ABSTRACT

In this paper, Margaret Atwood’s novel Surfacing (1972) is analyzed from an eco-feminist perspective. A term coined by the French writer Françoise d’Eaubonne, Eco feminism refers to a philosophical and political movement that combines ecological and feminist concerns, regarding both as a result of patriarchy. The nameless protagonist of the story returns the undeveloped island, Northern Quebec, where she grew up, to search for his missing father. The protagonist realizes the gap between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she gets in direct contact with nature. Her association with nature raises her consciousness in regards to subordination of women. Since the novel introduces issue pertaining to feminism and environmentalism, it constitutes a representative literary example of ecological feminism. The language, events and characters in this novel reflect a world that oppresses and dominates both women and nature. The study analyzes the novel in terms of feminism and eco-criticism.

Keywords: Domination, Femininity, Ecofeminism, women, Nature, Patriarchy, Surfacing.

ÖZ


Anahtar Kelimeler: Egemenlik, Femininite, Ekofeminizm, Kadın, Doğa, Ataerkilik, Yüzeyleme.
1. INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism is a movement emerged from the union of feminist and ecological concerns and argues that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the abuse of the natural environment. The theory emphasized the importance of the wholeness and interconnectedness of all the living organisms in the Universe. Based on Einstein’s Theory of Relativity which redefined the relationship between the matter and energy, the theory proved that space and time are not separate entities but part of larger body. According to physicist Heisenberg, “the world thus appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole” (Heisenberg, 1985: 25). Since there is interconnectedness in the Universe, the abuse and exploitation of nature after the other members of the cosmos and as a consequence of her close relationship with nature, woman became one of the most widely affected members.

The domination of women over the years is directly connected to the environmental exploitation of our planet. Greta Gaard argues “ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology, which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities, is the same ideology, which sanctions the oppression of nature.” (Gaard, 1993: 75). In consistent with this argument, Carolyn Merchant claims “ecological feminism is the position that there are important connections, - historical, symbolic, and theoretical— between the domination of women and the domination of nature, an understanding which is crucial to both feminism and environmental ethics”(Warren, 1990: 135).

In the light of ecofeminist perspective, this paper tries to bring an approach to Margaret Atwood’s novel Surfacing (1972). The title of the novel is important as it reveals the efforts of an individual’s self—exploration, which undergoes many phases of physical ordeals and mental traumas. All the efforts for self exploration clearly come up on the surface in midst of the nature from deep conflict between self and society and gives a new power of reconsidering to the nameless heroine of the novel for further process of life. On the other hand, the publication of Surfacing coincides with the emergence of the feminist and ecological movements and reflects the concerns of the era. The nameless female protagonist of the story is an eco-feminist who returns to Northern Quebec to search for her missing father. The story follows the protagonist’s search for her father, which serves at the backdrop her search for her inner-self and is observed through her gradual submersion into nature towards a self-recognition. Her relationship with males and her attempt to abortion shows her emotional and artistic death. Malashri Lal says, “the pain of aborting life unhinges the minds to a degree that it creates an alternate truth’ to the event.”(Lal, 2000: 75). She becomes a symbol for all those who are exploited and abused because of their lack of power. At the end of the novel she realizes nature provides no identity, and she declares herself ready for motherhood and for reintegration into society. In this process, she unMASKS the dualities and inconsistencies in both her personal life and the patriarchal society. Through the struggle to reclaim her identity and roots, the protagonist begins a psychological journey that leads her directly into the natural world. The protagonist realizes the gap between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she unites with nature. While searching for her missing father in the wilderness, she recognizes the extent to which nature has been destroyed. Her evolving awareness of herself as a victim is parallel to this recognition. Thus, men destroy nature and women just for their own pleasure. The relationship between nature and men is relationship of exploitation. Petra Kelly argues, “women are sex toys for men, their lives count less than those of men; women who assert their independence and power are in some way defective. (Kelly, 1984: 120).

2. ECOFEMINISM IN SURFACING

The nameless protagonist finds a reflection of her own tragedy in the Quebec’s landscape. She expresses a deep concern for nature and presents the readers the connection between women-nature. The novel clearly displays parallelism between the exploitation of woman and of nature by man. In the course of her journey she discovers that “nothing is the same. I don’t know the way anymore.” (Atwood, 2009: 10) Therefore, the ecological destruction pervades the setting whether it is to control the nature or the destruction of older trees: “the trees will never be allowed to grow tall again, they’re killed as soon as they’re valuable, big trees are scarce as whale.” (Atwood, 2009:55)

Similarly, the act of fishing in the lake is a far-fetched metaphor, which suggests entrapment. Soon, the protagonist realizes that in her capacity for evil, she herself has not been different from them. The illusion of her childhood innocence shatters and she recalls a childhood game - the stabbing of the doll, which actually foreshadowed her abortion. This incident is a sad reminder of the differences between natural predation and the hunting done by the man, which is done for the excitement of killing. As Shiva points out, it is not hunting which leads to a violent relationship with nature: “it is the elevation of hunting to the level of ideology which...
does so’ (Shiva, 1988: 50) She is disgusted by her friends’ filming of the fish’s habitation. She does not want to kill the fish herself, the second time: “I couldn’t anymore, I had no right to, we don’t need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, this act. Violation, for pleasure, recreation they call it.” (Atwood, 2009: 153).

The narrator’s self-image of animal victim is first indicated when the boys tie her to the tree in school and forget to release her. She feels she becomes “an artist of sorts, expert at undoing knots” (Atwood, 2009: 88). As an escape artist her escape route lies in thinking of herself as a victim and to take recourse to detachment and flight. She looks for her liberation through a regression to primitiveness, which involves total immersion in environment to the extent of living like a wild animal. In her vision significantly, her mother turns into a jay and her father into a fish-like creature.

The ecofeminism’s aspect of the novel becomes more obvious in the novel by her return to the natural world. Ecofeminism argues that this system and those who are powerful within it do not contribute to nature itself but rather exploit it as much as they can. Before her “surfacing” occurs, she undergoes an extensive transformation in perception and eventually learns to embrace the natural world, healing herself in the process. She experiences the oppression of male world lacking the strength to fight for her survival and passively consents to abort her child. The unnatural act of her abortion and the continual struggle for her to feel comfortable with words and language illustrate the extent to which society or man oppressed and consumed the surface. Both empowering and dominating nature of her ex lover shows: “it was my husband’s, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it to me, he wanted a replica of himself.” (Atwood, 2009: 39)

On the other hand, men exploit the bodies of women for their sexual needs. They even control and intervene in the process of childbirth which nature has granted only to women. Their relationship, which is simply based on carnal desires, can be explained in Lacanian terms of ‘phallic power’. Lorraine explains this loss of phallic power as:

The female child is castrated; she lacks, the loss she is currently experiencing is final, her compensations inferior to those of the boy. Instead of identifying with the father, with the phallic power through association with a man. Being passive, she can never create a paternal law that orders social relationships. She is an object of exchange, waiting to be exchanged by those who wield phallic power (Lorraine, 1992: 78).

Ecofeminism theory questions the science, which is a major tool to colonize woman and nature. Mies states: ‘For biotechnologists, human beings are just heaps of organic matter, DNA, raw material, which can be dissected and reassembled into new bio-machines. Science is supposed to be value-free, motivated only by pure quest for knowledge, not by interest or ambition. (Mies & Shiva, 1993: 192). The modern techniques, in the guise of assisting woman, rob her of the ability to sense her bodily rhythms. Hence, she does not want the child to be taken out with a fork, “like a pickle out of a pickle jar” (Atwood, 2009: 101). The effect of the birth controlling pills in her eyes, that is, of blurring her vision, also becomes a significant step towards her self-awakening. She isolates herself from everything that belongs to her former life and city, and chooses to be an outcast. Though this is not a role assigned to the narrator by men, it is of great importance as she, not the male characters, is the one to escape into nature. Because she cannot fit in the society or be the person she is expected to become, she finds the solace by detaching herself from all kinds of artificial relationships. She realizes that no human being can help her in discovering her real self and, therefore, she turns to nature. Ironically enough it is only when she identifies herself with the damaged nature that she discovers herself. She becomes part of the nature but prior to this, she discards her marriage ring, her name and her seeming identity. Before the narrator’s encounter with the dead heron, David summarizes the interference of the Americans in Canadian nature and colonization of nature through destruction. He remarks ‘Do you realize that this country is founded on the bodies of dead animals? Dead fish, dead seals, the beaver is to this country what the black man is to the United States.’ (Atwood, 2009: 45). His allusion to black people being enslaved and exploited by white man in the past for the sake of capitalism manifests itself in the form of animals and land in Surfacing. The narrator states “My country sold or drowned, a reservoir; the people were sold along with the land and the animals, a bargain, sale, sold. Les soldes they called them, sellouts, the flood would deepen on who got elected, not here but somewhere else” (Atwood, 2009: 145). Ecofeminism theory opposes the colonization of land. Property ownership becomes a right exercised by depriving ‘other’ of their natural rights, either materially or psychologically. Mies argues:

Europe’s progress was based on the regression of colonies. The development of productive forces was based on robbery, warfare and violence, at home as well as in the colonies. And self-determination of the social
individual, the subject, was – and is – based on the definition of the ‘Other’, the definition as object, of certain human beings. In other words: autonomy of the subject is based on heteronomy of some Other. (Mies & Shiva, 1993: 228).

In her transformation process, the narrator begins to compare herself with the dead heron. The brutal and unnecessary murder of the heron presents a direct ecological parallel to the experience of the narrator. Rigney argues “the protagonist sees the heron as symbolic of her own psychological death” (Rigney, 1978: 100). She feels the deep disgust towards the killing of the bird and compares it with oppression and subjugation of women. As ecofeminism theory suggests the progress of the colonizer depends on the regression of the other, this dead heron that protagonist identifies herself with demonstrates the fact that American just kill the bird for the sake of claiming superiority over a totally harmless creature Women’s association with birth and men’s with environment abuse serves as a metaphor of the violation of women by patriarchy.

After her abortion, the protagonist comes to realize her deep sympathy for the flora and realizes that regeneration through nature is the only solution for her disintegration. The power for destruction can be reconciled only with the power for creation. She gradually comes to feel that she herself has been anti-nature. She had tried to subvert nature by abortion. So, she must compensate for that anti-nature activity. She decides to give birth to a child and allow the baby to grow as a natural human being in the most natural way: “the baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten and I’ll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs” (Atwood, 2009: 209)

When she establishes a link between her own life with those of the other beings of nature, she is able to perceive the rhythm of nature; its cycle of life and death. She comes to feel that in order to unite with nature; she has to get rid of her clothes to become like animals. She survives on mushrooms, plants and berries. She merges with the forest, descending even further to the level of plants. After linking her life with the natural things, she feels that her life has been totally changed: “my body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me, I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply. (Atwood, 2009: 217)

She becomes a plant, animal, earth and woman all at the same time; she becomes a natural woman who should be “new kind of centerfold” (Atwood, 2009: 248). She dodges like an animal, blood swells within her body like cell sap and yet she remains as a natural woman. She feels herself to be powerful, for she is natural, human, and saintly at the same time. She is no more the same person whom one saw at the beginning of the novel. She realizes the essential pain in the life of her parents and realizes that this is the only truth in her own life.

She decides to stay back in Quebec and give birth to the baby growing in her womb. She does not know whether the child in her womb is a male or a female child but has made up her mind to assert herself by allowing the baby to grow. She states: “I cannot know yet; it’s too early. But I assume it: if I die it dies, if I starve it starves with me. It might be first one, the first true human; it must be born, allowed.” (Atwood, 2009: 250) With the her determination to give birth to the child, the germination will take place implying that both women and nature will be protected provided they defend themselves against the tyranny of patriarchy. She is aware that patriarchy’s domination of women is deeply ingrained and systematic. Many men and women think that it is something natural and universal. The oppression of women is so deeply embedded in our psyches that “women suffer both from structural oppression and from individual men” (Kelly, 1984: 113). But the protagonist would be different. She would not allow herself to be controlled by men. Similarly, Kelly observes “ultimate result of unchecked, terminal patriarchy will be ecological catastrophe. (Kelly, 1984: 118).

The heroine makes the earth her literal home for she knows that in the natural world all life is interconnected, teeming with diversity and complexity. She is not afraid of any one. There is no one to dominate her. She unites with her mother nature by throwing away all her civility since it is destroying the biosphere. She may recreate a culture that respects to seek harmony with nature. The language, events and characters in this novel reflect a world that oppresses and dominates both femininity and nature. This actual journey is the surface meaning while the deep meaning lies in the journey of self-discovery and assertion of her individual identity. These two kinds of meanings links ecology with feminism and make the novel a major eco-feminist novel. However, she does not want to overturn patriarchy and replace it with women’s dominance. She wants to transform the structures of male dominance and restore a kind of balance and harmony between women and men.

3. CONCLUSION

In Margaret Atwood’s novel Surfacing, the protagonist realizes the gap between her natural self and her artificial construct only when she gets in direct contact with nature. Her association with nature raises her
consciousness in regards to subordination of women. Since the novel introduces issue pertaining to feminism and environmentalism, it constitutes a representative literary example of ecological feminism. The language, events and characters in this novel reflect a world that oppresses and dominates both women and nature.

_Surfacing_ embodies the very basic arguments of ecofeminism. Through the narrator’s relationships with the male figures in her life, the dualist relationships between the male and female roles are demonstrated. Narrator’s story is one of estrangement from patriarchal world, where the narrator lacks a true sense of belonging either through her close social environment or her family, in fact all patriarchal institutions.

Her isolation reaches its maxim by her aborted child. But once she sets on her spiritual journey, she finds her true self and unites with nature. _Surfacing_ highlights the most prevailing discourses such as man’s abuse of the female body as well as of nature; man’s underestimation of woman by giving her fixed roles, woman’s loss of her identity and alienation. The close bond between women and nature can be clearly observed in the narrator’s final union with absolute nature.

**REFERENCES**


