



Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* as a Critique of the Enlightenment Reason

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Abstract

Surfacing, a novel written by Margaret Atwood in 1972, portrays the domination of western civilization as a masculinist ideology over nature and woman in parallel. The novel is about the degeneration of the core ideas of the Enlightenment – rationalism and progress – into brute domination, colonization and the rift between nature and culture. This study attempts to demonstrate the centrality of this critique to the novel. Atwood scathingly criticizes the rampant consumerism and capitalism of the modern age embodied in the threat posed by American culture, or American mentality, to Canada and nature which runs parallel to the masculine rationality which wills to 'submerge' (as the central metaphor of 'surfacing' has it) the feminine and the natural. The paper also discusses a number of other related dualisms represented in the novel.

Key words: Margaret Atwood; *Surfacing*; The Enlightenment; Reason; Ecofeminism; Nature; Power

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The Enlightenment, especially its American version, with reason as its instrument and its promise of progress and democracy has been the dominant paradigm in western thought since the eighteenth century despite the many critiques leveled at it, especially in the twentieth century. The critics, for instance, have talked of "crisis of reason"

(Plumwood, 2005, p.3), for the aftermath of the approach to reason as a mere instrument has been disastrous. One of the main disasters is the ecological one; in fact, what the 'rationalists' have done is manipulate nature and reduce it to a blank canvas for their 'enlightened' reason. In the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, there is no difference between what they promise as rational science and progress and magic myth (qtd in Wilson, 2007, p.16). In addition, as Adorno and Horkheimer also argue, "enlightenment involves the thoroughgoing expulsion of any inherent meaning from natural phenomena" (Wilson, 2007, p.16).

Hence, the ecological feminists or ecofeminist critics have recently tried to make connections between nature and the woman. In fact, the disaster mentioned above affects both women and nature. In Ariel Salleh's words, "the basic premise in ecofeminism is acknowledgement of the parallel in men's thinking between their 'right' to exploit nature, on the one hand, and the use they make of women on the other" (qtd in Peter Hay, 2002, p.75). Also in a simple definition of the ecofeminism by Karen J. Warren, this connection is acknowledged more explicitly. She says that ecofeminism addresses the relationship between the inferiority of nature to culture and the inferiority of women to men.

Karen J. Warren in *ecological feminist philosophies* (1996, p.iv-xxvi) attempts to uncover the connections between feminism and the environment in eight domains: historical, conceptual, empirical, epistemological, symbolic, ethical, theoretical and political. There is many a dualism here crucial to this relationship some of which are: mind/body, reason/emotion, rationality/irrationality, culture/nature and, most importantly, man/woman. Hence, one can see here the connection between the critique of the enlightenment and ecofeminism, for the patriarchal society is the official culture which pursues the notions of reason, rationality, power and knowledge associating nature with irrationality and emotion, an object to be

known and dominated. On this, Plumwood remarks:

Nature as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotion, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilized, the nonhuman world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and madness. (2003, p.19)

Margaret Atwood's groundbreaking second novel *Surfacing* (1972), deals with the exploitation and destruction of the wilderness of Canada by those who claim to be rational and enlightened people. The novel tells us the story of a narrator who returns to her hometown after several years to search for her missing father. She is at first shocked to see so many changes in the region and the wild nature most of which caused by Americans. The toll economic development and material gain has taken on nature, by using tools supposed to be the means of progress, is horrendous to the sensitive narrator. To her "the familiar smell of road dust fuming behind and mixes with the gas—and upholstery smell of car" (Atwood, 1972, p.10) is the gift of Americans to Canadian people. J. Brooks Bouson (1993) remarks that *Surfacing* "rejects the masculinist culture--which is depicted as both rationalistic and dangerously aggressive--and idealizes a nature-identified femininity." (39) This 'rationalistic' and 'aggressive' mentality, we should bear in mind, is the legacy of the Enlightenment. The modern heirs of this legacy throughout the novel are called Americans or Americanized Canadians.

Surfacing movingly dramatizes the ecofeminist idea of masculine culture vs. feminine nature. Central to ecofeminism is the idea that "nature is fragile and threatened" (Fiona Tolan, 2007, p.43). This is obvious right from the beginning of the novel where there is an image of disease: "the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south" (Atwood, 1972, p.1). The south, of course, is America. As the novel goes on we become more conscious of the extent of the widespread damages to nature: "rocks blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air" (Atwood, 1972, p.10). Although at first the protagonist is somehow strange to the place, she gradually feels affinity with nature and tries to defend it against the things that are happening to it by the 'Americans'. Here there exists a parallel to the narrator's own condition, for, as Fiona Tolan argues, "in accordance with ecofeminism, the narrator identifies herself as a woman with nature, and therefore perceives herself as threatened and victimised" (43). In chapter 14 after they catch a fish, David wants her to kill the fish but she says: "the fish is whole, I couldn't any more, I had no right to...these were no longer the *right reasons*" (Atwood, 1972, p.12, emphasis added). The usual 'reasons' for treating nature aggressively do not sound 'right' to her anymore. Hence she perceives her body, fragmented through her past abortion, as identifiable with that of the fish whose wholeness of body she cannot desecrate by killing. Her sense of identity with nature and its creatures goes to the extent that towards the end of the

novel she considers herself not as human: "they mistake me for human being...if they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me...and hang me up by the feet from the tree" (Atwood, 1972, p.190); in fact, she imagines herself being treated as other animals, especially the mutilated hanged heron.

A related binary is that of male (associated with reason, civilization, culture) vs. female (associated with unreason/insanity, wilderness, nurture). The contrast between the female protagonist's parents is a sharp one indeed. A very interesting precursor for the narrator to think of herself as nature is her mother, though she is initially under the influence of culture and civilization, 'the law of the father'. She tells us about her mother: "on some days she would simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest" (Atwood, 1972, p.49) or, elsewhere, "standing beside the tray for the birds, her [mother's] hand stretched out; the jays were there too, she's training them, one is on her shoulder, peering at her with clever thumbtack eyes, another is landing on her wrist, wings caught as a blur." (ibid, 108) What Carolyn Merchant describes as "the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother" (qtd. in Tolan, 2007, p.42-43), is well exemplified in the narrator's mother.

The narrator thinks of her mother and herself as victims of a culture based on cold ratiocination, "She [the mother] hated hospitals and doctors; she must have been afraid they would experiment on her, keep her alive as long as they could with tubes and needles even though it was what they call terminal, in the head it always is; and in fact that's what they did" (Atwood, 1972, p.17). She has a lucid vision of this sense of victimhood when she sees the dead heron hanged upside down, she says: "why had they strung it up like a lynch victim...to prove they could do it, they had the power to kill" (Atwood, 1972, p.118). This idea of 'power' over nature, central to the Enlightenment, gained through reason-generated tools has become the 'power to kill' *unreasonably*, the power to colonize nature.

This 'power' is epitomized in the narrator's father who is the very opposite of her mother. He plays the role of a rational man and he is what the narrator calls an "eighteenth century rationalist" (Atwood, 1972, p.34). Pragmatism is his religion, "he believed that with the proper guide books you could do everything yourself" (ibid.). He is in fact a "Robinson Crusoe figure." Like many of the Enlightenment thinkers, he is an empirical-minded scientist whose attitude towards nature is that of colonialist. His job, which remains a mystery, is to help the government to exploit nature, as the protagonist tells us, "our father had gone on a long trip as he often did to investigate trees for the paper company or the government" (Atwood, 1972, p.78). Even if his real job is to spy for the Americans, that is, to help them have power over Canada, to keep it as a sort of colony, again it is in line with the masculinist, exploitative, colonialist attitude

towards nature.

The narrator's absent brother was also under the influence of his father, as a child he had built for himself a laboratory in which he used to try to experiment with insects and animals; he "kept them in jars and tins on a board shelf back in the forest, ... one of snakes was dead and several of frogs, their skin dry and their yellow stomach puffed up, and the crayfish was floating in the clouded water with its legs uppermost like a spider's" (Atwood, 1972, p.132). There is an attempt to pass this 'culture' from the father on to the son.

The father's cold ways, his mechanical life, turns his wife and children to emotionally desiccated people; this is most evident in his wife who is extremely reserved about her feelings. When the narrator finds her diary, she realizes that:

All she put in it was a record of the weather and the work done on that day: *no reflections, no emotions*. She would refer to it when she wanted to compare the years, decide whether the the spring had been late or early, whether it had been a wet summer (Atwood, 1972, p.18, emphasis added).

There is a lot of pathos in that she finds this diary "on the bedside table with the flowers and chrysanthemums" (ibid.). For it is implied that there is no beauty in the life of a genuine lover of the beauty of nature because of the coldly rational, mechanical lifestyle imposed by her husband on her.

Another major female character in the novel is Anna. She is the ideal type for the masculinist ideology. As Eleonora Rao argues, "Anna in *Surfacing* adopts "masculine" points of view and interests. She remains, however, in the perception of her husband, excluded from the Male world of the intellect, and is defined in relation to her body, a "dumb" talking doll" (1993, p.138). For Atwood, Anna is "locked in, she isn't allowed to eat or shit or cry or give birth" (Atwood, 1972, p.169); she is just a doll, a robot of her husband, David. Despite all the abuses by her husband, Anna still tries to be a faithful companion to him. Oddly enough, she is happy to leave nature for a culture in which she is a victim: "I'll be glad to hit the city" (ibid., 168). She has to use makeup all the time, that is, to look artificial rather than natural, as a whim of her husband. Remembering her mother's "dismayed" (ibid., 41) look at her daughter's attempt to put on makeup, the narrator tells Anna, "you don't need it here...there is no one to look at you" (ibid., 41) but Anna seems to have internalized the 'male gaze.'

As mentioned before, the idea of 'power' is central in the novel. The power/knowledge nexus over/about nature/woman is a staple topic in any ecofeminist analysis. As Karen J. Warren notes, there is an epistemological connection between these concepts and ecofeminist critics challenge "mainstream views of reason, rationality, knowledge and the nature of the knower" (1996, p.xiv). *Surfacing* also, as J. Brooks Bouson (1993, p.52), argues "challenges the privileging of masculinity as the site of

power and knowledge." This knowledge which empowers its owners to 'rape' nature is "evil", as the narrator puts it: "if I'd turned out like the others with power I would have been evil" (Atwood, 1972, p.33). The power/knowledge nexus and its ravages are embodied in the novel in the imperialistic attitude of America towards Canada, which by and large symbolizes 'nature'. "For us", says the narrator, "when we were small the origin was Hitler, he was the great evil...But Hitler was gone and the thing remained ...It was like cutting up a tapeworm, the pieces grew;" she asks, "are the American worse than Hitler" (ibid., 130). The Americans, the narrator says, "spread themselves like a virus" (ibid., 130), they also "get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference" (ibid.). The virus of 'empowering' reason has infected humanity.

Ironically, those who are not infected, the novel has it, are considered insane (insanity as a major theme in the novel). As Erinç Özdemir points out, "*surfacing* embodies the view of female madness as an expression of powerlessness and revolt against patriarchal society" (2003, p.66). Hence, those surrounding the narrator think of her as a mad woman, due to her escape from their civilization; as the narrator says: "they would never believe it's only a natural woman, *state of nature*" (Atwood, 1972, p.196, emphasis added). Indeed the contrast is between their "state of mind" and her "state of nature." This is her revolt against the 'man'-made civilization, against the masculine/masculinist culture that marks her as 'insane':

I have become hungry. The food in the cabin is forbidden, I'm not allowed to Go back into that cage, wooden rectangle. Also tin cans and jars are forbidden they are glass and metal.... I eat the green peas out of their shell and the raw yellow beans, I scrape the carrots from the earth with my finger, I will wash them in the lake first (Atwood, 1972, p.183).

She tries to avoid whatever is made in the course of civilization and just stick to nature, like an animal (she carries a blanket to protect herself from the cold weather "until the fur grows" (ibid., 182), or towards the end of the novel "crawls" like a child/animal back into the bosom of the mother nature).

The narrator is labeled 'mad' by the patriarchal order, the order of law and reason, because she escapes from civilization. Hence language (or discourse in Michel Foucault and other modern theorists' terms) becomes a means of exercising power. Enlightenment view of language was that of a transparent tool or means of rational communication. The 'language of civilization' - of politics, commerce and social exchange - is that of power. "VOTEZ GODET, VOTEZ OBRIEN...THE SALAD, BLUE MOON COTTAGES ½ MILE, QUEBEC LIBRE... BUVEZ COCA-COLA GLACÉ" (Atwood, 1972, p.11). As André Brink remarks, these words and their referents are "symptomatic of the 'American' world ...: recyclable,

collapsible, disposable, consumable” (1998, p.256). The narrator rejects all these words and things of civilization. For her language is the “voice of reason” (Atwood, 1972, p.191). As a woman who feels a total affinity with nature, she no more needs the use of such a tool and prefers silence to language: “the animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word” (Atwood, 1972, p.187). In Özdemir words, the narrator “is depicted as enacting a painful but determined search for another language, one that would allow non-destructive relationships with others and nature. Such a language would preclude the reductive and alienating relationships of domination and subordination reflected by the subject-object split that characterizes the syntax of our current language” (2003, p.58).

In Lacanian terms, the narrator escapes from the Symbolic order - the law of the father, the norms of culture, the rule of language – and returns to the Imaginary order, the infant’s experiences of wholeness, of unity with the body of the mother. She flees the city and civilization and returns ‘home’ in more than one sense. On returning she experiences a sort of reverse ‘mirror stage’; this occurs after diving into the lake and ‘surfacing’. The lake works as the mirror for her and she finds again the Mother Nature there; the homecoming becomes a going back to the Imaginary order and forgetting the language that “wasn’t mine” (Atwood, 1972, p.107).

As with postmodern literature and art in general and ecofeminism in particular, the theme of representation, in language and art, is a seminal one in Atwood’s novel. Most of the figures in the novel (the narrator, David, Joe) are artists or have artistic aspirations and pretensions. The novel could be read as, in a sense, a critique of masculinist art or art generally as a component of masculinist culture. Consider, for instance, the image of camera in the novel which is used mainly as a means of entrapment, as ‘man’s’ tool to represent nature and woman. David and his crew try to capture “samples” of Canadian nature and life in a film shot for an educational channel. Ironically their supposedly documentary film, ‘realistic’ representation, is a distortion, is a ‘sample’ of commercialized. Here is how the damage done to nature, like the dead heron, turns into a ‘documentary’ which as commodified art fails to capture the reality of the tragic scene. David says:

“We need that; we can put it next to the fish guts”

“Shit,” Joe said “it really stinks.”

“That won’t show in the movie,” David said, “you can stand it for five minutes, it looks so great, you have to admit it” (Atwood, 1972, p.117)

This is also clear in the scene in which they, David and Joe, force Anna to take off her clothes so her naked body could be shot for the movie; they force her to be represented the way they want it. They ask her to go and stand beside the dead heron: “you will go in beside the dead bird, it’s your chance for stardom, you’ve always wanted fame. You’ll get to be on Educational TV”

(Atwood, 1972, p.135). Both woman and nature become objects of representation for leisure ‘education’ (a central concept of the enlightenment). They want to do the same to the narrator but, as Alice Ridout points out, she “refuses to be represented by David and Joe in the same way as they represented Anna” (2011, p.79). Interestingly, the narrator in an act of defiance destroys the film by throwing it into the lake (a multivalent symbol in the novel). Masculinist representation is resisted.

As mentioned, the narrator is also an artist: “I am what they call a commercial artist, or, when the job is more pretentious, an illustrator. I do posters, covers, a little advertising and magazine work” (Atwood, 1972, p.9). Doubting the artistic abilities of women, her husband, a mouthpiece for the masculinist culture, tells her: “I should study something I’d be able to use because there have never been any important woman artist” (ibid.). As for her Canadian employer, “what they like best is something they hope will interest the English and American publisher too” (Atwood, 1972, p.50). The quoted passages bespeak of the commodification of art in the modern/postmodern age, the position of women as artists and the status of Canadian art at the time as subsidiary to the English/American mainstream.

Also related to the concept of art is the figuring of ‘primitive’ art in the novel, that of Indians inhabiting Canada before ‘enlightened’ European colonized it. There are examples like rock paintings or cave paintings which the narrator’s father ‘discovers’ and is fascinated with. The missing father in his correspondences with a university professor had tried to make sense of, to ‘rationalize’ the drawings. Puzzled with the color red in the drawings they try to rationalize. The professor in a letter to narrator’s father remarks, “the predominance is red, with minor occurrences of white and yellow, this may be due either to the fact that red among Indians is a sacred color or to the relative availability of iron oxides” (Atwood, 1972, p.103). The drawings also ‘document’ the presence of the natives centuries before the Europeans. As such, it could be said that there is attempted a ‘rewriting’ of the history of Canada.

In Michel Foucault’s formulation “power means relations, a more-or-less organized, hierarchal, co-ordinated cluster of relations” (qtd. in Somacarrera, 2006, p.44). Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* is about such relations which have their roots in the Enlightenment view of ‘reason.’ It celebrates, among other things, the attempt to ‘surface’ from the ‘lake’ of such relations of power which have ‘submerged’ the feminine and the natural.

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