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Review Of Research

ECO-FEMINISM IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING : A CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT
Eco-Feminism stresses, in male-authored literature, the predominant gendering of the land as female, and the accordant tendency to resort to nature for pastoral repose, recuperation, and gratification. It also proposed a parallel between the domination and subjugation of women and the exploitation and spoliation of the land. Eco-Feminism is a strand within feminism which aims at liberating Nature as well as women from destruction wrought by mechanistic – material patriarchy.

KEYWORD: - *Eco-Feminism, Eco-Criticism, Feminism, Patriarchy, Colonialism.*

INTRODUCTION:

Most of the so-called civilised societies are patriarchal in nature. Patriachy means: "a society or a [1] country governed by men." In patriarchy, women is marginalised, cyphered and divested of a distinct identity of their own and status of women is defined" primarily as wards of their husbands, fathers and [2] brothers." On the basis of biological differences, man has always been associated with "masculinity" and thus with "power, independence,self assertion and domination," while a woman has been associated with "femininity" and thus with " weakness, helplessness, dependence, complacency and [3] subservience." Patriarchal society has entailed subjugation of not only woman but also Nature.



There is an overt connection between[4] patriarchal violence against woman and against Nature, as both are valued for the "raw material" they provide. This connection is hinted in the following line: " To be woman is to accept suffering. Suffering ennobles. Endurance is a part of Femininity. Woman is patient like Earth: she can accept all the[5] trampling." But with the rise of humanistic and democratic spirit, feminism gained momentum. Feminism is a "term of recent origin to designate the motives and ideas that underlines the modern movement in favour of rights for women. It includes the personal and social as well as the political and economic aspects of the movement and has for its object the placing of women on a complete equality with men." [6] Eco-Feminism is a strand within feminism which aims at liberating Nature as well as women from destruction wrought by mechanistic-material patriarchy.

Margaret Atwood, an eminent Candadian novelist is a pronounced feminist who tends towards eco-feministic potentials. Her novels like The Edible Woman, The Handmaid's Tale, Surfacing, The Rober Brideexamine themes related to "the politics of gender, such as the enforced alienation of woman under patriarchy, the delimiting definition of woman as

a function, the patriarchal attempt to annihilate the selfhood of woman, the gradual carving out of female space by woman through various[7] strategies and woman's quest for identity, self definition and autonomy." Present paper discusses Margaret Atwood's Surfacing (1972) from the point of view of eco-feministic construction of the world.

Unnamed protagonist who is also the narrator of the novel, exposes the hypocritical and totalitarian nature of patriarchal institutions which expropriate female's as well as Nature's identity. She questions sex and gender roles and her actions ironically end up subverting the utopia of the mind which she has deliberately seeks to construct.

Atwood, in Surfacing, draws our attention to the fact that the world is masculine on the whole and this world gives woman a role not an identity. Atwood's protagonist is nameless, it is not just she[8] who is without a name and thus without an identity. In fact "none of the women had names then." By depriving her protagonist a name, Atwood seems to suggest that what she is describing are not the agonies of a particular woman but of women at large.

Growing up as a female in a masculine world, Atwood's protagonist had an experience of sexual colonialism when she was just a school going child. In school, it "was worse for a girl to ask questions than for a boy. If a boy asked a question the other boys would make derisive sucking noises with their mouths but if a girl asked one the other girls would say "Think you're so great' in the wash room after wards" (p.112) Thus the education system convinces women that their role is to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers, and that it is futile for them to desire a greater destiny. The protagonist recalls the answers given by girls when they were asked. "what you were going to be when you grew up?" The answers were: " 'A lady' or ' A mother', either one was safe; it wasn't a lie, I did want to be those things" (p.97)

Male is very well pleased to remain the absolute superior, essential being and refuses to accept his companion as his equal in my concrete way. The narrator of Surfacing recalls that she would have been a great artist if she had not cared to listen what her ex-lover told her: "there have never been any important women artists" (p.58). Males always resist women's demand for equality. They do not accept feminism. David, who is an embodiment of male chauvinism outwardly professes that he is " all for the equality for women" (p.149) warns his wife Anna:" 'None of that Women's Lib' David said his eyes lidding, 'or you'll be out on the street. I won't have one in the house, they're preaching random, castration, they get off on that, they're roving the streets in savage bonds armed with garden shears.' " (p.120)[9] Patriarchy defines women as "nothing but the sex, the womb, the ovaries." Women are considered as beings whose primary functions are either to bear and raise children or to satisfy man's sexual desires. The narrator recalls how her husband cared for her too much when she was pregnant: " He measured everything he would let me eat. He was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use" (p.37). But later on we come to know that in reality she never got married and never gave birth to a child. Her lover who was a "middleaged, second rate and selfishman"(p.203) had refused to marry her after impregnating her. Not only this, he forced her to undergo abortion. The narrator felt shattered when he showed her the photographs of his wife and children: "they had names , he said I should be mature" (p.162). The protagonist was betrayed by her lover whom she'd loved intensely. Se says: "For him I could be anyone but for me he was unique, the first, that's where I learned. I worshipped him….I kept scraps of his handwriting like saints relics"(Ibid). Though her present lover Joe is no less demanding and exploitative than any other man, yet and even with him, she believes, " that was the only time there could be anything like love, when he was asleep, demanding nothing"(p.133)

Marriage, in patriarchal set-up usurps "omnipotence-potence legitimation for himself between [10] male and female." David has fixed certain rules for his wife Anna. Anna tells the narrator: " 'If I break one of them I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I'm never sure….He likes to make me cry because he can't do it himself' " (p.131). He want her to look "like a young chick all the time: Anna is never seen without her make-up because David 'get mad" (Ibid.) if he sees her without it. Not only woman, but also Nature is being victimized, contaminated and spoiled by patriarchal forces. David enjoys immortalizing the birds and the animals by taking their photographs and including these in the film "Random Samples." He photographs the stuffed moose, the slaughtered heron, the fish victimized by him, "the fish innards, collapsed bladders

and tubes and soft ropes (p.77) as well as Anna's naked body. The protagonist identifies her own helplessness with the helplessness of trees which "will never be allowed to grow that tall again" (p.47)

Male is rational, ruthless, objective, progressive and against what is emotional, natural and spiritual. The protagonist cannot forget the misery abortion has caused her, as she says, "I couldn't accept it, that multiliation, ruin I'd made" (p.160). She has been deprived of the joys of motherhood. But to her lover it was "simplelike getting a wart removed" (p.165). Woman has been reduced to the level of " a chemical slot machine" (p.85) by doctors who are again agents of patriarchal society. They want to have control even in the process of childbirth which Nature has assigned exclusively to women So.

> They shut you into a hospital, they shave the hair off you and tie your hands down and they don't let you see, they don't want you to understand, they want you to believe it's their power not yours. They stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame, they bend over you, technicians, mechanics, butchers, students clumsy or snickering practising on your body, they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar (pp.85-86)

The protagonist is so much disgusted with the whole process that she is determined not to "let them do that to me ever again" (p.92). Abortion has left the protagonist a psychic wreck, "emptied, amputated" (p.164). But the narrator cannot deny her own participation in this "murder", this "slaughter" (p.155). She confesses: "I could have said no but I didn't : that made me one of them too a killer" (Ibid).). She feels guilty of having killed the unborn baby. Thus for the female individual to survive, she must reject not only the pathology of social and sexual arrangement but her own participation in these arrangements as well.

Women's lack of faith in themselves is the main cause which does not let them question male exploitation. Women feel that even if they get together and make" wings for themselves….attempting to fly" (p.142) they will end up breaking both their ankles- a fact which is "chilly and sad "(Ibid). Anna is a perfect example of the unconscious appropriation of female within male gaze. She has accepted her abject position and does not struggle to liberate herself from sexual colonialism. Atwood's protagonist in the beginning is a silent sufferer. She feels strongly against male violence, but does not act. Her contempt for male's predatory instincts is evident in her monologues. But later on, she realises that it is as bad to be" one of the silent guarded faces in the crowd" (p.150). Evil should be dealt with, "watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (p.203)

Thus, the protagonist resolves to react against the structures of exploitation and deconstruct the myth that woman is mere weak, helpless victim and powerless being. She refuses to surrender before David's predatory instincts. She even asks Anna to divorce David and come out of victor-victim relationship. But she goes to undesirable extreme in her protest against male exploitation. The alternative she chooses to regain her identity is tentative and contradictory. There comes a gap between what she professes and what she actually does. On the one hand, she advocates that the evil should be confronted and one should" refuse to be a victim" (p.206). But on the other hand, she herself ends up being a victimiser, an evil doer when she uses Joe to get herself pregnant but refuses to marry him. Abortion has brought her on the verge of insanity, but after having performed the sexual act with Joe, she thinks she has been redeemed by recovering her lost child: "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, rising from the lake where it has been prisoned for so long, its eyes and teeth phosphoroscent" (p.173). Motherhood enables her to find the "missing part" (Ibid). that she has been looking for all along.

Atwood's protagonist becomes vindictive and impatient in her attempt to find her "missing part " (p.173). She herself becomes a male whom she has been criticising up to now. She uses Joe as she herself was used by her ex-lover. The assertion of her victory over Joe can give her momentary satisfaction, not

mature and meditative satisfaction. There is a lacuna in her thinking. She moves towards fragmented culture where the parts of human beings are more important than the "whole" (p.157). She herself says, "he's given me the part of himself I needed" (p.173).

The narrator seems to be reacting against male culture when she displays tremendous courage to unwind the camera film which contains "captured images" (p.178) of Nature as well as of woman in spite of Anna's warning to her: "you better not do it…. They'll kill you" (p.178). Unwinding of camera film is symbolic of emancipation of Nature as well as of woman from patriarchy. Though the protagonist in her attempt to surface from patriarchy becomes a male, as she unwinds the camera film in a planned way in David's absence. Planning is supposed to be a product of male's rational mind, in a way she tries to pay back males in their own coin. Ironically, she succumbs to the same designs which she sets out to reject.

Unnamed protagonist of Surfacing decides to reject the so-called civilisation which does not let woman develop as a complete human being and thus joins the world of Nature. She wants to become a natural woman who can survive at the minimum barest level. She forces Joe to make with her in natural surroundings and decides to give birth to her child in the lap of Nature, without the help of technicians, mechanics and anaesthetics. She says: :Nobody must find out or they'll do that to me again, strap me to the death machine, emptiness machine, legs in the metal frame work, secret knives. This time I won't let them"(p.173). The protagonist resents the idea of being used as "a chemical slot machine" (p.85) by males.

Now the protagonist is determined to prove Nature's as well as woman's identity. But the path she follows is not a constructive one. She goes to farthest extremes in her identification with Nature. She grows impatient and destroys all signs of civilisation: "the type scripts, Quebec Folk Tales …. Ring from my non husband" (p.189), and again, "the map, the glasses…. the blankets, the sheets and the beds and the tents and at the end my own clothes and my mother's grey leather jacket, my father's grey hat: husks are not needed any longer, I abolish them, I have to clear a space " (p.190). Not only this, she relinquishes man-made shelter as well as food, as she herself says, "I eat the green peas out of their shells and the raw yellow beans. I scrape the carrots from the earth with my fingers. I will wash them in the lake first" (p.191). She descends along the evolutionary scale and reaches the stage of animals. She says: " Theout house is forbidden so I leave my dung droppings on the ground and kick earth over.

All animals with dens do that" (p.192). She discards clothes and even language: "Language divides us into fragments, I want to be whole" (p.157). Eventually she becomes one with nature : " I am part of the landscape, I would be anything, a tree, a deer skeleton, a rock" (p.201). It is ironical that she boasts of being one with Nature after committing an anti-nature act. Nature definitely gives us relief from the structures of exploitation, but the way he totally rejects society and becomes one with Nature is not practical. Her animal like satisfaction and extreme identification with Nature sounds melodramatic. Isolation from society does not solve any problem solutions are to be found while living within the society.

On examination, we find that though she tends towards eco-feminist praxis, yet it is not without flaws. These flaws are more of her own making because she tries to achieve goals without fully apprehending the male-female dialectic. She seeks answers more in confrontation than in negotiations and within this context her becoming one with Nature ultimately ends up in disharmony. Eco-feminism to which she takes recourse to regain her identity is not constructive and inclusive but is narrow and exclusive. Ecofeminism in actual sense, is additive and creative, it is based on survival philosophy and does not give place to any kind of injury or victimisation. The narrator becomes vindictive and forgets the fact that vindictiveness never brings enlightenment and regeneration. It only destroys, never creates. She seeks easy solutions not real solutions. Towards the end, she feels guilty of her being revengeful, but it is a momentary realisation on her part. Ending of the novel is quite ambiguous, only a hint is given that the protagonist may go back to the city as "withdrawing is no longer possible" (p.206), But is is not clear why and for what ? Ending of the novel is not convincing and satisfactory, it appears to be forced upon and does not come from preceding narration. The predicament of woman remains unsolved.

Atwood, for these reasons ends up being more of a propagandist as the repeatedly stresses on the need to relinquish patriarchal civilization and to embrace Nature. She becomes rigid in her viewpoint and seems to forget that feminism though gynaefocal, does not exclude males from the sphere of Nature.

Feminism does not want women to become like man: rather it emphasises the value of woman as she is. Feminists aim to bring about a moral revolution for the betterment of world and seek more meaningful relationship based on trust and companionship rather than on the power politics where on sex whether it be male or female dominates his or her counterpart. Feminist thought is humanist-a point of view to recognise the world realities, a positivist, life affirming and holistic approach to life, because males and females can't be segregated. Both are complementary to each other. In fact, woman can't aspire to be whole" (p.157) without becoming mother and she cannot be a mother without man's help. Feminism is not anti- male, but it is a step towards sanity and balance in manwoman relationship.

We find that feminism advocated in surfacing is not only eco-feminism, but a feminism of an extreme type, that is not acceptable from humanist perspective The only merit of the novel, thus lies in the exposure of male-female power politics, but it stumbles when it tries to carve out solutions.

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