielding to nature, can we discover the quintessence of humanity.

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