

Perspective of Feminism in Surfacing by Margaret Eleanor Atwood

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Abstract:

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian writer. A prolific poet, novelist, literary critic, feminist and activist. She is among the most honoured authors of fiction in recent history. She is winner of the Arthurs C. Clarke Award and prince of Austrians award of literature. While she is best known for her work as a Novelist, her poetry is noteworthy. Many her poems have been inspired by myths and fairy tales. Born on 18th November 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario Atwood is the second of three children of Carl Edmund Atwood an entomologist and Margaret Dorothy William a former dietician and nutritionist. Due to her father's on-going research in forest entomology. Atwood spent much of her childhood in the backwoods of Northern Quebec. She is not attending school full time until she was 11 year old. She became a voracious reader of literature mysterious, Fairy Tales, Canadian animal stories and comic books. She studied at Harvard Red Cliffe Collage a master degree in 1962. She taught at the University of British Columbia. Atwood's literary career as a contemporary fiction writer, which started with her first novel, The Edible Women (1969) was followed by Surfacing (1972), Lady Oracle (1976), Life Before Man (1979), Bodily Harm (1981), The Handmaid's Tale (1985), Cat's Eye (1988), The Robber Bride (1993), Alias Grace (1996), and her most recent creation, The Blind Assassin (2000) has Cemented her place among the top women novelists around the world. Atwood's poetry collection, The Circle Game was published in 1966, followed by The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970) which evokes Canadian history.

Introduction:

A Peculiarly Canadian Feminism:

Early North American readings of Surfacing were distinctly culture-specific. Atwood has said that the American reviewers interpreted the novel "almost exclusively as a feminist or ecological treatise" (p.no.230). whereas in Canada it was reviewed "almost exclusively as a nationalistic one" (p.no.156). It would seem that, at least initially, both countries viewed nationalism, feminism and ecology as unrelated issues. With the progression of feminist theory, however, came the development of a more comprehensive school of thought, and it was during this period, when Surfacing was being published, that Canadian nationalism and feminism first began to significantly interact around issues of autonomy and identity. For

Atwood, the parallels between the movements were self-evident, as she explained in a 1981 lecture on Canadian-American relations. The cultural nationalism of the early 70s was not aggressive in nature. It was a simple statement: we exist. Such movements become militant only when the other side replies, in effect, you don't have Witness of feminism.

Similar ideas had already been touched on in The Edible Woman, in which Marian had fought, largely subconsciously, for Peter's acknowledgement of her existence separate from his. In Surfacing, this fight for autonomy is extended beyond sexual politics as Atwood addresses Canada's struggle to escape cultural domination by America. In the early 1970s, second wave feminism, particularly Canadian second wave feminism, was still in its infancy, and dominated by English,

French and American thinking. The *Feminine Mystique* and *The Second Sex* were still two of the most influential critical texts, and consequently, de Beauvoir and Friedan were much referred to nineteen seventy two anthology of Canadian feminist writing, *Women Unite!* Many of the contributors contradicted the philosophies of the two theorists on ideological grounds; for example, the radical feminist Bonny Kreps wrote: "We, in this segment of the movement, do not believe that the oppression of women will be ended by giving them a bigger piece of the pie, as Betty Friedan would have it. We believe that the pie itself is rotten" (p.no.176). Others yet believed that the problem lay, not in the content of such Americo- European writings, but in their cultural focus, and the original 1970 introduction to the Canadian anthology demanded cultural specificity within the increasingly widespread feminist movement.

Too often the left in Canada has been content to adopt the American left's analysis of and solution to social problems. The Canadian women's movement, along with the Canadian left, has been guilty of this tendency to accept the American viewpoint. It is in response to this tendency, and in assertion of the need to understand the unique experience of Canadian women, that we have undertaken the present anthology.

The authors of the anthology were demanding recognition: that their unique experience is recognized as significant and of worth, and that it not is subsumed into the dominant experience of their American counterparts. Such concerns were evidently also on Atwood's mind as she was writing *Surfacing*, and in subsequent interviews about the novel she frequently referred to notions of ideological colonialism, arguing that: "what we have done in this country is to use imported gods like imported everything else"(P.NO.149). The themes of

authenticity and recognition permeate *Surfacing*, and they connect many of the political dialogues that influence the novel.

One of the concerns of the narrator of *Surfacing* is to discover the values that are real or indigenous to her as a female, as a Canadian, and as an individual: to become, in her words, a "natural woman". This idea of authenticity draws Atwood's novel to communitarian theory, and to "the politics of recognition" discussed by the Canadian political theorist, Charles Taylor, in his important 1994 essay of that title. The work of both Atwood and Taylor has proven hugely influential, and not just within their immediate spheres, but as part of a more general cultural discourse. Atwood's early interaction with the ideas that Taylor later discusses has shaped her response to feminist arguments, and has led her to locate feminism, at a very early stage in the second wave, within much broader themes of cultural identity. Although Taylor's essay appeared some twenty-two years after *Surfacing*, the coincidence of theme in the two works demonstrates that, in the early seventies, Atwood was articulating ideas that would continue to have resonance in Canada for decades to come.

Eco-feminism and "The Great Canadian Victim Complex"

Many of the above themes draw *Surfacing* to ecofeminism; in particular, the belief in an innocent, authentic, *natural* self, regainable by escaping corrupting civilisation, has definite sympathies with certain feminists who believed that a rational, masculine culture had compromised an earlier, more sensual and intuitive feminine society. Ecofeminism, "turning up spontaneously across several continents during the 1970s," was born of the peace movements of the 1960s. Women involved in anti-war and antinuclear protests soon made connections between the various manifestations of patriarchal violence: "...

aggression against the environment was perceived almost physically as and aggression against our female body." The informing philosophy was one of connection between man's reckless plundering of nature's resources, his identification of nature as female - implicit in what Carolyn Merchant describes as "the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother"(P.NO.260). and thus his general attitude towards the feminine.

The developing ecofeminism articulated spiralling connections between variously theorised conflicts: between culture and nature; between destruction and creation; and between mind and body. Helene Cixous discusses the significance of binary opposition in her 1975 essay, "Sorties." Like de Beauvoir, Cixous locates the origin of opposition in the original couple, male and female, and also like de Beauvoir, who spoke of "an original aspiration to dominate the Other," Cixous identifies the rational compulsion to oppose each concept within a binary system as a destructive process; she argues: "Thought has always worked by opposition ... By dual, *hierarchized* oppositions," and ... the movement whereby each opposition is set up to make sense is the movement through which the couple is destroyed. A universal battlefield. Each time, a war is let loose. Death is always at work.

Cixous's concern is that binary oppositions are never equal, but become hierarchical, organized around a central male-female opposition, and that the hierarchy always favors the aggressive male half of the equation over the passive female half. Correspondingly, ecofeminists believe that there is a destructive opposition between masculine culture and feminine nature. This view is given considerable authority in *Surfacing*, in which nature is fragile and threatened. The novel opens with the pronouncement of disease: "the white

birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south ..." (P.NO.111). "South," of course, is where America and the city lie. As the novel progresses, the prognosis worsens: "... the hill would become an eroding sand island surrounded by dead trees" (P.NO.107). In accordance with ecofeminism, the narrator identifies herself as a woman with nature, and therefore perceives herself as threatened and victimized. The system of interconnected, hierarchical oppositions results in a situation in which nature, women and Canada are all innocent victims of an aggressive, patriarchal, Americanized culture.

Atwood avoids naming the narrator of *Surfacing* in order to emphasize the universality of the narrator's feeling of alienation from society. The narrator feels emotionally isolated by the numerous roles she is supposed to play in her life. She is grief; part of it due to spending too much time in the wilderness. But the narrator's madness also stems in large part from systematic social alienation. Atwood explores a woman's place in all of its facets as a human, a wife a religious person, a mother a sexual being. The narrator's madness seems to arise from her anger at – the entire standard of roles forced upon woman. Her response to this alienation is to become an animal. She sees animal not as beasts without reason but as graceful creatures that are better than human at peacefully co existing with nature. The result of the narrator transformation is greater understanding of her place in society.

As the narrator is the protagonist of the novel, she is the one person we know the most. In contrast to her, many of the secondary characters in *Surfacing* are two-dimensional or flat. It helps to explain certain things in her personality and behavior. At the beginning

of the novel, she seems to be a cool, uninvolved woman. We soon learn that this coolness marks a feeling of alienation from others. She is learning that this coolness marks a feeling emotion. As a result she is full of tension and anxiousness. The narrator and her family relationship are completely cut off from her past. She stopped visiting her parents several years ago seeing her mother only briefly before. She died and having no contact at all with her father. So she is cut off from her past and her true identity.

CONCLUSION:

Atwood wrote *Surfacing* at a time when the culture differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada were manifesting themselves in terms of rising Quebec nationalism. Atwood marks this political change in *Surfacing*. The narrator feels emotionally isolated by the numerous roles she is supposed to play in her life. She is full of repressed emotion as a result she is full of tension and anxiousness. Atwood explores a women's place in its entire facet as a human, a wife a religious person, a mother, a sexual being. The narrator's madness seems to arise from her anger at all-of-the standard of roles forced upon woman. Her response to this alienation is to become an animal. She sees animal not as beasts without reason but as graceful creatures that are better than human at peacefully Co- existing with nature. The result of the narrator transformation is greater understanding of her place in society.

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