



Ecofeminist Consciousness and Female Self-Reclamation in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Mandeep Kaur

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9424-212X>

Corresponding Author: Mandeep Kaur (Aulakh), Assistant Professor, PG Department of English,
Satish Chander Dhawan Government College, Ludhiana, aulakhmandeep110292@gmail.com

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Abstract

Aim: The paper aims to present an ecofeminist reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, examining how the novel intertwines ecological degradation with female subjectivity, trauma, and resistance.

Methodology and approaches: The paper undertakes a qualitative textual analysis of *Surfacing* through an ecofeminist lens, examining key narrative moments that connect the protagonist's psychological journey with the natural landscape. It explores how gendered oppression and ecological degradation are intertwined, particularly through images of violence, withdrawal, and reconnection with nature.

Outcome: The study demonstrates that Atwood exposes patriarchal structures as interlinked agents of environmental destruction and women's oppression, revealing how the domination of nature mirrors the control of female bodies and subjectivities.

Conclusion and Suggestions: In conclusion, "Surfacing" links the narrator's psychological trauma with environmental degradation, showing how both arise from patriarchal domination. Her withdrawal into the wilderness becomes a process of confrontation and healing, where fractured selfhood is gradually reconstituted through ecological awareness. The study suggests scope for further research linking the text with contemporary ecological crises and trauma studies, as well as comparative analyses with other women's or Indigenous ecological narratives to deepen ecofeminist insights.

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Published in 1972, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* emerged during a period when environmental awareness, countercultural movements, and feminist thought were gaining visibility and beginning to reshape literary discourse. Atwood captures this historical moment by placing a female narrator in the heart of a forested Canadian wilderness, allowing the landscape to become an active participant in her psychological unravelling. The remote island in northern Quebec is not just a physical setting but a charged environment where memory, trauma, gender, and ecology intersect. The wilderness becomes a mirror that reflects the narrator's fractured inner world and intensifies the unresolved tensions she carries with her.

At its core, *Surfacing* is a narrative of return—return to the childhood home, to the familial past, and ultimately to the narrator's own embodied self. What begins as a straightforward search for her missing father gradually transforms into a psychological excavation of suppressed experiences? Her emotional numbness, fragmented memories, and sense of dislocation suggest deep, unarticulated wounds. As she moves deeper into the wilderness, the external journey increasingly mirrors an internal one, blurring the boundaries between outer landscape and inner consciousness.

Traditional feminist readings focus on how patriarchal narratives, reproductive control, and gendered violence shape the narrator's life and identity. An ecofeminist reading adds an important layer of interpretation by foregrounding the interconnectedness of women and nature. Ecofeminism argues that the same patriarchal mindset that devalues and exploits women also dominates and damages the natural world. In the novel, this link becomes visible through images of ecological harm—polluted waters, unnecessary killing of animals, commercialization of the wilderness—which parallel the narrator's own experiences of violation and erasure. Adding this ecofeminist perspective helps illuminate how the novel critiques hierarchical systems that position both women and nature as passive, controllable, and expendable. It also shows how the narrator's crisis is not only personal but embedded in broader cultural attitudes toward the environment and the female body. This layered understanding deepens the novel's introduction, setting the stage for a more nuanced discussion of how *Surfacing* intertwines ecological devastation with psychic and gendered trauma.

The scholarship on *Surfacing* spans psychological, feminist, ecological, and nationalistic approaches, reflecting the novel's thematic richness. Early critics such as Sherrill Grace (1980) read the narrative as an exploration of duality, arguing that its fragmented structure mirrors the protagonist's divided consciousness. Marilyn Rose (1980) similarly interprets the wilderness as an extension of the narrator's inner turmoil, charting both her disintegration and her eventual renewal. Feminist scholars including Coral Ann Howells and Nathalie Cooke foreground Atwood's critique of patriarchal structures, focusing particularly on how the narrator's relationships expose the objectification of women. The abortion episode, in this body of work, becomes a central symbol of bodily violation and coerced submission. Eleonora Rao situates the novel within Canadian national identity, suggesting that the wilderness signifies both ancestral grounding and feminine self-recovery. Symbolic motifs—water, animals, silence, and the act of seeing—have been widely analysed to show how Atwood constructs a narrative that is simultaneously psychological, political, and deeply symbolic.

Ecofeminist scholarship builds on these insights by directly linking women's oppression with ecological destruction. Nargis Akhter and Arif Rashid Shah argue that the narrator's emotional numbness parallels the environmental degradation depicted in the dying birches and the killing of the heron. Their work resonates with foundational ecofeminist theories from Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant, and Vandana Shiva, who view patriarchal domination as a force that simultaneously targets women's bodies and the natural world. Although extensive scholarship exists across these domains, few studies integrate ecofeminism with trauma theory and narrative structure. This paper addresses that gap by arguing that Atwood's ecofeminist vision is inseparable from the protagonist's psychological healing, and that the novel's form itself enacts the intertwined processes of trauma acknowledgment and ecological reconnection.

Theoretical Framework: R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960), Vandana Shiva's work is central to this framework. She asserts that women possess a distinctive ecological awareness rooted in their daily, embodied interactions with land, food, and natural rhythms, Carolyn Merchant's critique of the mechanistic

worldview further strengthens this reading. Val Plumwood's analysis of patriarchal dualisms also illuminates the novel's structure.

R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self* (1960) sought to explain madness in human terms, arguing that psychosis grows out of a deep break between the individual and the world, a split that ultimately fractures the self. In this paper, Laing's insights offer a useful lens for understanding the narrator's psychological unravelling in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. The protagonist displays many features Laing describes—emotional withdrawal, inner division, and a growing sense of estrangement from others and from her own embodied self. Using Laing's theory, this study examines how Atwood portrays madness not as a medical event but as an existential crisis shaped by memory, repression, and the pressures placed on women in modern society. The narrator's retreat into numbness and fragmentation emerges as a response to an emotional environment she finds unbearable. Madness, in this context, becomes both a symptom of her alienation and a way of surviving it. This reading argues that *Surfacing* expands Laing's concept of the "divided self." Atwood shows how gendered expectations, unresolved trauma, and societal demands contribute to the narrator's inner split, while also suggesting that her breakdown contains the seeds of healing. As she confronts the truths she has long suppressed, the possibility of reintegration begins to emerge.

This study employs an ecofeminist theoretical framework to analyse Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, recognising that the novel draws its power from the intertwined realities of environmental destruction and the oppression of women. The term ecofeminism, introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in the 1970s, argues that patriarchal systems sustain themselves through the simultaneous domination of women and nature. Atwood's novel, emerging in the same decade, resonates strongly with this insight, portraying both the female body and the natural world as sites of patriarchal violation. Vandana Shiva's work is central to this framework. She asserts that women possess a distinctive ecological awareness rooted in their daily, embodied interactions with land, food, and natural rhythms. According to Shiva, patriarchal capitalism suppresses this knowledge by elevating exploitative, technocratic modes of production. In *Surfacing*, the narrator's gradual sensitivity to plants, animals, and water reflects a recovery of

this marginalised ecological consciousness. Her increasing attunement to natural elements suggests a return to the intuitive, experiential knowledge that Shiva identifies as central to women's ecological relationship with the world.

Carolyn Merchant's critique of the mechanistic worldview further strengthens this reading. Merchant explains that the Scientific Revolution transformed nature from a living organism into a mechanical object, opening the way for its extraction and exploitation. This shift, she argues, coincided with and contributed to the subordination of women. Atwood mirrors this critique through her depictions of polluted lakes, dying birches, and intrusive technologies such as motorboats and power lines. These images reveal a world in which the mechanistic, patriarchal mindset has disrupted both ecological balance and human connection to the environment.

Val Plumwood's analysis of patriarchal dualisms also illuminates the novel's structure. She argues that binaries such as culture/nature, reason/emotion, and man/woman sustain systems of domination by assigning superiority to one side—typically the masculine. *Surfacing* challenges these oppositions as the narrator's identity slowly merges with the surrounding forest. Her dissolution into natural rhythms destabilises Western notions of individualism and exposes the artificiality of the patriarchal divisions that separate humans from nature.

The present paper adopts a qualitative textual analysis to examine *Surfacing* through an ecofeminist theoretical framework. The study focuses on pivotal narrative moments—such as the protagonist's encounters with the lake, her discovery of the mutilated heron, and her gradual withdrawal into the forest to explore how the text intertwines gendered oppression with ecological degradation. Insights from Val Plumwood, Vandana Shiva, and Carolyn Merchant shape the interpretive approach, allowing an examination of patriarchal rationality, ecological consciousness, and the shared structures of domination that link the exploitation of women's bodies with the exploitation of nature. This methodology enables a close, contextually grounded reading of the novel's thematic concerns and ecological resonances.

Moreover, women engaged in anti-war and anti-nuclear movements gradually began to recognize parallels between different forms of patriarchal violence. As Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva note in *Ecofeminism*, many activists

came to “perceive aggression against the environment almost physically as aggression against [the] female body” (Mies and Shiva 25). This insight rests on the belief that men’s exploitative treatment of nature is intertwined with the long-standing feminization of the natural world, what Carolyn Merchant calls “the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother” (Merchant 26). Ecofeminists therefore argue that patriarchal systems establish a damaging hierarchy that pits masculine culture against feminine nature.

This conceptual framework aligns closely with Atwood’s *Surfacing*, where nature appears vulnerable and endangered from the opening lines: “the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south” (Atwood 1). The south symbolically represents America and the urban world. As the story continues, the landscape’s decline becomes more severe: “the hill would become an eroding sand island surrounded by dead trees” (Atwood 107). Reflecting ecofeminist thought, the narrator identifies herself with the threatened environment and senses her own vulnerability mirrored in the land’s deterioration. Through these layered hierarchies, women, nature, and Canada appear as the innocent victims of a patriarchal, Americanized cultural force.

Ecofeminist theorists reinforce this perception of victimization by arguing that patriarchal society is inherently aggressive. Mies and Shiva assert that “science’s whole paradigm is characteristically patriarchal, anti-nature and colonial and aims to dispossess women of their generative capacity as it does the productive capacities of nature” (Mies and Shiva 32). The narrator internalizes this connection as well, recognizing that the harm inflicted on her through a coerced abortion parallels the damage done to the natural world around her—visible even on the island, where “trash was strewn around it”.

The novel opens with Atwood’s unnamed narrator, an isolated “I” returning to the wild solitude of the island. Her opening line, “I can’t believe I’m on this road again” (1), immediately conveys unease, as though something within her is unsettled. This sense deepens when she recounts events that occurred before her birth with the clarity of direct memory, signalling a fractured perception and emotional instability. Anna’s observation, made while reading the narrator’s palm, that some of her “lines are double” and that her otherwise “good childhood” was disrupted by “a funny break” (Atwood 4), signals an underlying

psychological rupture. Although Atwood does not reveal the cause of this “break” immediately, she allows the reader to witness the symptoms of emotional deadness, detachment, and an almost anesthetized response to life. When the narrator bites “down into the cone” but feels nothing “for a minute” (Atwood 7), the physical numbness mirrors a deeper emotional paralysis. Later she admits that she had been like that all her life. Much like the individuals Laing discusses in *The Divided Self*, she experiences profound estrangement both from society and from her own inner life. Like the estranged individuals Laing discusses in *The Divided Self*, she experiences a profound separation from both society and herself. Her emotional paralysis is evident when the protagonist admits she fears breaking down in front of others, worrying that if she began to cry “none of them would know what to do and neither would I” (Atwood 7).

Her discomfort in social situations reinforces this detachment. Although she claims to like and trust David, Anna, and Joe, and even acknowledges their practical usefulness, she nonetheless wishes “they weren’t here.” The presence of others makes her restless, leaving her to wonder whether “either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am” (3). Her recurring thought, “Nobody loves me. Everybody hates me” (Atwood 42), exposes a deep insecurity. She calls herself “an escape artist of sorts, expert at undoing knots” (Atwood 50) while simultaneously recognizing, with bitter clarity, that “Being socially retarded is like being mentally retarded” (Atwood 51). Her emotional life has frozen over like the ponds she describes, producing the same sense of entrapment and numbness reminiscent of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. In both narratives, a young woman’s psyche becomes sealed within a metaphorical glass container, cut off from meaningful connection. Each protagonist becomes distanced from friends, engages in self-destructive acts, labels herself “crazy,” and moves through psychological breakdown toward a fragile emergence. Atwood even adopts the first-person narrative technique, much like Plath. Yet beyond these surface parallels, the resemblance ends. *The Bell Jar* is confessional, grounded in personal history, whereas *Surfacing* is a work of imaginative reconstruction. Plath’s protagonist begins to fall apart in the middle of the novel. Atwood’s narrator, however, collapses completely only toward the end, showing a more radical use of madness. A careful reader soon identifies the root of the narrator’s

disintegration: the severing of ties from her origins. By the time she returns to the island, she refers to her family as “they,” as though they belonged to someone else (Atwood 8). The decisive rupture occurred nine years earlier, after her abortion, an experience she never disclosed to her parents:

They never knew, about that or why I left. Their own innocence, the reason I couldn't tell them; perilous innocence, closing them in glass, their artificial garden, greenhouse. They didn't teach us about evil, they didn't understand about it, how could I describe it to them? They were from another age, prehistoric, when everyone got married and had a family, children growing in the yard like sunflowers; remote as Eskimoes or mastodons (Atwood 106).

In her memory, her parents' world appears pure, sheltered, almost fragile like a “greenhouse,” in stark contrast to the world she entered through her affair with her married teacher, a world marked by violence, insincerity, and emotional betrayal. This is the “funny break” Anna sensed: the moment when the narrator left behind the unspoiled safety of childhood and stepped into a corrupted adult world that shattered her emotional integrity. The protagonist admits that she cannot pinpoint when the rupture within her first occurred. She imagines herself as a stage-magician's assistant and states:

No hints or facts, I didn't know when it had happened. I must have been all right then; but after that I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling, a trick done with mirrors, I read it in a comic book; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart. The other half, the one locked away, was the only one that could live; I was the wrong half, detached, terminal. I was nothing but a head, or no, something minor like a severed thumb; numb. At school they used to play a joke, they would bring little boxes with cotton wool in them and a hole cut in the bottom; they would poke their finger through the hole and pretend it was a dead finger (Atwood 79).

Through this portrayal, Atwood shows that the narrator's madness is not just a personal crisis but a way of surviving an emotional world she finds impossible to endure, which directly supports Laing's ideas about the divided self. Her numbness, distance, and sense of not belonging come together to form a story of

deep alienation. Yet within this breakdown there is also a chance for healing, a possibility that appears only when she finally faces the hidden truth of her past.

The mother–daughter relationship in *Surfacing* is emotionally complex, shaped by distance, longing, and absence. The narrator’s mother, remembered as gentle and deeply attuned to nature—feeding jays from her grey leather jacket, surrounded by birds and flowers—represents a lost source of emotional nourishment. Her death leaves a void that cannot be replaced. She reflects on the impossibility of fully aligning with her mother, noting that “It would need a time warp; she was either ten thousand years behind the rest or fifty years ahead of them” (Atwood 35). The protagonist’s connection to her mother is therefore not only personal but symbolic, entwined with her bond to the natural world. Similarly, her search for her father functions on more than a literal level. It is intertwined with her attempts to recover the emotional grounding that both parents once offered. Yet the novel’s deeper concern is not the father’s presence itself, but the narrator’s quest for psychic wholeness. Numb and emotionally hollow, she journeys from a state of inner death toward the possibility of renewal. In revisiting the wilderness of her childhood and confronting her relationships with her parents, she engages in a process of self-exploration and reckoning. As Atwood suggests in *Survival*, characters must revisit personal histories to understand the values and experiences that have shaped them, and her return to the wild becomes a space where fractured relationships and the self itself can be examined and, potentially, integrated.

The lake in *Surfacing* serves as a symbolic threshold between the external world and the narrator’s inner life. Her act of diving into its waters functions as a kind of baptism, compelling her to confront the deepest recesses of her psyche. This plunge is not merely a physical act but a metaphorical journey inward, through which she seeks to locate and reconcile the fragmented parts of herself. Each time she enters the water, she experiences a heightened awareness of her body and sensations, suggesting an undoing of the dissociation cultivated in her urban life. Vandana Shiva’s concept of embodied knowledge helps explain this transformation: immersion in natural processes restores perceptual and emotional capacities suppressed under patriarchal conditioning.

Confrontation with her father's corpse becomes the catalyst for truth. It forces her to admit the reality of her abortion and the falsified life story she crafted to bury it. She concedes, "Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one, I didn't allow it" (Atwood 105). Her invented narrative of a failed marriage and childbirth was a refuge from the painful truth. The pregnancy and abortion were the result of a manipulative affair with an older man who abandoned her once she had served his purpose. Realizing she left the safety of her parents for someone who viewed her merely as a sexual object leaves her stunned and ashamed. "I locked myself in and turned on the water in the bathtub and he cried on the other side of the door" (Atwood 109), she recalls, acknowledging her emotional immaturity and the depth of her self-deception. Only after confronting her father's lifeless body does the truth finally surface. Thus, the "paper house" she had built around herself is finally broken.

After confronting the truth of her past, the protagonist realizes that becoming "whole" requires abandoning the distorted self-image she has sustained through mirrors: "I must stop being in the mirror. I look for the last time at my distorted glass face Not to see myself but to see. I reverse the mirror so it's toward the wall; it no longer traps me" (Atwood 129). Here turning the mirror to the wall frees her from its distortions and marks her release from the false identities that once confined her. Her descent into the lake thus becomes a symbolic journey into the depths of her own psyche.

Surfacing juxtaposes the male and female principles, situating the female principle as deeply intertwined with nature, creativity, and regeneration, which is one of the key concerns of ecofeminist thought. The male principle, represented by the father, embodies rationality, order, and a resistance to the irrational. In contrast, the female principle opens onto a realm beyond logic, aligned with the cycles and rhythms of the natural world, where opposites such as life and death or suffering and joy are reconciled. A failure to acknowledge this feminine domain results in a catastrophic splitting of the self. While her father imparted strategies for "staying alive" but the protagonist comes to realize that "logic is a wall" (Atwood 128) and cannot protect her. What she truly needs is the legacy of her mother. The father's legacy is recorded in sketches of prehistoric pictographs,

linking rational knowledge to history and survival, but the mother's legacy is rooted in the protagonist's own childhood drawing, a woman with a "round moon stomach" and a child inside her, and opposite her "a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail" (Atwood 116). Through this image, she discerns a new meaning, the necessity of embracing the female principle, of becoming like her mother, despite previously believing it impossible. This recognition reframes motherhood not as a socially imposed role but as a conscious, regenerative act essential to her reintegration. By initiating the sexual act with Joe and embracing her potential for motherhood, she begins to emerge from the cold, numb state that had weighed her down. It signifies her awakening to life and feeling a renewed sense of vitality.

Motherhood, in this ecofeminist reading, is inseparable from her connection to the natural world: it restores her sexual and creative power and situates her within the cycles of life rather than outside them. As Carol P. Christ argues, motherhood can be understood as a sacred act, aligning the woman with ancient mother-goddesses and reinforcing her regenerative capacities (Christ 325). In *Surfacing*, the female principle and its alignment with nature enable the protagonist to reconcile life and death, good and evil, and to reclaim a holistic sense of self. Ecofeminism thus illuminates how Atwood links women, nature, and creativity, showing that the reclamation of feminine power and ecological consciousness is central to survival, psychic integration, and the restoration of balance in both the self and the world around her.

As the protagonist descends further into her psychological crisis, she begins to assume qualities of animals and plants, signalling an intrinsic continuity between humans, nonhuman life, and the natural world. The departure of her companions brings relief, "this is what I wanted, to stay here alone" (Atwood 25). Because true communion with spirits and nature requires solitude and the suspension of rational thought. Her aimless movements, entering the house through the window, wandering without purpose, reflect a regression into childhood. This confrontation finally releases her tears: "I'm crying... it's the first time I watch myself doing it" (Atwood 126). This is a moment of catharsis.

Her regression accelerates as she abandons clothes, "peeling them away... like wallpaper" (Atwood 130), waits for the "fur" that does not appear, and rejects

all traces of civilization- plates, tins, jars, even cooked food. Instead, she consumes raw peas, beans, carrots, roots, and berries. She refuses the cabin and constructs an animal-like shelter from branches and leaves. She defends leaving her droppings outside reasoning that animals with dens do the same. Eventually, even paths, enclosures, and objects touched by metal are forbidden. She no longer identifies as an organism but as the medium through which all life moves: “I am the thing in which the trees and animals grow” (Atwood 133).

Trance-like visions unfold before her. Her mother appears as she once was, quietly feeding birds. Her father emerges as a mythic presence. A fish leaps before her, shifting fluidly between living creature, carved idol, and ancient pictograph. These images signal her movement into a symbolic space where nature, memory, and the subconscious flow together. This moment becomes a point of revelation. She understands that the parents she has been seeing are not literal apparitions but projections of her own fractured inner world. Through this insight, she releases her parents, accepts their absence, and allows them to merge symbolically with the natural world she inhabits. The self-imposed prohibitions that once governed her life dissolve: “The rules are over... I can go anywhere now” (Atwood 138). With this liberation, she is ready to return to human society, no longer seeking authority or validation from gods, parents, or any external force. Her return to sanity brings deeper insights. She recovers the capacity for love, trust, and responsibility. True freedom, she understands, lies not in withdrawal but in engaging with life; retreat leads only to psychological death, whereas reintegration with others ensures survival. Her recovery is signalled by her acceptance of basic human needs—food, shelter, relationship—and by her recognition that she is neither an animal nor a primitive deity.

Madness has been a temporary stage in her evolution, a way to confront the internal ruptures caused by trauma. Atwood has noted that Canadian artists often suffer a kind of cultural schizophrenia born of isolation, but the protagonist emerges from this condition stronger and more whole. She rejects binary thinking—victor/victim, sanity/insanity, city/bush—and discovers what Atwood calls “a third way,” a mode of being that transcends destructive polarities (Grace 98). Turning the mirror around, she refuses the split self it represents; the creature

reflected is “neither animal nor human” (Atwood 140), signalling a new identity beyond old categories. All rigid borders dissolve.

Through an ecofeminist reading, *Surfacing* becomes a narrative of intertwined ecological and feminist awakening. The protagonist’s reconnection with the natural world is not escapism but the very means by which the truth of her past becomes visible. Her eventual decision to return to society indicates not regression but renewal. She re-enters the human world with a restored sense of autonomy and connection to herself. She recognizes the need to resist patriarchal victimhood and to rebuild her life on the terms shaped by her own embodied awareness rather than external impositions. Nature exposes what patriarchal culture encourages her to suppress, enabling her to confront the trauma of her abortion and reclaim her agency. Atwood suggests that personal healing and ecological consciousness are mutually reinforcing processes. The protagonist’s journey demonstrates that liberation arises through renewed attention to the body, intuition, and the rhythms of the nonhuman world—forces that resist and counteract patriarchal domination.

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Mandeep Kaur

Mandeep Kaur is an Assistant Professor of English at Satish Chander Dhawan Government College, Ludhiana, Punjab, India. She holds M.A.(Hons.) in English from Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar and pursuing Ph.D. from Panjab University, Chandigarh. She is UGC-NET qualified. She began her teaching career at Bebe Nanaki Guru Nanak University College, Kapurthala, and

subsequently taught at Guru Nanak College, Phagwara, where she served for over five years. Her research interests include feminism, Indian literary theory and criticism, gender studies, and contemporary literary and cultural criticism.