

Taming of Women and Nature in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

Born in Ottawa, capital of Canada in November, 1939, Atwood spent her early childhood in Quebec Island where her father, being a biologist, used to take his children to the Island along with him. Her entire family had a scientific background and kept keen interest in nature and natural beauty of the Island. Atwood uses her writing as a powerful weapon to fight for vital issues like global warming and subtle and systematic destruction of nature in the name of urbanization. Drawing a parallel between the exploitation of nature because of so-called development and that of women by men in patriarchal society, she warns humanity against the dangers of misuse of pesticides and radioactive substances. In *Surfacing* her protagonist, though a victim of male torture, as nature is that of industrialization, comes out as a survivor in the end. Having rejected the city life she comes to the Quebec Island in search of her father but her search turns out to be the search of her own identity. Atwood shows that the natural life of Canada is completely shattered and she has lost the perennial beauty of her landscape and looks more like a typical American colony. In *The Handmaid's Tale* she creates an imaginary state called Gilead where all men have become sterile and women barren because of illegal ecological malpractices. Atwood has depicted the crucial issue of environmental degradation brought in by the technocratic society and how it has affected the life of women on this planet. There is no denying the fact that while talking about the evil of taming women on one hand and nature on other hand, Atwood does not defy male rights but wants that women's rights are not violated and denied.

KEYWORDS

Global Warming; Industrialization; Ecological Degradation.

Margaret Atwood's name shines brightly in the literary world because of her focus on the issue of female subjugation and nature's exploitation in the present-day society, which is dominated by industrialization and urbanization. Born in Ottawa, capital of Canada on November 18, 1939 Atwood

spent her early childhood in Quebec Island of Canada where her father, a biologist working on the Quebec Island, used to take his children to the Island along with him. Her entire family had a scientific background and developed keen interest in nature and natural beauty of the Island. Atwood spent her childhood in northern wilderness on the Island with her brother and this close contact with nature during her childhood left an indelible mark on her, which is reflected explicitly in almost all her writings, especially in *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Atwood uses her writing as a powerful weapon to fight for vital issues like global warming and subtle and systematic destruction of nature in the name of urbanization. She urges the reader to initiate action to save nature and Mother Earth. Drawing a parallel between the exploitation of nature and that of women by men in patriarchal society in her novels, she warns humanity against the dangers of misuse of pesticides and radioactive substances. In order to delineate the perils of modern industrial growth she creates an imaginary state called Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where all men have become sterile and women barren because of illegal ecological malpractices. Similarly, in *Surfacing* her protagonist though a victim of male torture, like nature abused through industrialization, comes out as a survivor in the end. Having rejected the city life she comes to the Quebec Island in search of her father but her search turns out to be the search of her own identity. In *Surfacing* the novelist shows that the natural life of Canada is completely shattered and has become a typical American colony. The unnamed protagonist finds that Canada is now a victim of American civilization as she is a victim of male subjection. Atwood has taken American civilization as a severe ecological error, because for her American

civilization means tampering with nature for selfish motives.

The unnamed narrator of the novel finds the trauma of abortion a scar left by the criminal act of men on women, with an intention to kill their bodies and minds. The protagonist is forcibly victimized by modern American machines (abortion) as Suka Joshua also rightly points out: *"She feels their rejection of nature and the strong presence of American machinations. She could smell missiles, war presence and death everywhere."*

The protagonist of the novel comes to the Quebec Island along with her friends David, Anna, and her present day lover Joe. Her father used to live near a lake in Northern Western Canadian Island, which according to the city dwellers is an uncultivated and uncivilized land full of wilderness. She returns to the island after a long period of nine years and her search for her father goes concurrently with the undercover search of Canadian National Identity which is losing fast its value under American influence. As the novel opens the unnamed protagonist makes derogatory comments:

"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 sea-planes for hire."[Joshua, Suka 103]

Here Atwood overtly shows that American factors are responsible for the destruction of Canadian Island. At the very outset of the novel Atwood writes about the artificialities of the city life. To Atwood this is not Canadian culture but American impact which reduces women and nature to a status of a commodity, meant to be used by men for their selfish ends.

The American influence is shown so powerfully in the novel that initially the narrator feels that she is on the wrong Island or might have arrived to a wrong road because landscapes from both sides have completely changed. There are a few more shops and restaurants which earlier

were not here; she says: "Either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am." (S 5)

Atwood has delineated that this overgrown influence of Americanization is nothing but the heavy loss of Canada's own identity. K. Reshmi does not exaggerate when she states:

While searching for her missing father in the wilderness and under the lake, the female protagonist recognizes the extent to which nature has been victimized by the Americans. Her evolving awareness of herself as a 'victim' is parallel to this recognition. The first sentence of the novel indicates the death of the white birches. [Surfacing 3]

Atwood has depicted Canada as a colony which is craving for its identity as it is overwhelmed by technological growth. She makes a severe attack on the prejudice that Americans are powerful, cultured and more civilized people. She wants Canadians to be firm and not to lose their power to remain cultured and innocent under such technocratic pressures. Presenting a clash between America and Canada, she illustrates another clash between culture and nature in *Surfacing*. She has touched upon the theme of dominance and survival, which can be seen against the dominance of American influence over the survival of Canadian national identity. The protagonist wants to see the old familiar sites on the Island but, on the contrary, finds numerous changes which are the symbol of American commercialism such as power lines, gravel pit, a new paved road and above all stuffed moose with an American flag on the terrace of a local Gas station. She observes aptly :

What they're after is the three stuffed moose on a platform near the pumps: they're dressed in human clothes and wired standing up on their hind legs, a father moose with a trench-coat and a pipe in his mouth, a mother moose in a print dress and flowered

hat and a little boy moose in short pants, a stripped jersey and a baseball cap, waving an American flag. (Surfacing 11)

She takes all these physical changes as symbol of American influence and her search for the exact road is similar to the Canadian search for the right way to get rid of this American invasion.

"The company built the whole thing', I say' and David says 'Rotten capitalist bastards' and begins to whistle again." She is not able to understand whether she is on a foreign territory or on homeland: "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (S 9).

According to Atwood Quebec Island has become mini America or a small American colony. The protagonist shows her hatred for American tourism when she meets first American character in the novel, an owner of the local motel and his son Claude, who sells beer bottles. She describes them as the committed capitalists as they ask extra money for the beer and a boat ride trip to Quebec Island. David calls them: "Rotten capitalist bastards." Atwood finds these Americans posing severe ecological threat to the Canadian wildlife, as they come to the Island for their recreation. The incident of killing a heron is used in the novel as a symbol of slow extinction of Canadian wildlife because of the overgrowth of American tourism industry. These Americans kill Canadian wildlife for their pleasure of fishing and hunting.

At many places in the novel Atwood exhibits her unhappiness over the needless killing of animals. She shows her protagonist using a frog as bait to catch the fish but feels very heavy in her heart. Anna also seems an animal lover when she could not bear killing it for food. She says,

"Anna covers her eyes and says 'Ugh'." The protagonist even after killing the fish feels very bad, she

regrets for whatever she has done "I feel little sick, it's because I've killed something, made it dead."(S 80)

The novelist shows how the use of motor boats by Americans spoils the crystal clear water of the lake due to leakage of gasoline from these motorboats. This oil leak is dangerous for aquatic life in the lake. These American tourists mindlessly throw garbage in to the lake which either floats on the surface or gets deposited at the bottom, resulting in floods and a heavy loss of wildlife as well as human beings every year. Animals as victims of tourism and environmental pollution, get prominent image in *Surfacing*. This image shows Americans as victimizers and Canadian wildlife and nature as victims. When the protagonist of the novel rejects the present world and chooses to live in nature, she finds herself akin to the animals of the Island. She chooses to be an animal because being animal she can perform the function of procreation without any control, which is necessary for getting her power back –the power of being female, and thus, the power of being able to reproduce.

Atwood's other novel *The Handmaid's Tale* also depicts her concern for nature and women's subjugated condition. Offred, the protagonist of the novel becomes the voice for the suppression of women and nature in the Republic of Gilead. This totalitarian, theocratic state becomes a substitute of United States of America. Here on account of alarming low reproduction rate handmaids are given a duty to bear children for women in elite families who have trouble in conceiving because most of the men in the society are sterile and women barren and this is happening because of the over consumption of pesticides and the aftermath of other nuclear pollution in the name of progress or urbanization. Here women (handmaids) are reduced to the status of reproductive machines. As the female body is controlled

by the male dominant society, gardens, flowers, trees and the grass are controlled by the repressive machinery of Gilead. They all serve as symbols of female fertility as is clear from the fact that all handmaids greet one another in the name of nature:

'Blessed be the fruit', she says to me, the accepted greeting among us, 'May the Lord open,' I answer, the accepted response."[*The Handmaid's Tale* 29]

All kinds of flowers and the trees can be grown in the confined gardens only as the garden of the Serena Joy in the novel. "This garden is the domain of the Commander's wife. Looking out through my shatterproof window I've often seen her in it" (HT 22) and all these gardens will be fenced and well organized under wire barricades. Offred rarely mentions any area in Gilead where she finds a garden in full bloom:

"A willow, weeping catkins; around the edges, the flower borders, in which the daffodils are now fading and the tulips are opening their cups, spilling out color. The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem; as if they had been cut and are beginning to heal there" (HT 22).

She often compares her own confinement with the confinement of the nature in the form of gardens in Gilead. Offred learns that the stunted growth of the plants in the garden of Serena Joy is caused by radioactive influence, which is also the reason behind women's sterility in Gilead. The women are made captive and physically confined to their roles of servants, handmaids, wives and reduced to the uncanny role of laborers to clean nuclear waste. As women cannot think beyond their long dresses and veils, nature too cannot flourish beyond the boundaries of the fixed gardens of the Gilead.

Offred finds similarity between her own miserable plight and the unfortunate condition of nature, because both are being exploited by the male dominant society.

Handmaids have to repopulate Gilead with new healthy population and nature has to refresh the polluted atmosphere of Gilead. When Offred enters the commander's house for the first time she finds the sign of fertility among the rain drops of last night. She ruminates:

"It had rained during the night; the grass to either side is damp, the air humid. Here and there are worms, evidence of the fertility of the soil, caught by the sun, half dead; flexible and pink, like lips." (HT 27)

he thinks that nature is with her and this time she will get pregnant as nature has given her the signal. She is much quailed as it is her last chance or she will be declared as 'unwoman' and will be sent to colonies to clear nuclear waste. The very presence of nature which is confined in Gilead regime provokes the Offred's desire to break all the physical and mental control upon her. Without fears and fences she finds the atmosphere of Gilead very dry and barren:

"Not a dandelion in sight here, the lawns are picked clean. I cling for one, just one, rubbishy and insolently random and hard..."(HT 224)

The image of plain dandelion which is growing in the grass of Gilead is enough to encourage her to go for her freedom. Sometimes the bounty of nature and its lushness can be seen in Offred's sexual desires, when she kisses Nick she has the feel of the smell of earth and damp grass. Not only this, her act of sexual intercourse with Nick is inspired by weeds and the smell of the earth. She describes Nick as thin as a withered flower of Serena Joy's garden: "In Serena's parlor, with the dried flowers, on the Chinese carpet, his thin body" (HT 109).

She does not feel comfortable with the commander at the ceremony; she bears this ceremony as a burden in which neither commander nor Offred seems happy. Even commander's wife also seems helpless whereas the sexual act of Offred with Nick

is the act of physical enjoyment as it is full of nature's exuberance. Atwood writes about the joyless and mechanical sexual act between Offred and the Commander:

It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desires, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena. Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they would be a symptom of frivolity merely...This is not recreation, even for the commander. This is serious business. The commander, too, is doing his duty (HT 105).

In fact, it is only nature which helps Offred to get free from Gilead. Nature enables her to flee from Gilead into a world full of life and natural beauty where she can see her husband and her daughter once again. There are ample instances of physical victimization of women and oppression of nature in the novel. The Eco-feministic reading of the novel shows that the regime tries to control both women and nature by authorizing their natural desires and their primordial roles. Commander wants Offred to dress like a prostitute before taking her to the brothel run by Gilead for the pleasure of the elite class only. He asks her to wear feathers and high heels shoes and put some cheap makeup so that he can make her happy and control her for his sexual pleasure. Offred says:

He's holding a handful; it seems, of feathers, mauve and pink. Now he shakes this out. It's a garment, apparently, and for a woman: there are cups for the breasts, covered in purple sequins (HT 242).

In conclusion one might safely say that Atwood's *Surfacing* portrays victimization of women as well of Canadian Island as women are in an existential condition, the condition of being powerless and helpless, akin to Canada and its natural beauty rendered helpless in the hands of American invaders resorting to eco-errors.

They don't mind in destroying nature's wild beauty in the name of civilization and development nor do they feel guilty in suppressing women. According to them, a woman has no right to give birth to a baby without the name of a husband. When the pregnancy of the protagonist in *Surfacing* and in *The Handmaid's Tale* got terminated in abortion and sterility respectively they feel unfulfilled, emptied, amputated and soulless. It seems that only men can save women by making them pregnant. Atwood has shown a superb, penetrating incident of the traumatic experiences of insemination and abortion in the life of modern women who are struggling for their survival in this technocratic world full of the horrors of industrial growth.

K. Reshmi rightly observes:

"In Surfacing and The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood has depicted the crucial issue of environmental degradation brought in by the technocratic society and how it has affected the life of women on this planet. Preservation of

biodiversity is a must for the continuation of human life on the earth. It is in this context that ecofeminism gains importance as a radical movement. Ecofeminism is not against development, but against those industrial and technological growths which are at ecological cost. It does not oppose science, but the reductionist policy of science, which isolates and fragments life and nature."[65]

There is no denying the fact that while talking about the evil of taming women on one hand and nature on the other, Atwood does not challenge male rights but wants that women's rights are not violated and denied. Her fiction manifests almost all her protagonists coming out from the suffocating confinements of homes and fighting for themselves as well as for nature and environment. They are no more city mongers under the pressure of scientific and technological growth but are nature's true devotees.

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