

Beyond the Human: Material Ecocriticism in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract: Literature celebrates the beauty of nature by examining ecological issues, environmental themes and the interaction between human and non-human entities. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* serves as a pivotal work which illustrates the material dimension of the ecological life. Material ecocriticism encompasses narratives that are revealed through narrative agencies and are formulated within the 'material' realm. This article is analysed through the lens of material ecocriticism proposed by Serenella Lovino and Serpil Oppermann. It explores how the Canadian landscape is shaped by natural processes and human intervention. This study focuses on the lake, forest and the Canadian wilderness and highlights how these material entities are interwoven with history, colonization, globalization and industrial resource extraction. It also demonstrates how issues of memory, identity, and belonging are inextricably linked to environmental change. The article depicts landscapes as active participants where biological, historical and cultural processes are tangibly ingrained. This article contends on the Canadian wilderness which serves as a testament to ecological transformation and prompts the role of human responsibility in this biological landscape.

Key Words: material ecocriticism, memory, Canadian wilderness, globalization, storied matter.

Introduction

Literature acts as an essential tool for mankind to envision and redefine their relationship with the natural world. The world is at its crucial ecological threshold, where there is no stability between human and non-human life as it is threatened by climate change, environment degradation and exploitation of natural resources. These environmental catastrophes have not only changed the ecosystem but also human's connection with nature, spawning about the coexistence and sustainability. Many a literary text illustrates the intricate

relation between the human and non-human environment, thus fostering ecological awareness and ethical contemplation.

Literature has consistently reflected the essence of human existence. The relation between individuals and the natural world is analyzed within the theory “ecocriticism”. Ecocriticism was initially used by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Literature”, expounded as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and the future of the world” (73). Ecocriticism broadens criticism beyond the human centered issues to include the interaction between the human and non-human things, and the material environment. Micah Issitt, in the EBSCO Research Starter titled “Ecocriticism” highlights that the work of Meeker “proposes that Western culture has embraced a course of development that involves increasing separation from the natural environment, often leading to environmental degradation”. This focuses on the necessity to reevaluate literature as a medium that not only mirrors environmental issues but also examines the consequence of human estrangement from nature. This ecological outlook provided the conceptual basis for subsequent development of ecocriticism and the enhancement of ecological concepts from diverse perspectives.

Modern ecocriticism is the one which incorporates the contribution of literary studies, social and natural science and pragmatic activism. As eco-criticism thrives, there is progressive transition from analyzing literary depictions of nature to scrutinizing the anthropocentric beliefs that have historically shaped the human – environment relation. In an article “A Study of Eco-Criticism for the Relationship between Natural and Human Environments”, Jemima Asenath and A. Santhanalakshmi state that “The ecocritical eye can make the most of anything and everything that occurs in our planet. Additionally, anthropocentrism and the desire to transcend are the scourge of ecocriticism” (1286). It should be recognized that in the ecological system both nature and humans play significant roles and are constantly interconnected to create a whole natural world.

The escalating environmental crisis shows the limitation of human centered development theories that regard nature as a mere resource for human use. Ecological dilemmas have created an immediate need for critical approaches that reevaluate humanity’s moral and cultural connection with the non-human realm. Ecocriticism promotes a sustainable future. It diligently strives to maintain the basic earth’s rights to life, thus ensuring its viability for a sustainable future. A secure atmosphere must be provided for a prosperous future generation. Ecocriticism has extended to a wide range of academic fields including philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology and environmental humanities. This development signifies that ecological issues cannot be resolved solely by scientific or political means. They necessitate shift in cultural perception, moral accountability and stories that shape mankind and their role in the natural world.

Material ecocriticism originated as an important development within ecocritical studies, mirroring the larger material turn in humanities. Material ecocriticism fundamentally has two approaches to understand the agency of matter. The initial approach emphasizes the depiction and representation of matter’s non-human agentic abilities within narrative forms. The second approach centers on matter’s narrative influence in generating configurations of meaning and substances that engage with human existence in a field of co-emerging interactions. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann in “Introduction Stories Come to Matter”, expound material ecocriticism as

Material ecocriticism, in this broad framework, is the study of the way material forms- bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes and biological entities- intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories. (7)

Matter plays an active role not as a passive background in the idea of interconnecting with living and non- living things.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of literature demonstrates that *Surfacing* by Atwood has received significant scholarly attention from a variety of theoretical viewpoints. Pranita Shinde (2024), in an article “Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood’s Novel *Surfacing*”, analyses the novel’s depiction of ecological consciousness and its resemblance with women’s condition. Rakshanda Sayad Jan and Ijaz Ahmed (2026) in an article “Nature, Identity, and Narrative Form in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*: An Ecofeminist Analysis”, explores the ecofeminist perspective and the link between women and nature in a patriarchal society. Tina and Kanchan Sharma (2025) in an article “Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*: Feminism and Sexual Politics”, exposes the idea that feminism and gender inequity are not natural, but rather embedded and examines how women are limited to patriarchal culture-defined duties. Atwood’s work emphasizes the psychological and societal limits placed on women.

Meškova, Sandra in the article “Ecology of Self: Woman’s Self-Discovery In Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*”, presents dilemma of a woman’s self-perception in an environment damaged by patriarchal power relations and the pressures of modern consumer society. Self-discovery is analysed in the framework of the French feminist school of *écriture féminine*, the theoretical perspectives of Alice Jardine and Rita Felski, as well as cultural ecology. Suneetha Rose and Rajendra Prasad (2023) in an article “Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*: A Study on Quest for Identity”, tackles the intricacies of human existence and the road of self-discovery. It explores the depths of human existence, considering identity, relationships and the quest of meaning as pursuits of purpose.

Vijeta Gautam and Jyotsna Sinha in the article “Role of Nature in Self- Exploration in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*”, focus on the human interaction with nature. This paper unmasks the dualities and inconsistency in both Atwood’s personal life and her patriarchal society. Through the struggle, she reclaims her identity and begins a psychological journey that leads her into the natural world. These studies have helped to establish *Surfacing* as a seminal feminist work, yet they typically portray nature as a symbolic extension of the protagonist’s psychological state rather as an active player in the story. All these works highlight the interrelated exploitation of female bodies and the natural environment by exposing parallel patterns of dominance impacting both women and nature.

Another important corpus of research looks at *Surfacing* from the perspectives of postcolonial identity and Canadian nationalism. By comparing the Canadian wilderness with American materialism and colonial influence, the critic Frank Davey contend that the book challenges Canada’s cultural identity. Frank Davey’s memoir specifies that “Atwood was taking Canadians’ various struggles for cultural power, and how ‘natural’ she thought Ontario Tory dominance of Canadian cultural paradigms to be” (18). The landscape serves as a symbol of cultural resistance and national consciousness in these readings. These viewpoints shed light on the novel’s political aspects and provides ideological interpretation precedence over the material environmental ecological values.

Psychological methods have made a significant contribution to the interpretation of *Surfacing*. Leena Pundir in an article “Psychic Assimilation in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*”, paper seeks to establish how the heroine’s standards of behaviour, repress her bad memories as a healing journey through trauma, memory and fractured identity. The lake, the forest, and surrounding wilderness are examined as metaphorical locations that promote self-reconciliation and psychological healing. Although these interpretations offer insightful perspectives on the protagonist’s emotional metamorphosis, they tend to focus more on the internal human experience and less on the agency of the nonhuman world.

Recent advances in environmental humanities, especially material ecocriticism, have broadened ecological inquiry beyond the depiction of nature. While Jane Bennett’s idea of lively matter questions traditional divisions between animate and inanimate existence, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann contend that landscapes, bodies, water, animals and other material phenomena actively engage in the construction of meaning. These theoretical advancements open up new avenues for understanding literary texts as places where material agencies have impact on human experience, ethics and narrative. While material ecocriticism has been effectively applied to a number of literary works, its application to *Surfacing* is still limited.

Thus, there is a significant gap in the current body of research. While feminist, psychological, nationalist, ecofeminist, and ecocritical viewpoints have greatly enhanced the understanding of *Surfacing*, relatively little research has been done on how the agency of material entities reshape the protagonist’s ecological consciousness.

The current study of material ecocriticism show that the novel’s ecological vision arises from the dynamic interactions between human and nonhuman material agencies as well as from its portrayal of nature. This method contributes to current discussions in environmental humanities about material agency, relational ontology, and ecological ethics while providing a distinctive interpretation of Atwood’s work.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative and interpretive approach based on in-depth textual analysis is used in this study. The theoretical stances of material ecocriticism, offer a thorough framework to comprehend the novel’s ecological vision and serve as the main sources of information for this research. The research explores the agency of material phenomena, such as the lake and the forest and analyses how their interactions create the protagonist’s ecological metamorphosis rather than interpreting the natural world as a symbolic or descriptive backdrop. The interpretation is supported by pertinent ideas from the writings of Serenella Iovino, Serpil Oppermann, Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo, Donna Haraway and other environmental humanities experts. After analysing each material object as an active player in the story, the study looks at how their interrelated ties create ecological networking. The study shows that *Surfacing* portrays ecological identity not as a purely human or psychological experience, but rather as a dynamic process of material and social involvement.

The aspect of nature writing can be seen in *Surfacing*. It heeds on the manner in which material entities actively mould ecological awareness via their interactions. *Surfacing* contends that the lake, forest, fauna and the protagonist’s corporeal form act as material agents that engage in the story instead of just representing psychological and emotional conditions. The interaction of these material entities establishes an ecological network that enables the protagonist to progressively acknowledge her intrinsic connection with the non-human realm.

ENTANGLED ECOLOGICAL MATTERS

The Canadian wilderness acts as a dynamic force that influences identity, memory and environmental stewardship. Canada, the second largest country has a very strong link to its history of wilderness. Nearly half of Canada is covered with forests and it has a small population. The economy of the country is natural resource oriented. In an article “Canada’s Wilderness”, Ron Rutledge and Terje Vold adduce that “the Canadian land has shaped the spirit and nature of its people much more than Canadians, up to now, have reshaped the land” (8). On their trip, the narrator and her boyfriend Joe, and their married friends David and Anna encounter diverse culture and visual shift of landscape that “moved through flattened cow-sprinkled hills and leaf trees and dead elm skeletons, then into the needle trees” (5). These lines act as the living presence that embodies the memory and ecosophy of the forest.

All earthly agencies create meaning-filled contacts with everything else in a continuing process of communications. The lake symbolizes ecological depth and acts as the material archive which preserves multiple histories within itself. The protagonist come to Northern Quebec, a remote island with her lover and her two friends in search of her father. “I sip at my tea and rock, by my feet the dog stirs, the lake below flutters in the wind which is beginning” (25). The view of the lake brings in the memory of her missing father.

The narrator brings a deep connection with nature and is immersed in her quotidian activity. Her attention is immediately captivated by the presence of the leech in the water, “Below me in the water there’s a leech, the good kind with red dots on the back, undulating along like a streamer held at one end and shaken. The bad kind is mottled grey and yellow” (43). The leech is consequently not only a descriptive feature but an expressive tangible presence that reflects the vitality of the lake and its biological diversity. The lake indicates that matter has the power to maintain history independent of human storytelling. Water continually changes through movement and circulation, however, it also contains sediments, biological remnants and records of past occurrences. In the work *The Posthuman Glossary*, the essay “Storied Matter” by Serpil Oppermann states that “Storied matter compels us to think beyond anthropocentricity and about our coexistence and coevolution in the story of earth itself” (412). This dual nature makes the lake a compelling example of storied matter, where biological processes and human history become interwoven.

The forest transforms into a living being, urging a reversion to primal instincts, memory and unspoken connection. The narrator's search for her father turns into a pursuit of self-discovery, revealing her connection to nature. Her return to nature can be seen in her behaviour and what she eats, as she gives up eating processed food like “Pork and beans and musical fruit” (212). As she ascends further into the forest, the protagonist starts to dismantle the divisions between her identity and the nonhuman realm. Surabhi Chandan in an article “Voice of the Nonhuman: Posthuman Ecologies in Atwood’s *Surfacing*” states that “I’m in the forest, but the forest isn’t in me; it surrounds me, breathes through me. I dissolve into it” (44). This statement exposes that the land is not mute, it enunciates via intuition, perception and feeling.

The forest functions as a living material force that influences human perception, emotions and identity. In her journey in search on her father, she becomes close to nature, where the narrator gradually withdraws from the modern world and inhabit the rhythm of the natural world. She distances herself from other characters and stays alone in the forest “When I wake in the morning I know they have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water, wherever they were when I summoned them. The rules are over. I can go anywhere now, into

the cabin into the garden, I can walk on the paths. I am only one left alive on the island” (245). From this movement, the island and its tangible environment shape how she lives, moves, and knows herself. The allusions to earth, air and water emphasize that her existence is now shaped by material elements instead of interpersonal connections. The forest, the island, the climate, and the encompassing terrain start to influence her actions, routines, and self-awareness.

The forest acts as the material agency, during the narrator’s journey through the wilderness. The journey through the forest to reach the cabin is very difficult “we pass gigantic stumps, level and saw-cut, remnants of the trees that were here before the district was logged out. . . . The forest thickens and I watch for the blazes”(55). The characters are not able to follow a particular pattern or move with their own intention through the forest. Instead they have forced their body to respond to the agency of the landscape. This depicts the forest as a material force that drives mankind to adapt to its physical environment. Surabhi Chandan in an article “Voice of the Nonhuman: Posthuman Ecologies in Atwood’s *Surfacing*” states that Jane Bennet concept of “vibrant matter” resonates “where water, trees, and animals are not inert objects but vibrant, living agents. Bennett urges us to perceive the world ‘as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages,’ a perspective Atwood vividly explore” (43).

Canada, a once green land becomes the target of colonizers and industrialization. In an article, Hossein Pirnajmuddin and Omid Amani opine that “The critics, for instance, have talked of ‘crisis of reason’ for the aftermath of the approach to reason as a mere instrument has been disastrous” (6). One of the primary calamities in this period is ecological crisis. In the name of enlightenment, rationalists have exploited the landscape and natural resources have severely deteriorated. Violence against nature is violence against the interrelated material web in which people are enmeshed and supporting material ecocritical assertion implies that ecological devastation reverberates across both human and non-human bodies

As globalization and industrialisation have burgeoned, humans are more focused on materialistic goals rather than on the environment. In an article Mansi Joshi “Ecological Concern for Survival in Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* and Dhruv Bhatt’s *Akoopar – The Infinite*” opines that “environmental degradation is evident worldwide, including in countries like Canada and India. When we disregard our roots and the significance of our natural surroundings, our very existence becomes endangered” (22). Northern Quebec, is a remote island, which after colonisation has initiated various projects for socio economic and political refinement. The paper company is the key initiative aimed at boosting local economy and utilizing the region’s natural resource:

they were going to raise the lake level as they had sixty years ago, they were plotting the new shoreline. Twenty feet up again and this time they wouldn’t cut off the trees as they had before, it would cost too much, they would be left to rot. The garden would go but the cabin would survive; the hill would become an eroding sand island surrounded by dead trees. (144)

These lines portray the destruction by humans in the name of progress. Landscape and nature are totally exploited because of the company launched by the government. Atwood contests this utilitarian perspective by illustrating the Canadian wilderness as a materially interlinked system, where its disturbance has impact on both the ecosystem and the narrator's ability to regain memory, identity and sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Surfacing is physically embedded within the lake, forests and the wilderness of the island. Through material ecocriticism, the landscape serves as dynamic material entities that reshape the protagonist's self-perception and her role in the broader non-human realm. It contends that *Surfacing* perceives ecological coexistence not merely as an ethical aspiration, but as a lived material reality rooted in reciprocity, dependency and collective vulnerability. This analysis frames Atwood's novel as a significant addition to modern environmental humanities, encouraging readers to understand that ecological responsibility arises from engagement with the intricate network of material existence rather than from human supremacy over nature.

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