

Reclaiming Identity and Nature: A Feminist Ecocritical Reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Srishti Sharma

PhD Scholar, University School of Humanities and Social Science, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Dwarka, Delhi, India

Abstract: This paper examines the protagonist's interaction as well as its relationship with nature in Margaret Atwood's novel and its adaptation of the same name, *Surfacing*. The protagonist's return to her childhood island which signifies a reconnection with nature. This journey symbolises her attempt to reclaim her identity and roots. The protagonist's growing awareness of ecological degradation and her rejection of modern, consumerist society aligns with ecocritical concerns.

The paper touches upon themes of dualities and contradictions, revealing inconsistencies in the protagonist's personal life and the patriarchal society. Moreover, on a larger scale, it highlights the conflict between human society and nature. The paper also explores the theme of domination and oppression, which elaborates and analyses the author's language, events and characters in the novel, reflecting the oppression of femininity and nature and how the novel critiques the patriarchal system that dominates and marginalises women and nature.

The paper also highlights how both animals and women are marginalised and violated by a male-dominated, consumerist society. Both groups face threats of consumption and exploitation, deprived of their rights to live freely and independently. Atwood's novels explore these themes by drawing parallels between women and animals, highlighting their oppression.

The paper delves into the protagonist's psychological journey, which involves questioning and deconstructing her identity, reflecting postmodern themes of fragmented and fluid selves. The novel rejects traditional, patriarchal narratives about identity and truth, embracing ambiguity and multiplicity. The protagonist's shifting perceptions of reality and her eventual immersion into the natural world illustrate the postmodern blurring of boundaries between self and environment.

Keywords: Identity, Canadian Wilderness, Enlightenment, Postmodern Self, Other, Binaries

Anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ; if they didn't kill birds and fish they would have killed us. The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people, hunters in the fall killing the deer, that is Christ also. And we eat them, out of cans or otherwise; we are eaters of death, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life. Canned Spam, canned Jesus, even the plants must be Christ.

Surfacing, Margaret Atwood

This quote critiques the commodification of life and death. It challenges the reader to reflect on how humans have distanced themselves from the natural processes of death and sacrifice, reducing them to consumable goods and products. It also highlights the interconnectedness between human existence, nature, and spirituality, suggesting that modern life requires the death of other beings (animals, plants) for human survival, turning even the most sacred symbols (like Christ) into consumable, lifeless things. The novel *Surfacing* maps a similar journey. The protagonist's return to her childhood island in the novel, which symbolises the protagonist's desire to reconnect with her roots that are both personal and ecological. Her home island represents a place of purity, untouched by modern society and its capitalist regime, where she finds space and a place to rediscover her authentic self, free from external pressures. This journey mirrors the protagonist's attempt to reclaim her lost identity by returning to a more primal and uncorrupted state of being. This paper attempts to understand the protagonist's journey which isn't just a physical return to her childhood island but is also an existential one that is deeply intertwined with postmodern ideas of fragmented identity.

In her book *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Susan Griffin deepens the exploration of the interconnectedness between women and nature and she critiques the patriarchal structures that perpetuate women's marginalisation. Griffin contends that women's connection to nature is often appropriated by patriarchal narratives, which cast them as passive, nurturing, and subservient and parallels are often drawn between women's bodies and the earth. She critiques this appropriation, advocating instead for a reclamation of this bond in a way that empowers women to

resist oppression and redefine their roles outside patriarchal expectations. By aligning the struggles of women with those of nature, Griffin calls for a feminist ecocritical perspective that rethinks the treatment of both, challenging destructive hierarchies and promoting a more equitable, symbiotic relationship (Griffin 2016). Griffin's discussion resonates with that of Atwood and her novel *Surfacing*. Both Griffin and Atwood call for a re-evaluation of societal norms that uphold destructive binaries and emphasise more on the need to embrace emotional, historical and ecological dimensions of existence. This attempt by both authors advocates for a more integrated understanding of identity that recognises the shared struggles of women and the environment which this ultimately promotes an important vision of liberation that transcends traditional boundaries. This paper also reflects on the approaches and ideas which Atwood highlights in her novel like the relationship between nature and gender and simultaneously calls for a collective responsibility towards healing and reclaiming agency in the face of systemic oppression.

The blurring of boundaries between the self and the environment is shown in several ways in the novel *Surfacing*, which draws several tangents on its circumference like the themes of identity, interconnectedness and the embodied experiences of the protagonist. This underlines an important inference for readers to consider about identity that how individual identity is shaped by and is inseparable from the surrounding natural world.

It is found that throughout the novel the protagonist sheds multiple layers of the self that she has curated and wears each day that were imposed upon her mind and body by society, patriarchy as well as her relationships. Initially it is found that the protagonist i.e. the unnamed narrator of the novel *Surfacing* carries many narratives about herself for example a narrative of a daughter, a victim of patriarchal oppression, a mother who aborted her child, a lover and even of a passive member of society she lives in. It is important to notice that as she enters the Canadian wilderness, she symbolically rejects these many narratives of the self by removing her clothes and confronting her raw, naked self, seeking an authentic connection to both nature and her inner being. This transformation underpins the postmodernist concept of the self as fluid, where identity is never fixed

but constantly in flux, a cyclical process of continuous deconstruction and reconstruction. Additionally, this also frames the protagonist's journey within the context of Canadian identity, particularly through postcolonial lens. Scholars like Laura Moss argues that Canada despite of being perceived a developed nation, is still negotiating its identity very much like other postcolonial countries that struggle with the vestiges of the British imperialism. The novel also not only critiques patriarchy but also cultural imperialism that can be understood especially by studying the tension between American consumerism and Canadian wilderness. The protagonist's growing realization that, just like the Americans whom she criticises, she too is implicated in the colonisation and exploitation of the land. In this particular light the novel successfully conveys a deep unease about the effects of cultural imperialism and environmental destruction, questioning the protagonist's own complicity in these dynamics.

Understanding this theme through the lens of Canada's postcolonial history interestingly deepens this analysis. Canada's past is characterised by the domination of Indigenous people and the exploitation of natural resources by European settlers. The binary oppositions of coloniser/colonised and male/female are central to this historical narrative, as each pair positions one side as superior to the Other. This dynamic is reflected in the protagonist's personal struggles and her efforts to reclaim her identity in a world defined by such inequalities. The theme of domination is not just an individual experience but is rooted in the broader historical context that informs contemporary Canadian identity.

In her quest for identity the protagonist dismantles the personal and gendered binaries along with the larger power dynamics of the coloniser versus the colonised, victim versus the oppressor. Drawing from Spivak's concept of the "subaltern" and her critique of the inability of the marginalised voices to be heard within the framework of colonial power structures, highlights how the protagonist grapples with her own complicity, her agency and her voice (Spivak). Spivak's notion of the subaltern not being able to speak resonates with the protagonist's struggle to articulate a new identity beyond the binaries, expectations and imposed idealistic frameworks. This very deconstruction of the power

dynamics can be sensed when the narrator-protagonist states, that she is with each passing day becoming more and more like a dead person. This mirrors Spivak's critical theory on the entangled and often invisible dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed. Spivak argues that subjects within oppressive systems are always implicated in those very structures, making total resistance impossible without self-erasure. Becoming like a dead person reflects the paradox of resistance—one must recognize their complicity in the system while refusing to fully submit to it. This echoes Spivak's idea that even the most marginalized voices (e.g., the subaltern) struggle to speak outside the dominant discourse, as their agency is always mediated by the structures that silence them.

The novel also critiques the traditional binary that positions nature as "other" to human civilization, a concept rooted in Enlightenment thought where humans are seen as separate from and superior to the natural world. In *Surfacing*, this binary is deconstructed as the protagonist comes to realize that the idea of humanity's separation from nature is a false construct, one imposed by the same patriarchal and colonial systems that seek to dominate both women and the environment. Nature in the novel is not something to be conquered or tamed, but something with which the protagonist must reconcile, both externally and internally. Her eventual immersion into the wilderness, particularly her naked return to a primal state, symbolises her rejection of these human/non-human distinction.

It also simultaneously pinpoints the fact how the protagonist must first dismantle her identity shaped by these binaries before she can achieve a true authentic sense of self. Atwood's use of the wilderness as a liminal space (Bhabha) where distinctions between man and nature, male and female, self and other blur, and which allows her to break free from the rigid expectations and definitions and move forward towards embracing a more dynamic, interconnected understanding of herself and her place in the world.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "liminal space" is particularly relevant to understanding how *Surfacing* navigates these themes. The narrator's journey into the wilderness represents a movement into a liminal space—one that exists between the binary oppositions of civilization and nature, self

and other, male and female. This space is not merely a physical transition; it is also a metaphorical journey toward self-discovery and reclamation of agency. It is within this interstitial zone that the protagonist confronts the contradictions and complexities of her identity. The liminal space allows for the negotiation of identities and experiences that cannot be easily categorised, challenging the simplistic binaries that dominate both personal and national narratives.

Furthermore, the literal setting of the novel, situated on the border between Ontario and Quebec, serves to destabilise the notion of a unified Canadian identity. This geographical liminality reflects the larger cultural and historical tensions present in Canada, where various identities intersect and challenge colonial narratives. The protagonist's experiences in this borderland illuminate the complexities of her identity as a woman and as a Canadian, forcing her to confront the historical legacies of domination that shape her understanding of self.

The novel reflects ecocritical concerns by portraying the natural world as something sacred that is being eroded and invaded by human greed. Her rejection of the modern life mirrors a kind of protest against such exploitations and emphasises on the need to reconnect and protect nature. The wilderness in *Surfacing* serves as a crucial metaphor for the protagonist's evolving sense of identity, as it represents both the external environment and her inner psychological landscape. As she ventures into the Canadian wilderness, the natural world becomes a mirror for her fragmented self, reflecting the struggle between her societal conditioning and a deeper, more primal identity tied to the land. The wilderness is untamed, raw, and vast—qualities that resonate with the protagonist's own internal chaos as she grapples with memories of her father, her abortion, and her broken relationships. The wilderness, free from the constraints of modern consumerism and patriarchal control, offers her a space to confront these suppressed emotions and shed the layers of social and gendered expectations. It becomes the backdrop for her psychological breakdown, where she moves beyond the limitations of civilized, structured life and reclaims a more fluid, undefined self.

The metaphysical concept that nature serves as the boundary through which humanity conceives of its differences from the non-human world is central to *Surfacing*, and Atwood uses this

idea to explore how the boundaries between human and non-human are not as clear-cut as they seem. In many ways, the novel problematizes the very idea that humans are distinct from nature. The protagonist's journey into the wilderness becomes a process of dissolving these conceptual boundaries, as she increasingly sees herself not as separate from, but as a part of, the natural world.

At the heart of this metaphysical exploration is the question of what defines or counts as human. Throughout the novel, nature is depicted as a space beyond human society, a realm that exists outside of human constructs, norms, and civilization. For the protagonist, society represents constraint and control, largely through the patriarchal systems that define her identity and role. In contrast, nature symbolises a kind of freedom, a space where these artificial human distinctions no longer apply. As she rejects the layers of her socially constructed identity—her roles as lover, a victim, and even her sense of self as part of human society—she begins to blur the lines between herself and the natural world. This dissolution of boundaries questions what it means to be human, as the protagonist moves beyond societal definitions of humanity and seeks a more fundamental, primal connection to existence.

This metaphysical collapse between human and non-human also ties into the novel's themes of ecological awareness. The protagonist's growing recognition of ecological degradation reflects a deeper understanding of how human exploitation of nature mirrors the exploitation of marginalized groups, particularly women. In a patriarchal, consumerist society, both women and nature are "othered" and objectified, reduced to resources to be controlled and consumed. The novel critiques this view, suggesting that the health of human identity is tied to the health of the environment—by estranging humanity from nature, society alienates individuals from themselves. The protagonist's journey, then, becomes an act of reconciling these divisions, not just to reclaim her identity but to redefine what it means to be human in a world where humans are intimately connected to and dependent upon the natural world.

When the narrator in the novel, *Surfacing* talks about animals, who do not need language—why speak when you already embody meaning? For this she states an example, where she leans

against a tree, and in doing so, she becomes part of it. This moment symbolises the protagonist's growing empathy with the natural world and the creatures within it, as she begins to understand her own subjugation through the lens of the voicelessness and exploitation of animals. This interconnectedness fosters her deeper awareness of the hierarchies that oppress both women and animals, urging a rethinking of their treatment. The protagonist's growing recognition of the exploitation and suffering of animals, which in turn leads her to question the structures of power and dominance that also govern her own experience as a woman. It underscores the ethical and emotional connections between the oppression of animals and the marginalisation of women, challenging the hierarchies that separate them.

Animality plays a crucial role in *Surfacing*, as Atwood draws explicit connections between the treatment of women and animals. Both are objectified, consumed, and controlled by patriarchal society, with the protagonist identifying with animals in their vulnerability and marginalisation. Her interactions with animals—such as the scene where she witnesses the brutal killing of a heron—force her to confront the violence inherent in a system that devalues both human and non-human life. This identification with animals highlights the theme of animality in the novel, where the protagonist seeks a more symbiotic relationship with the natural world, contrasting the exploitative relationship promoted by modern, industrial society. The merging of human and animal identities points to a broader critique of the anthropocentric worldview, challenging the hierarchy that places humans above animals and suggesting that a true understanding of self and place requires dismantling these hierarchies.

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* operates as a multi-layered text that offers both ecological and feminist critiques, examining the intersections of environment, gender, identity, and human existence. The novel critiques the exploitation of both nature and women by patriarchal and colonial systems, drawing clear parallels between the two. The wilderness, a symbol of untamed nature, is threatened by industrialisation and consumerism, much like the protagonist's identity is subject to patriarchal control. Ecologically, the novel is a call to recognise the degradation of nature as an extension of the

violence inflicted on marginalized groups, particularly women. The protagonist's increasing awareness of environmental destruction reflects an ecocritical concern—the destruction of wilderness is not just a loss of space but a loss of connection to something vital and uncommodified, much like the oppression of women under patriarchy.

From a feminist perspective, Atwood critiques how women are marginalized, commodified, and treated as resources by male-dominated structures, much like nature. The protagonist's journey into the wilderness mirrors her rejection of these structures, as she peels back layers of societal expectations and embraces a deeper, primal self that is aligned with nature. The novel examines gender performativity as the protagonist rejects the roles imposed on her—mother, lover, victim—and seeks a more authentic existence beyond the constraints of societal norms. By stripping herself of clothing and entering the wilderness naked, she symbolically sheds the performative aspects of her identity and seeks a deeper, unmediated connection with the natural world. This can be seen as a rejection of the societal “performance” (Butler) expected of her, aligning with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, where identity is understood as a series of socially prescribed acts rather than an inherent essence.

The protagonist embodies contradictions, such as the tension between her need for independence and societal expectations placed upon her as a woman. These contradictions echo larger societal conflicts, such as the divide between urban, modern life and the natural world. The novel critiques the false dichotomy between humanity and nature, suggesting that societal norms and industrialisation create harmful separations that result in ecological and psychological damage.

In *Surfacing*, the dualities and contradictions in the narrator's life directly embody the complex relationship between humanity, nature, and civilization, aligning with Lawrence Buell's ecocritical ideas. Buell's argument that the non-human environment is not just a backdrop but a central, dynamic force in human history is reflected throughout the novel, where nature is not passive but an active agent in the narrator's journey. The wilderness of Canada is not merely a setting for the protagonist's retreat, but an entity with its own power and autonomy. It's a space that forces the

protagonist to confront her internal contradictions, the fractures in her identity, and the ways in which her life has been shaped by human civilisation's oppressive structures—especially patriarchal and colonial forces.

The narrator's life is full of contradictions—she is caught between her past and present, her Canadian identity and the pressures of American consumerism, and her role as a woman in a male-dominated society. These dualities extend to her relationships, particularly the way she views men and women, civilization and wilderness, and life and death. Her gradual realization that she cannot neatly categorise these experiences or aspects of her life reflects the broader ecological understanding that humanity cannot be separated from nature. Nature, in *Surfacing*, is not something “other” to the human experience; instead, human history and identity are deeply implicated in the natural world. The wilderness is where the protagonist begins to unravel these contradictions, realising that her personal history—her abortion, her relationships, her father's disappearance—is intertwined with the natural history of the land. In this way, *Surfacing* reflects Buell's assertion that human history is implicated in natural history.

Moreover, the novel reinforces Buell's point that human interests are not the only legitimate concerns. Throughout the novel, Atwood critiques human domination over nature, particularly through the lens of American industrialism and consumerism, which encroach upon the Canadian wilderness. The narrator's deepening awareness of ecological destruction reflects a shift in perspective—she comes to see that nature has its own inherent value, independent of human use or exploitation. The scene where the narrator encounters the mutilated heron, killed for sport by careless humans, symbolises this recognition. Nature is not just a resource for human exploitation, but a living system with its own rights and agency. This echoes Buell's idea that human interests are not paramount, and it positions the environment as an active, vital presence that demands respect and care.

Buell's third point about human accountability to the environment as part of the text's ethical orientation is also central to *Surfacing*. The protagonist's transformation is partly an ecological

awakening—her psychological breakdown and rejection of societal norms lead her to a deeper awareness of humanity’s destructive relationship with nature. The novel critiques the human tendency to dominate and exploit the natural world, particularly through colonial and patriarchal lenses. The narrator’s eventual rejection of civilization, symbolised by her immersion into the wilderness, represents an attempt to reconcile with the natural world, to accept responsibility for the ways in which human actions have harmed the environment. Her decision to live in harmony with nature toward the end of the novel suggests a newfound sense of accountability—both to the environment and to herself.

Finally, Buell’s idea that the environment should be seen as a process, rather than a static entity, is implicit in *Surfacing*. The wilderness in the novel is dynamic, constantly shifting and changing, much like the protagonist’s evolving identity. The environment is portrayed as something fluid and alive, not a constant or unchanging backdrop. This reflects the ecological understanding that nature is not something to be controlled or fixed in place, but a process that exists in its own right. The lake, the forest, and the animals all play a role in the protagonist’s transformation, showing that nature is not passive but an active, evolving force. In this sense, the novel aligns with Buell’s ecocritical ideas, demonstrating that the environment is not just a backdrop to human drama but a living, changing process that humans must reckon with and be accountable to.

The novel *Surfacing* embodies Buell’s principles by portraying nature as a central, dynamic force in human life, emphasising that human history and identity are inseparable from the natural world. It critiques the human tendency to place its interests above the environment and calls for an ethical accountability to the natural world. Finally, it shows the environment as a process rather than a static entity, a constantly evolving system that demands respect and understanding.

Atwood thus portrays domination as a pervasive force that manifests in the relationships between characters, particularly in the interactions between men and women. The protagonist grapples with the oppressive influence of patriarchal society, which seeks to define her identity and limit her autonomy. Her relationships with male characters, including her lover and her father,

highlight the ways in which women are often relegated to subordinate roles, stripped of their agency and voice. This dynamic is echoed in the treatment of the natural world, which is depicted as an entity that is also oppressed and exploited. The male characters embody the colonial mentality that views both women and nature as resources to be dominated and controlled, reinforcing the idea that exploitation is inherent in the structures of power that govern human relationships.

Additionally, Canada's past is characterised by the domination of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of natural resources by European settlers. The binary oppositions of coloniser/colonised and male/female are central to this historical narrative, as each pair positions one side as superior to the other. This dynamic is reflected in the protagonist's personal struggles and her efforts to reclaim her identity in a world defined by such inequalities. The theme of domination is not just an individual experience but is rooted in the broader historical context that informs contemporary Canadian identity.

Therefore, the theme of domination and oppression in *Surfacing* operates on multiple levels: it critiques the patriarchal structures that marginalise women and exposes the ecological exploitation inherent in colonial histories. By examining these dynamics through the lens of binary oppositions and liminal spaces, the novel reveals the complexities of identity formation in a postcolonial context, ultimately advocating for a more nuanced understanding of both human and non-human experiences. Atwood's narrative challenges readers to reconsider the hierarchies of power that define relationships and the ethical responsibilities humanity holds toward the environment and marginalized voices.

Atwood challenges binaries such as nature vs. civilization, male vs. female, and self vs. other in *Surfacing* through the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and the complex interplay between these concepts throughout the narrative. Atwood's *Surfacing* intricately weaves together themes of identity, nature, and marginalisation, challenging traditional binaries and highlighting the interconnectedness of all beings. The protagonist's journey reflects a deeper understanding of self that transcends individualism, advocating for a holistic approach that recognises the ethical and political implications of our relationships with both women and the environment. The connections

between the historical treatment of women and nature serve as a powerful critique of societal structures that continue to marginalise and exploit both, urging a re-evaluation of the narratives that define our existence.

Works Cited and Consulted

Atwood, Margaret. *Surfacing*. Anchor, 2010.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 2002.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 2009.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2019.

Ganguly, Keya. "Roundtable: Revisiting Edward Said's *Orientalism*." *History of the Present*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2015, p. 65–82. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.5.1.0065>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2025.

Griffin, Susan. *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. Harper et Row, 1978.

Hadlari, Thomas. "Letter to the Editor: Decolonization of Language Policy in Arctic Canada." *The Indigenous Peoples' Journal of Law, Culture, & Resistance*, vol. 8, 2023, p. 1–4. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48758182>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2025.

Jagger, Gill. *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative*. Routledge, 2008.

Lawrence Buell. "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends." *Qui Parle*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2011, p. 87–115. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.19.2.0087>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2025.

Morris, Rosalind C., and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia UP, 2010.

Moss, Laura. "Margaret Atwood: Branding an Icon Abroad." *Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye*, edited by John Moss and Tobi Kozakewich, University of Ottawa P, p. 19–34. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1d2dnq2.7>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2025.

Said, Edward W. "Orientalism." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1977, p. 162–206. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41397448>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2025.

Wood, Michael Ray. *The Postmodern Self: An Analysis of Selected Nineteenth and Twentieth Century American Published Diaries*. 1998.