

The Creative Launcher

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Reading of Nature and Women in the Select Novels of Margaret Atwood: An Ecofeminist Approach

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"Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid 1970s alongside second wave feminism and the green movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movement, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women"

(Introduction taken from *Feminism and Ecology* of Marry Mellor)

Abstract

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and political movement and theory which commingle or puts together demonstrate male domination of society. The term Ecofeminism is coined in the 1970s by the French writer Françoise d' Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou La Mort* (1974). The term ecofeminism unites *Ecology* (a scientific study and analysis of interaction among organisms and their environment) and *Feminism* (a social and political movement which advocates for women rights) and attempts to eradicate all forms of social injustice. It draws parallel between the both women and nature because both are dominated by men. The movement ecofeminism is the result of gradual development. In the beginning some women activists participated to preserve environment, but in the late 20th century these women activists began to work to protect wild life, food, air and water. We may see, in 1973, in Northern India, rise of a movement led by women activists to protect forests from deforestation that is known as 'Chipko movement.'

Keywords- Ecofeminism, Suppression, Protection, Conservation, Oppression, Germination

In 1977, the 'Green Belt Movement' was initiated by Professor Wangari Maathai in Kenya and is ongoing today. It is a rural planting program. In 1978, Lois Gibbs, mother and environmentalist led her community to protest against Love Canal, which was built on top of

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a toxic dump sites, because the toxins in the ground were causing illness among children and reproductive issues among women. Later on, the feminist took interest in these small movements and explored how oppressions were linked through gender, race, class and ecology. They took cues from *Green party politics*, *peace movement*, and *Direct Action Movement* and developed text such as *Women and Nature (1978)* by Susan Griffin, *The Death of Nature (1980)* by Carolyn Merchant and *Gyn/Ecology (1978)* by Mary Daly.

Like deconstructive critics, Eco feminists also believe that there is lot of injustice in society, which they try to eradicate all forms of social injustice, not only injustice against women and environment but also all the subordinate groups (such as people of color, children, the poor, animals, land, water, air etc) which are subject to oppression, exploitation and colonialization from the western patriarchal society that gives more importance to men. In western philosophy binary system (*Culture versus Nature*) was prevailed where Nature was treated as feminine and culture as masculine. Here nature is imagined as women and culture as men that always have been dominant upon women and nature and act as though both are to be exploited. Deconstructive critics criticized this binary system and gave more importance to the second term Nature. But Eco feminists try to make balance or harmony between the both.

Eco feminists are of the view regarding labor, production, materialist or socialist that-

- Labor and productive capacities of both women and nature are harnessed to serve men.
- Men dominate the production and labor of both women and nature, whether it is women's domestic work or mining nature for various ores and metals.
- Women's work is viewed as lesser value. Like women's work, nature's products and services are deemed to be free.

Due to this domination and exploitation, Eco feminists emphasize to review nature's economy and domestic because they viewed all political economy are interdependent.

Ecofeminism brings older myths and religious beliefs in which nature is seen as deity and revered. Eco feminists argue that all humans and non-humans lives on integrated with nature. They also valued to women's knowledge. Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist and environmental activists, born in Ottawa, Canada on 18 Nov. 1939, and spent childhood with her family in the Quebec bush, where her father was an entomologist her later childhood and adolescence passed in Toronto, a city which features frequently in her works. Atwood first made her reputation as a poet with her poetic collection *the circle game* (1966) which won the *Governor General Award* for poetry in 1967. Another poetic volume is *The Journal of Susanna Moodie (1970)*, in which she used poetic persona of a well known writer of Victorian Canada to explore the representation of gender and national ability.

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Atwood first novel is *The Edible women* (1969) but it was her second novel *Surfacing* (1972) that gave her name and fame as a novelist. Both the novels deal with the problems of young women in western societies. Atwood got international fame with her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) the novel brought her the *Governor General Award* for fiction in 1986, and was shortlisted for man Booker. In 1990's Atwood international reputation went beyond that of any other Canadian writer. In 1993, she got *Commonwealth prize* for her novel *The Robber Bridge* (1993). She also got *Man Booker prize* in 2000 for her novel *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Margaret wrote essays and critical works also. Her well-known short-story collection is *Dancing Girl* (1977) and her significant critical work is *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972).

Lady Oracle (1970) third novel by Margaret Atwood deals with women place, role and condition in patriarchal society. The protagonist of the novel is Joan Foster, now is a renowned feminist writer recalls her past, when she was young, how she was treated at home as a girl, how her mother and other family members force her to play predefined and fixed gender role such as daughter, wife and mother, and how she revolts against men made conventions, beliefs, values in male dominant society. In the course of her rebels, how she found herself alone and alienated. Yet Joan challenges all man made institution in order to search identity for her.

The novel deals with the problems of women in family, friends and at public places or male centric society. The protagonist Joan throughout the novel, describes her memories and anxieties of her childhood and adolescence. She tells that she had many wishes but like other women or girl she had to see herself as an object. Her mother used to force her to behave like a women and not to go beyond anything that were restricted for women. But she refuses to do all that and stand against her mother's will. "By this time I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get. The war between me and my mother was on in earnest, the disputed territory was my body." Now we see that Joan learned to use her body as weapon to stand against society. In the beginning of the novel we see, that how Joan with the help of her friend creates fake news about her death and make her way to Rome and there she starts a new life. After the death of her beloved aunt, she starts writing in England with the help of her male friend, who was perhaps an artist. She lives in relationship despite her husband Arthur. One day through her writings about feminism, becomes famous.

In *surfacing* (1972), Atwood presented the power and domination of patriarchal society that directly oppress both the feminism world and the natural. It is a story of a nameless character, who narrates her story, how she come Quebec in search of her missing father. She come her with her boyfriend Joe and a couple David and Anna. Atwood employs these two couples to explore the place and the problems of women. The narrator tries to seek her father with the help of the guide named Evans and her father's friend Paul. Seeing the isolated, she remarks. "I can't believe I am on this road again, twisting along past the lake

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where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south and of notice they now have sea-planes for hire.” On the island soon it was realized to her that her father has gone mad and is still alive. On the proposal of David, both the couple stays on the island for a week, where we see how David makes Anna to feel lower through his jokes. He constantly insults Anna and forces her to do whatever he wishes. In this novel, Atwood shows us that how American capitalists are responsible for the exploitation. This American exploitation is revealed so effectively that the narrator feels that she is on the mistaken island or might have arrived on a wrong road, “Either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am.” The narrator along with her friends goes on the tip to see walls painting. On their way to the lake, they see a decomposing heron that was hanging on a tree. Here the narrator blames to Americans for this crime. After returning from the tour Anna tells narrator that she has forgotten make up and David will punish her. The narrator asks David, why he tortures Anna and David claims that he does so because Anna cheats him.

Other aspects of the story we find in the relationship between Joe and narrator. There is a communication gap between the both. Joe seems like a nice person but he is not talkative and unable to understand the narrator's problems. This is the reason of their unhealthy relationship. The narrator herself has an exploitative past in which she had a child and divorce husband. The narrator reveals Joe her affair with an art professor and how she was forced to abort their baby. Amid the story Joe tries to rape her and later on we see how David lures her to reduce by telling her that Anna and Joe are having sex. All these exploitation through which the narrator had to pass, put her into sanity and psychosis. She yet believes that her father is still alive despite the facts presented by Paul and Joe. At last of the story we see that the narrator abandons her friends and destroyed David's film and gone into deeper madness. She becomes an animal running around naked and eating unwashed plants.

Atwood's another novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), also describes her worry for the nature and women's exploited predicament. Here she has described the adverse effects of environmental degradation on the life of women because the natural world is denatured by men in the Republic of Gilead and pollution of environment resulted in sterility and deformity of the children.

The story of the novel took place in the Republic of Gilead; a dictatorial, theoretical state becomes a replacement of United State of America. Offered is the central character of the novel and becomes the voice of exploitative women and nature in the republic of Gilead, an unreal state where due to environmental malpractices and exploitation of nature all men have become sterile and women unfruitful therefore handmaids are employed to bear children for the elite class people like commander and Serena Joy.

Offered is the voice of all handmaids who are employed to beget children for elite class. Offered tells how handmaids are treated in Gilead. These handmaids are degraded to the level of mere reproductive beings. “They are not supposed free to think and feel.”

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They are kept in strict regulation, oppression and extreme punishment. They have to perform the impregnation ceremony as offered says, "We are two legged wombs, that's all sacred vessels ambulatory chalices." Due to scientific development and industrial progress nature was denatured to a large extent. The impact of radioactive waves can be seen clearly on all types of flowers that grow in nature. Offered gives description of the garden of Serena Joy that is guarded by well ordered wire barricades. "... A willow, weeping catkins, around the edges

The flower borders in which daffodils are now

Fading and the tulips are opening their cups spilling out color."

Offered compares herself with violent imprisonment of nature. Offered comes to know about the underdevelopment of the plants in Serena's garden that was result of radioactive waves effect, which also made Gileadean women infertile. Offered describes her ceremonial acts with that she has to perform with the commander and his wife as a burden.

It has nothing to do with passion or

Love or romance or any of that other

Notions. . . It has nothing to do with

Sexual desire, at least for me, certainly

Not for Serena. . . This is a serious

Business, The commander, too, is doing duty."

Ecofeminism focuses on the anarchy of powerful male culture were sensitive and silent, nature. The dichotomy between culture and nature leads to hierarchical binary opposite of culture/nature, where nature is exploited as a woman by the patriarchal culture in the name of growth and development.

In contemporary societies, it is very important to think about the ways by which we may remove all social evils and connect ourselves with nature because nowadays we are passing through a critical periods in which biodiversity has lost and pollution is on the rise and its servers effects and consequences we are seeing which is the outcome of excessive industrialization in the name of progress. Apart from it we are saying discrimination among people on the basis of color, race, poverty and gender and all are asking for their rights from which they were deprived long ago, therefore it becomes very necessary to fulfill their needs and establish a harmonious society and relations among all. For this purpose, ecofeminism provides us the ways to think and organize ourselves by encouraging interconnectedness with our environment and marginalized people.

The central dogma of ecofeminism is that social and environmental issues are inseparable. It provides us the ways to establish harmony among all and makes us to think

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and view all these issues collectively. Thus we may assert that ecofeminism puts forth the idea that life in nature can be maintained through cooperation, mutual care and love.

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