

Ecofeminism in Surfacing:

A Study of Self-Discovery

Debarati Chanda

Asstt. Prof., English,

Department of Law,

N.B.U.

Siliguri,

West Bengal

India

Abstract

The ideology of feminism is now-a-days postulated as one of the most area of theories for turning the wheel of traditional gender role based primarily on the concept of biological essentialism. Traditional gender role has established the superiority of men as ‘rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive.’ (Lois Tyson:85). In this way, it helps to make prominent the binary opposition between men and women. Throughout the world, women have been subjugated by the patriarchal dominance and patriarchal hegemony prevalent in the discursive power-structure of the society. Biological essentialism makes the hegemonic domination of men over women stronger as this concept believes in the inborn inferiority of women in the

society. Simon de Beauvoir, a French materialist feminist critic, opines in her well known book 'The Second Sex' (1949) about the discursive practice to subjugate women depending on the concept of their inborn inferiority and brings to light the true face of intentions behind such assumptions. She has used the term 'the second sex' with 'reference to woman cut ice' (Bijoy Kumar Das, 64). Due to the result of biological essentialism women are compelled to treat themselves as inferior to men in the cases of taking any decision, physical labour, rational thinking, achieving the desired aim in career etc. But, Beauvoir very clearly articulated the social/cultural position of women in the society by asserting: "one is not born a woman; one becomes one"(De Beauvoir ,The Second Sex). Beauvoir clearly points out, 'despite patriarchy's assumptions to the contrary, women are not even born with a material instinct.....Beauvoir maintains that women should not be content with investing the meaning of their lives in their husbands and sons, as patriarchy encourages them to do. (Lois Tyson, 96-97).

Feminism movement raises its voice against all discursive patriarchal practices and social assumption to liberate themselves and to find out their own socio-political-cultural identity and new space negating their positions as the 'other' of men. Women and nature are both exploited in the hands of colonialism and patriarchal society. Opportunist colonial exploiters destroy the Mother Nature to acquire more raw materials for colonial expansion as well as women who stand metaphorically for the mother-nature. Margaret Atwood asserts that "Canada as a whole is a victim, or an 'oppressed minority' on 'exploited', a colony for someone's profit" (Margaret Atwood, 35) Ecofeminism, which is an ideology bearing some concepts of feminist theory, tries to find out a connecting between nature and the female body to bridge the old gap between the ideology of feminism and the ideology of ecology. Greta Gaard asserts about the basic premise of ecofeminism that "Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism and socialism, 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 time ideology that sanctions the oppressions of nature." (Greta Gaard, 20).My paper attempts to analyse what the basic concept of eco -feminism is and how a woman can

discover her true identity emerging from a new self by establishing a connection between her inner world and mother nature.

Concept of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism, which tries to establish a connection between the exploitation of Nature and the exploitation of women, takes into its account the culture-nature relationship rejecting the already established idea of society as linguistically and culturally constructed. Society is seen as a discursive construction by various critics, but ecofeminism which comes under the label of ecocriticism insists to give important to existence of Nature “as an entity which affects us” (Peter Barry, 243) and offers us charm and happiness of ‘the simpler’ and tender life of the wilderness. Nature should not be reduced to any discursive construction.

“Theory in general tends to see our external world as socially and linguistically constructed as ‘always already’ textualised into discourse, but ecocriticism calls this long-standing theoretical orthodoxy into question, sometimes rather impatiently, as in Kate Soper’s frequently quoted remark (in her seminal book *What is Nature*, P-151) that ‘It isn’t language which has a hole in its ozone layer, ‘Ecocriticism, then, repudiates the foundational belief in ‘constructedness’ which is such an important aspect of literary theory” (Peter Barry, 243).

Ecofeminism which comes under the category of ecocriticism helps to understand how nature or wilderness has been brought to the edge of destruction of culturally constructed society for its own materialistic purposes. It is true that with the progress of the human civilization the natural world has been greatly affected due to various reasons like global warming, capitalism, colonial expansion, industrialism etc. Everywhere there is exploitation, damage and destruction in wilderness. Women are also exploited for similar reasons. So, the life-giving role of both nature and woman are neglected in the history of human progress and industrialism. Ecofeminism offers the way of establishing a reunion between women and nature and rediscovering the space to discover the true identity of women and the true value of ‘pure’ nature.

The concept of ideology of ecofeminism can be explained clearly by quoting some lines the writing of Malashri Lal:

”Breaking down the definition to its detailed components, I may clarify further the terms in which ecofeminists perceive western cultural history. Body and nature have been patriarchy’s ‘shadow’ easily projected on to woman, who through her biological rhythms and her domestic milieu is easily seen to be “close to nature”. With further connotations of wilderness, non-civilized state, primitivism, unformed condition, woman in man-made society was seen to require the mediation of man to ‘civilize’ her away from nature and take her closer to the realm of God or morality and social ethics as designed by patriarchy. Hence, emerged what ecofeminists call a “hierarchical dualism”. Man and women are not just “opposites” but the female is subordinate and inferior to the male. Man’s enterprise in

subduing female nature to his will is analogous to his mechanistic and technological domination over the Earth’s original environment. That which resists subjugation causes unease, fear and a sense of evil. The Exploitative relation between man and woman, and man and nature is equated”. (Lal Malashi, 309-10).

Ecofeminist Perspective Revealed in Search for New Identity of the Unnamed Protagonist in Surfacing

Margret Atwood, a Canadian writer, deals with the theme of exploitation of nature and women by the society in many of her novels. *Surfacing*(1972) centers round this particular theme and gradually reveals ‘surfacing’ of a new identity of the protagonist through the establishment of her connection with the Canadian wilderness. The novel begins with a trip of the unnamed female protagonist along with her boy friend Joe and two other friends, Anna and David in search of her father. She is eager to know what the cause of disappearance of her father is. Her past memories are evoked by her journey and she somehow starts connecting her joys and woes of past to the damages like dying white birches, killed heron and the damaged landscape of the place in Quebec.

She recalls how her art teacher, a married man, exploited her by concealing his marital status to the protagonist. The art teacher offers her a wedding ring with the promise of marriage only to deceive her. The true character of the art teacher was revealed when the protagonist became pregnant and she was forced to abort her child. As from her very childhood, she was taught that killing was a kind of cruelty and also a sin, she considers herself responsible for this crime and takes the abortion “as a part of sexual colonialism” (Bijay Kumar Das, 67-68). Her guilty conscience forces her to run away from her home and later on she sends a post card informing about her fabricated story of marriage and her child.

The unnamed female protagonist of the novel embarks on a journey or a quest not only to find out her father but also to rediscover her own emotions. After the incident of her abortion, she begins to regard herself powerless and victimized one. She confesses in surfacing about her victimization:

“he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator.....after it was born I was no more use” (Surfacing).

That is why her journey through the Canadian wilderness is an attempt to find out the truth about herself and emergence of a new woman free from the bonds of society, colonialism and male domination. Both nature and female body are victimized by industrialism, commercialization and technological innovations. The protagonist cannot tolerate the sight when Anna, her friend, becomes naked and runs to the lake for the purpose of shooting a film ‘Random Samples’ by David, Anna’s husband and Joe, the boy friend of the protagonist. The protagonist destroys David’s camera and lens, instruments of commercialization and modern technology to stop the violence on the female body. She finds a connection between Anna’s naked body and the burnt leeches in the island, as both of them are tortured or make victims by the colonialism and technological exploitation. The protagonist decides to stay on the island alone in order to establish affinity with the nature and bring back her power for recreation:

“I have to recent, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been. The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment these are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death,” (Surfacing, 191). She wants to get pregnant again, to fill her womb by her relationship with Joe only to rediscover her power for new creation.

Margaret Atwood in *Surfacing* offers a way of bridging the gap between one's true self or identity and socially discursive or socially essentialised identity by establishing a connection between the damaged landscapes and wilderness of Canadian nature and the wounded self of the nameless protagonist in the novel. During her journey to Quebec; the protagonist notices dead heron, killed by the American Canadians, representing the brutality of the modern civilized men. She compares her own condition with the situation of the heron.

But, the dead heron does not mean that it is finished, rather it suggests symbolically that it can take rebirth. In the same way, the aborted fetus does not suggest that the protagonist has lost her power of procreation. But, it means that she is still able to bring back another fetus or another new life. When she feels presence of a new baby inside her womb, she gradually becomes aware of rediscovery of her power.

This protagonist clearly reflects the tremendous revelation of an unconscious feminist. She asserts that so long she exists only as a creature, but by connecting with nature she becomes a nature-creature. She finds complete harmony with the Canadian Wilderness. When she decides to stay on the island in isolation, she gets closer to nature and her female body is transformed into plant, animal, insect etc. In short, her identity is transpersonalised. It becomes multiple plant, animal, mother goddess, heron and birch. Her journey from the city to wilderness can be regarded as a journey of transpersonalisation a new revelation that allows the nature to become part of her female body. By taking off her cloths, symbol of civilization, she becomes one with nature only to transform herself into a matured and conscious human being.

The protagonist dives deep into the water of the lake and emerges or surfaces with the power of becoming victorious and optimistic in life breaking the assumptions of her powerlessness. The new transformed self of the protagonist can be explained in a precise manner in the words of M.F. Salat:

“Hence when the protagonist surfaces from the depths of the lake, she surfaces with a new knowledge about herself that entails a re-assessment of herself in relation to the world. The psychological/spiritual journey towards self-discovery finds its culmination in a ritualistic re-alignment with the primitive world and a subsequent re-alignment with the lived world with altered perspective and a new vision.” (Salat,82).

Conclusion

The protagonist suffers from exploitation, guilty conscience, alienation and immaturity in the beginning of her journey. But her discovery of likeness with nature gradually breaks the barrier of communication that she crates between herself and the world. When “she chooses physical isolation a voluntary seclusion from society and gets rid of anything human about

herself, becoming more and more like an animal. She moves to a non-verbal level and explores other means of communication.....English words begins to sound “imported, foreign.” With the end of her visionary experience, she releases that she is no longer an animal and has become human again, (Mrs. R.C. Sheila Royappa, 125).¹⁴”

The protagonist embraces a truly ecofeminist outlook by asserting “that human beings are not radically separate from: nature: that the fulfillment of our own humanity is profoundly linked with learning to appreciate the nature within us and without” (Surfacing,40)¹⁵. The “woman-nature” connection by erasing the distinction between the two reveals the truth that both nature and so men have the mystical power to drive away all the damages both in psychological and physical levels and to restore the true power of humanity by becoming one with nature.

REFERENCES:

-
- Tyson, Lois, *A Critical Theory Today : A User – Friendly Guide*, New-York-Routledge, 2008.
- Das, Bijay Kumar, *Critical Essays on Post-Colonial Literature*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributor (P) Ltd., 2007.
- De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (trans), Borde, Constance and Chevallier, Sheila Malovany, Vintage Books, 2011
- Atwood, Margaret, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* Toronto: Anansi Press, 1972.
- Gaard, Greta, *Woman and Environment*, Spring, 1992.
- Barry, Peter, *Beginning Theory “An introduction to literary and cultural Theory*, Viva Books, 2010.
- Lal, Malashri, “Inheriting Nature: Ecofeminism in Canadian Literature”, *Post-Modernism and Feminism Canadian Contexts* (ed.) Shurin Kudchedk Delhi: Pencraft International, 1995.
- Salat, M.F *Canadian Novel: A Search for Identity*. Delhi: B.R Publishing corporation ,1993.
- Royappa, R.C. Sheila, *From cadence to Confidence: Mapping the Mind of Margaret Atwood’s Protagonist in Surfacing*, *Canadian Literature: An Overview*(ed), Balachandran Dr. K. New Deohi: Sarup and Sons
-