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Quest for the Self in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*: An Eco feminist Approach

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Abstract

The particular paper focuses on the analysis of patriarchal domination and capitalist's exploitation of women and nature. Through the ecofeminism point of view, I have made a depth study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), and found out that power, patriarchy and domination have oppressed both women and nature. The unnamed narrator, who is protagonist of the novel, symbolizes the natural and environmental destruction by the capitalists. Anna, David's wife in the novel, represents women's exploitation in the patriarchal society. The impact of ecofeminism is clearly discern in the novel when the unnamed narrator returns to natural world of the Quebec Island where she was grown up and associate her with nature. She burns all the stuffs that she had and reminded her of past, and decides to lead a life like the creatures of natural world. She rejects the artificial life and quest of her real self in the natural world.

Keywords- Quest of Self, Power, Patriarchy, Capitalism, Domination, Woman and Nature.

We are living in such an era where we may see a wave or current for empowering the women and to keep the Earth and environment safe from the problems like global warming and make this planet a place for better and healthy life, for which various conferences and summits are seen taking place at national and international level where the issues are discussed strongly.

During 1970's there was an emergence of a new phenomenon alongside of second wave of feminism that was Ecofeminism, a new stream, socio-political and philosophical movement, mostly led by women; questioning of male domination over women,

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subordinates, and non-human, and of the unrestrained capitalism for excessive exploitation of nature. Eco feminists see a very close resemblance between the both woman and nature for both are oppressed and devalued by male dominance while both are source of life and its sustainability. As Ram Chandra Guha puts it, “The connection of women to everyday work and environment being more intimate. (R.Guha 3).”

The term ‘Ecofeminism’ was coined by the French writer Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1970 in her seminal work *Le Feminisme ou La Mort* (1974). The word ecofeminism is constituted of the two words ‘eco’ and ‘feminism’, where the word eco is derived from the Greek word ‘oikos’ meaning ‘home’, and feminism is a socio-political movement asserting the rights of women. Thus ecofeminism is, as Mary Mellor said, “Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degeneration of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women (M. Mellor 1).” Eco feminists are of the view that nature is the home for living creature whether they are human and non-human but man has exploited nature at the name of development without conceiving the harmful effects afterwards.

The central dogma of ecofeminism is that nature and women both are oppressed by the patriarchy of male domination. There is no value of the work of woman in the society because in the male dominant society woman is seen inferior, fragile and can’t act like man. The only task of woman is to produce children and care of them and her working area is home. She was confined to home. This condition of woman is best expressed by Alfred Lord Tennyson, Man for the field and woman for the hearth.” This single line best expresses the place of woman in male dominant society. She is considered an exhibitionist and treated as sexual object for male gaze and a procreating device. At this condition of woman, Bilgen said, “These divisions prepared the basis for the stereotyping of man and woman in society which placed the former in the public sphere and the later in the private (Bilgen128).” Likewise, nature is considered as woman and not given value. The ruling ideology is of the view that nature is valueless and it should be best use by men. John Locke suggested that humans must treat the land as their own property.

It was during the Enlightenment, when women consciousness awake and found that they have no identity and there is no value of their work, therefore, they revolted against this patriarchy. Women, who are very close to nature, found that this patriarchy has not only

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mistreated them but nature also. Nature, which is conceived life-source, began to turn worse. For this misconduct of male domination, women collectively revolted against this patriarchy in order to quest their identity as well as for the preservation of nature.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian novelist and environmental activist. *Surfacing* (1972) is the second and the leading novel of Atwood in ecofeminism mode. It was written when ecofeminism was emerging as a new trend. In this novel, Atwood has dealt with all the primary concerns of ecofeminism. As an environmental activist and daughter of a zoologist, Atwood's childhood was passed in the woods and wilderness of Quebec Island. She was deeply affected by the greenery and wilderness of her surroundings. Due to globalization and industrialization, capitalists began to destroy this wilderness at the name of development. This growing capitalism and patriarchy culture have exploited the both women and nature. Atwood, who is an environmentalist and feminist at heart, deeply affected by it and through her writing she tried to establish harmony between the development and natural environment and man and woman.

Surfacing is a story of a young woman named as unnamed narrator, who is a freelance artist. Her father was a zoologist, lived in the wilderness of Quebec, now has missed somewhere in the lake region. Atwood has presented the power and domination of patriarchal society that directly oppressed both woman and nature. The unnamed narrator narrates the story, how she was oppressed by her ex-husband as well as her male friends around her. She is feeling insecure and alienated among them, and struggling for her identity. She visits Quebec with her boyfriend and a couple Anna and David in order to search her missing father. She is astonished seeing that everything has changed in Quebec. There are no more the woods and wilderness and the greenery in Quebec where she had passed her childhood. It was destroyed by the capitalists at the name of development. The novel opens with the speech of unnamed narrator where she says that the greenery is no more in which she used to play and passed her childhood. She says, "I can't believe that I am on this road again, twisting along past the lake where birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the South and of notice they now have sea-planes for hire. (Atwood 1)" When she reached Quebec she is astonished and confused whether they are on right track or on an alien island. She even remarks that, "Either the three of them are in the wrong place (Atwood 3)." She was not able to convince herself that so many changes, so development, so artificiality have taken place

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that swept the greenery and the naturalness, which was pervasive everywhere when she was young and used to play in the wilderness. All have lost but artificiality is everywhere. She is puzzled and says, “Nothing is the same, I don’t know the way anymore (Atwood 3).” The narrator directly accuses for the south for this change and natural destructions and several kinds of diseases which are spreading everywhere. By the south, her means America, who is a political and economical power in the world?

Eco feminists believe that in patriarchal society, man always dominates over woman and nature. This view of ecofeminism is best expressed by Margaret Atwood in her novel *Surfacing* through the characters of David, husband of Anna, Joe, boyfriend of the narrator and narrator’s ex-husband. Men always conceive woman as an object and a machine to produce children and nature as their private property and make best efforts to use it. They never valued women’s work whether inside or outside of the home and neither they account the value of the nature’s products what they take from it. They see woman as weak, docile, emotional, and dull. Ex-husband of narrator, of whom we don’t know more except what the narrator has told us, has harassed her mentally and physically. He forces her to abort the child, which deeply affected the narrator’s psychology. David, husband of Anna, takes full pleasure of her physical beauty and makes all his best efforts to pass vulgar comments over Anna and the narrator. His best use of each occasion to make their fun and always tries to put them down, David has full command over Anna’s will and body. She even can’t think independently about anything without the permission of David. He not only exploits Anna but many a time we see that David tries to persuade the narrator also for intercourse. He told narrator that Joe was slept with Anna the previous night. Joe, the boyfriend of narrator, though very innocent and reserved, yet he makes proposal to the narrator but she refuses him.

Eco feminists are of the view that capitalism (which is the major concern of ecofeminism), is the major force that play a vital role in the exploitation of natural world and its inhabitants (non-humans) as well as other subordinates (lower and working class people and women). Capitalists dominate over power and wealth. If look at *Surfacing*, we shall find that how capitalists have exploited the natural world and the life of common man, The narrator conceives the south, that is America, a capitalist world which is a superpower in the world and tries its best effort to expand its trade and commerce everywhere and makes the best use of the natural resources. As we open the text, we find that the narrator is in wonder that whether she is at right

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place or on some unknown island because it was not the same place, where her childhood was spent. And now what she looks is quite different artificial place where there is only industries, malls, no common people, no naturalness, no pure and fresh air to breath and diseases like cancer are spreading everywhere due to bio-disaster because capitalists have used natural resources mercilessly without paying attention on its dangerous outcomes. The narrator is much worried about the excessive and merciless exploitation of the nature. She expresses her wrath towards capitalists for their cruel acts at the name of development. She sometimes imagines herself as nature and correlates her exploitation in the hand of monstrous like man, and finds very affinities. Sometimes she began to feel herself insecure amid her companions and at the other time they appear to her as Americans. At many times, she addresses David as American.

It was at her father's cottage where the narrator with her boyfriend and a couple stayed. Paul, the friend of narrator's father, comes with an American, named Malmstorm Bill, who wish to purchase the land, where her father spent his whole life, on generous terms but narrator directly refuses that she will not sell because it is of her father's property.

Ecofeminist ideology is neither against the development nor wants to change its factors but its chief task is to raise the human consciousness to look into the politics of development and at the same time it makes aware the mankind about his life-source that is both-woman and nature. If we look at nature and woman from Indian perspective, we shall find that nature is viewed as 'Deity' and woman as 'Power'. Still being a power, Indian woman could not get a respectable place in society. She is still victim of patriarchy. Ecofeminism reminded them that the existence of mankind is not possible without woman and nature. Still patriarchy does not ready to place her in equal position.

In *Surfacing*, Atwood through the character of Anna depicted the male's domination over woman. In patriarchal society, woman is treated as weak, innocent, emotional, and procreating machine, of which Anna is the best example, which is treated as the puppet in David's hand, who always ill-treats her. She has not her own will. It seems as she has surrendered her will in David. She has not her own identity. She identifies herself as 'I am David's wife.' This remark of Anna makes the point clear that she is not an independent woman. She exists in this world due to David.

Anna is very beautiful and has a very charming look. For David, she is more sexual object and less his wife. She has neither her own will nor can transgress David's will. She has to do all that what David wished. Though Anna is very beautiful yet she always put up make-up on her

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face. She is not allowed to go anywhere without makeup. When narrator asks Anna why can't she go anywhere without makeup, she replied her that, "He doesn't like to see me without it (Atwood 24)." Once when Anna forgets makeup, when she comes to know about it her face turned pale. When it is asked by narrator that why she is so afraid? Anna tell her that she has forgotten her makeup and now "He'll kill me....He wants to look me like a young chick all the time (Atwood 40)." Anna is also well aware about makeup but she doesn't like it all the time. She is forced to do so. As she says, "Changing of costumes is a slavery of pleasure (Atwood 40)."

Eco feminists view Anna as a marginalized and socially oppressed woman. She is oppressed to the extent that she has forgotten her Self. She just remained a puppet in David's hand. She has to do all what David has fixed for her. When she get agitated, she herself reveals to the narrator that, "He's got this little set of rules. If I break one of them, I get Punished (Atwood 123)." Anna has no guts to oppose David. Despite this she has no choice but to obey. According to Bilgen, "The more Anna is insulted by him more he demonstrates his power over her, the more he proves his dominance as a male (Bilgen 154)." He, therefore, believes that women must break the boundaries that are set by the patriarchal society, and make a quest for their own identity. They must prove their power instead to obey or follow male's command.

Anna's exploitation in the hand of David remind us of Laura Mulvey statements where she states that in traditional society and cinema woman is treated as a 'sexual object for male gaze' and has an 'exhibitionist role' for the pleasure of man. In *Surfacing*, Anna is also treated as a sexual object. David most often forces her for sexual relations even against her will. She shares narrator that David doesn't care of her pains and sorrow, it is good that they have no children. Once David force Anna to dance, after putting off her garments, around the dead her on, when Anna refuses, David gets furious and began to abuse her. David wants to shoot the sight for his documentary film. After Anna's refusals David himself began to put off her garments. At this Joe interferes and asks David don't force her and let her go. He doesn't heed Joe and pass a filthy comment for her. He says, "She's an exhibitionist at heart (Atwood 138)." At last we see that Anna has to be nude and dance around the dead heron and David shoots this nudity with pleasure. If we look at the character of narrator, we shall find that she is very reserved and introspected. Atwood has presented her character as exploited nature because she is very close to nature and also so much worried for the destruction of natural world. In the whole text, she is struggling for identity. Identity of women is a major concern of the novel. The narrator of the novel is a divorcee

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young woman, now working as a freelance artist, living with her boyfriend, Joe. The narrator is herself an oppressed by male domination like Anna. She divorces her husband because her husband forces her to abort the child. She didn't want but it was imposed on her. Now she is searching the Surface where she can live naturally her life according to her own will because after her abortion. She began to feel discomfort with men for that was an unbearable incident for her which left upon her a horrible impression. When Joe advances his proposal of marriage in front of her, she straightly reject because she began to hate with the patriarchy. Again when Joe advances her for making love, she denies saying this that she will go pregnant. She looks at men as they are American. She feels that men exploit woman as, so Americans to the Nature.

The narrator stands strongly against male domination over woman and nature. She rejects the long held notion of the binary (day/night, man/woman, and culture/nature) which is the product of patriarchy, in which the first is much privileged over the second and presented as the most powerful. She interrogates the binary because it is a symbol of oppression. She wishes that harmony should exist among all. She questions David why he mistreats Anna, at this David answers that it is his right as her husband. At one place we see that she asks Anna to leave David because she should have her own will and identity. And later on she steps up to establish harmony between the both David and Anna.

When the narrator reaches in Quebec, she meets her father's friend Paul and his wife, Madam. She is called Madam because. "None of the women had names then (Atwood 23)." When the narrator with her companions goes out in search of her father, they encounter with the two Americans who were almost hunters. As they proceed they saw a killed heron that was almost killed by those Americans. Seeing the dead heron the narrator moved with tears and express anger at Americans. And at that same time she again sees exploitation of Anna in the hands of David, who force Anna to be nude and dance around the heron so that he may shoot the sight in his camera for his film. The narrator began to feel discomfort amid her friends and even she rejects Joe's marriage proposal, and puts out the reel of David's camera, and thus she makes a different way and left them in order to search her own identity not in artificial society but in the lap of nature.

One day morning, the narrator wakes up and makes her way towards lake, and there in the lake she dives and goes to its surface where it seems to her as she saw her father and brother and felt as she got the real cause of her troublesomeness. She feels as she got surface in her life. Here

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she realizes that she lost her identity in the false and artificial men-made world. This marks the beginning of her quest of the self. As she says, “When I am clean I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface (Atwood 94).” After that we see a radical change in the narrator. She, herself began to love Joe and makes sexual relations with him, rather within four walls of the cottage; she performs this ritual in the open environment under full moonlight. Now she realizes a power within her and a new freshness. She takes oath that this time she will bear the baby and keep it aloof from the patriarchal and artificial world and she will not teach it human’s language. Now she feels as she has got a surface.

In the last of the novel, the narrator is asked by her friends to go back from where they came but we see that the narrator refuses to go with them and decides to live in the wilderness amid nature where lies her identity. She does not want to go back in the artificial and patriarchal world again because she has realized that, “It’s too late, I no longer have a name. I tried for all those years to be civilized but I ‘m not and I ‘m though pretending (Atwood 89).” But now she wishes to live her life being free like non-human in the natural world. At last of the novel she burns all the stuffs associated her that reminds her of male domination. Thus we see at last she gets her identity in nature and later on Joe comes again to receive her and assure her that he will never dominate her and allow her freedom like him.

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