



## ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>  
 Vol. 05 No. 02. April-June 2026. Page# 428-437  
 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19927636) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19927636)  
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19927636)  
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19927636>



## Nature, Identity, and Narrative Form in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*: An Ecofeminist Analysis

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### Abstract

*This paper explores Margaret Atwood's Surfacing from an ecofeminist perspective and the link between women and nature in a patriarchal society. It is considered the representation of the oppression of women and nature and moreover shows how they are both being exploited in patriarchal societies. The research also readdresses the limits of previous studies and it focuses on themes and narrative form in previous studies by considering the use of first-person narration, fragmented memories, and silence to construct the protagonist's ecofeminist identity and to express her feelings of isolation and trauma. Employing a qualitative textual analysis method and the authors suggest that narrative form is an important way to give voice ecofeminist concerns. The results indicate that the protagonist's reengagement with nature helps her to heal and reflect, allowing her to stand up against patriarchal norms. Ultimately, this paper reveals that Surfacing does not only offers ecofeminist themes but also narrative approaches to enhance the understanding of the connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women.*

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Female Identity, Patriarchy, Nature, Narrative Techniques, Memory Fragmentation.

### 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* is a classic example of Canadian literature that delves into themes of identity, memory, trauma and human-environment relations. First published in 1972, the novel is a product of its cultural, social and environmental context while also being relevant to contemporary debates on gender and environmental issues. *Surfacing* is essentially about a female narrator's journey back to her home in the Canadian wilderness to look for her lost father. But this literal journey quickly evolves into a deep psychological and emotional journey as the narrator grapples with her fractured memories, a suppressed trauma, and the loss of her sense of self. The shift from external to internal journey is the narrative and thematic foundation of the novel and it is crucial for an ecofeminist reading.

Ecofeminism as a theory stresses the parallel domination of women and nature within patriarchal societies. Theorists like Warren (1988) believe that the oppression of women is connected to the oppression of nature in terms of "the logic of domination", which sees both as objects to be owned and exploited. Likewise, Plumwood (1993) argues that "nature has been constructed as a sphere of inferiority" which parallels the oppression of women in patriarchal cultures (p.4). In this sense, *Surfacing* is a compelling critique of these forms of oppression, as it

vividly illustrates how nature and the female body are both sites of domination, violence and resistance.

An interesting feature of this novel is its symbolism of nature. The setting of the wilderness - dense forests, still lakes and wild animals - is not just a backdrop but a dynamic and living entity that reflects the mental state of the protagonist. As the narrator progresses through the wilderness, she also progresses into her subconscious, reencountering traumatic experiences and confronting repressed parts of herself. The degradation of the environment through human interference and consumerist values as well as resonate with her own confusion, inner struggle and emotional turmoil. Therefore, nature is a mirror and a cure for humankind. As Atwood notes in her critical essays, "the wilderness is a testing ground" in which social identities are stripped away, and greater truths are revealed.

Silo and language as both oppressive and resistant forces have also been a focus of critical attention. Howells (2003) argues that Atwood's protagonists often struggle to find a language adequate to their experience, suggesting how patriarchal language can demean women and misrepresent their experiences. In *Surfacing*, the narrator's disjointed narration, with its elision, contradictions and non-sequential flashbacks, is emblematic of this struggle to express trauma and assert identity. The first-person point of view reinforces this, showing readers her mental breakdown and subsequent healing. Her ultimate retreat from language and society can be seen as a descent into madness but also as a defined act, a rejection of the oppressive societal and cultural forces that have shaped her.

Beyond this, the novel scrutinizes the influence of patriarchal culture on human relationships and their relationship with nature. The narrator's relationships with men reflect power dynamics that uphold gender inequality and emotional manipulation. Similarly, these dynamics also apply to human-nature relations, in which exploitation, domination and possession replace harmony and respect. Puleo (2017) suggests that contemporary capitalist societies, driven by competition and technological development are part of this system of domination, which has negative consequences for women and the environment. Her insight that another possible world requires care, sustainability, and equality echoes the underlying message of *Surfacing*, in which the protagonist's return to nature signifies a repudiation of exploitative values and a journey towards healing.

*Surfacing* is a story about recovery, but also a critique of the linked systems of patriarchy and environmental degradation. Its intricate narrative, symbolic representations of nature and gendered experiences exemplify the concerns of ecofeminism. The protagonist's journey of self-exploration and her ultimate integration with nature and place indicate that healing and recovery are possible, but only through a transformation of our attitudes towards women and nature. Through her literary artistry and philosophical wisdom, Atwood produces a work that still provokes readers to contemplate questions of identity, power and environmental sustainability in an increasingly vulnerable world.

Ecofeminism is a critical theory that came into existence at the end of the twentieth century with a mix of feminism and environmentalism. It looks at the profound interrelationship of the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature in patriarchal cultures. Ecofeminist scholars suggest that the same line of thought that defends the oppression of women also causes destruction of nature. This theory brings out the treatment of women and nature as passive, inferior and subject to control and use. Consequently, ecofeminism is now a useful method to literature studies to examine the way literature portrays gender, power, identity and environment.

In literary studies, ecofeminist criticism is concerned with the manner in which female characters relate to nature and the way this relationship is indicative of the larger social and cultural power dynamics. It also addresses the ways through which the identities of women are influenced by the patriarchal forces as well as their engagement with the natural realm. Meanwhile, voice structure and memory as narrative techniques are significant in introducing these themes. Nevertheless, they have often been the subject of thematic and ideological concerns by many traditional literary critics such as Lukas & Goldman (2024) and Eagleton (2011) who have tended to pay less emphasis to narrative form and technique.

Ecofeminist analysis of *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood would have a lot of ground. The novel narrates about an unnamed woman narrator who goes back to the Canadian wilderness in search of her lost father. Though the initial journey can be seen as a literal quest, it turns out to be more of a psychological one of memory, trauma and identity. The natural setting does not only provide a setting of the novel but it is a strong symbol that demonstrates the emotional state of the narrator. Her feelings of alienation, confusion and psychological suffering are compared to the destruction of nature.

Moreover, the experiences of the narrator demonstrate how difficult life in the patriarchal society can be as women usually cannot find their identity, relations, and social expectations. Her history is the failed relations and emotional trauma based on male domination and social conventions. These experiences bring an aspect of losing touch with her and others. Nevertheless, as she revives with nature, she starts a healing and self-discovery process. Nature is a place where she can get rid of patriarchal oppression and restore her identity.

Most of the research on *Surfacing* has been on its themes and not its modes of narration despite its extensive feminist and ecofeminist approach. Very little is said about the role played by the first-person narration, fragmentation of recollections and silence in the formation of the ecofeminist identity of the protagonist. Thus, the current research addresses this gap because it explores the coordination of narrative form and style with ecofeminist themes to provide a more advanced perspective on the connection between women, nature, and identity.

Through this, the history of the study is enough to prove that *Surfacing* is not a mere novel that discusses environmental and gender concerns but also a multifaceted story that gathers together the methods of literary styles to communicate the unity of oppression of women and nature and the potential of making it whole again by returning to nature.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is one of the most significant Canadian writers. She is a poet, novelist and a critic as well as a cultural activist. Atwood has become an international figure who is known through her strong writing as a feminist and social commentator. Critics as being among the best contemporary in the English literature have acclaimed her works. George Woodcock (1982), a renowned Canadian critic writes that no other Canadian author in her era demonstrates such breads of literary skill and control of word as Atwood.

*The Edible Woman* (1969) is the first novel by Atwood. This was succeeded by numerous significant novels including *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000). Atwood is one of the most powerful women novelists in the world through these works.

Atwood is a writer mostly recognized because of her novel books which address the present days in society, gender politics and power relationship and the experiences of women. Her female characters are usually powerful, complicated and mysterious. Her novels deal much on the plight of women to establish identity in a patriarchal world.

Atwood employs symbols, metaphors, similes and personification quite often. These appliances assist in conveying sophisticated feelings and concepts. Nevertheless, Atwood also demonstrates that language can be sometimes inadequate to be able to comprehend the full expression of pain and experience that women go through.

It is indicated that Atwood's stories tend to exhibit inner struggle and oppression particularly in women. This reinforces the notion of the complicated and enigmatic womanly characters.

Puleo (2017) describes how contemporary capitalism puts excessive emphasis on money, technology and competition. This is an ancient system of patriarchal ideas of power and control. Due to this, it hurts a lot of groups, in particular, women and also it is destructive to nature. Such a model is not sustainable in the long-term due to destruction of the environment. Ecofeminism questions the system and proposes a more appropriate approach to the way of thinking about development that is fair, sustainable and caring.

The concept of ecofeminism can simply be explained as a relationship between ecology and feminism. It reveals the connection of oppression of women and destruction of nature. Ecofeminism is gaining momentum today particularly among youthful females. Previously, ecofeminism was misinterpreted and many believed that women are naturally closer to nature. Howells (2004) believes that female identity is not solid and socially constructed rather it is a theme in Atwood fiction. Instead of women, she says, women are not just fighting with patriarchy but with their own disintegrated identity. This contributes to her argument of women attempting to seek identity in a patriarchal world.

Gaard (1993) explains that ecofeminism reminds us the linked oppression of women, animals and nature in patriarchal societies. She claims the dismantling of interrelated oppressions is the key to fight for gender and environmental justice.

Women are not born in closer relation to nature than men. There are those women who are environmentally conscious and others who are not. The same is true for men. Nevertheless, statistics indicate that a great number of environmental movements have more women. This is not owing to the reasons of biology but social roles. Traditionally, women had the role of taking care of children the sick and the home. Those roles assisted in the formation of such traits as care, empathy and responsibility. When women are educated and they are made consciously, these attributes can make them conserve nature and life.

Environmental destruction and climate change have become an international issue. Natural calamities are on the rise and even developed and wealthy nations are not spared. This confirms that the existing model of technology and economy is unsafe and unsustainable. Society currently exists in a risk society as sociologist Beck (2020) refers to it as a risk society where all people face the danger of pollution, chemical and environmental destruction.

At last, Margaret Atwood is a prolific writer who effectively speaks for female experiences in patriarchal settings for social and environmental issues. Her works reveal the complexities of women's identity and their struggle for stable their gender identity in a patriarchal world. Her novels, through the perspective of ecofeminism, show the link between the oppression of women and the oppression of the environment. Scholars such Puleo (2017) also enhance this argument by connecting contemporary capitalism with patriarchal systems which oppress women and the environment. Ecofeminism seeks to dismantling and to develop a more ethical, sustainable and compassionate world. The looming environmental crisis reinforces Beck's (2020) notion of a "risk society" in which humans are all exposed to environmental risks. This review demonstrates that literature, theories and social circumstances all stress the need for harmony

between humans and the environment. It also highlights the need for consciousness, education and critical thought to achieve a better future.

The bulk of the existing knowledge on *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood is centered on ecofeminism or the feminist ideas of the author. Such researches normally examine the way in which the novel portrays the oppression of women devastation of nature and the connection between women and nature. Nevertheless, only a limited number of studies investigates the ways in which the novel narrative means help to generate these ecofeminist concepts. The first-person narration, broken memories and silence are important factors that contribute to the development of the psychological and ideological life of the main character, yet they have not been examined in enough detail.

Most conventional literary works usually emphasize on themes, meanings and social concepts instead of formal organization of the story. Georg Lukacs & Goldman (2024), and Eagleton (2011) are some of the scholars who have significantly contributed to literary criticism by analyzing literature within the framework of ideology, society and historical context. Nevertheless, their methodologies tend to prioritize thematic interpretation and ideological interpretation, and pay relatively less attention to the ways in which narrative form and narrative methods of storytelling shape the construction of meaning.

### 1.1. Research Objectives

- To analyze Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* from an ecofeminist perspective by examining the relationship between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature.
- To examine how narrative techniques—such as first-person narration, fragmented memory, and silence—contribute to the construction of the protagonist's ecofeminist identity in *Surfacing*.

### 2. Research Methodology

The current research is a qualitative research using text and literary analysis as a major focus. Qualitative research has been found suitable in literary studies as it enables one to analyse in details the meanings and ideas and narrative structures in a literary text. As opposed to using numerical data or measuring things statistically, qualitative analysis focuses more on the interpretation, critical reading, and close analysis of the textual elements. The qualitative approach applied to the current research project helps explore the mechanisms of narrative techniques and the role of these techniques in the depiction of ecofeminist identity in the context of *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood in greater detail.

The study is narrowly aimed at examining how the narrative strategies used by Margaret Atwood are able to develop both the psychological and ideological growth of the main character. Special consideration is paid to such narrative components as first person narration, fragmentation of memories and use of silence. These methods are analyzed as structural elements that contribute to the comprehension of the reader about what experiences, feelings, and personality-building of the protagonist go through. The first-person narration makes the story told by the unnamed female protagonist and provides the opportunities to get into her inner thoughts and gleanings. This first person narrative approach is significant in exposing how patriarchal structures would affect the self of the main characters.

The qualitative analysis also focuses on the way in which the contact of the protagonist with the Canadian wilderness helps her in her process of self-awareness and identity building. Natural landscape in *Surfacing* is not simply a physical setting but it is a symbolic space in that it also depicts the psychological change experienced by the protagonist. The degradation of nature reflects the emotional alienation of the narrator and the fact that she is gradually becoming closer to nature is a sign of healing and of recognizing herself. The analysis of these aspects

reveals the interdependence of narrative form, ecofeminist ideology and identity construction as discussed in the research.

### **2.1. Theoretical framework**

This study relies on an ecofeminist literary theory and narrative theory as a means of coming up with a more humanistic and deeper look at *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood. This analysis will be heavily based on ecofeminist theory as this approach examines the strong linkage between the subjugation of women and the subjugation of nature as both modes of dominance are rooted in one patriarchal attitude that prefers control, dominance and power over nurturing, balance and coexistence. This point of view can be used in the context of the novel to understand how the personal struggles of the female protagonist are not only personal affairs but are profoundly affected by social and cultural forces that oppress the female and alienate them to the natural identities. The early ecofeminist philosophers also held the view that women feel more affiliated to nature because of their role which is to nurture and support life, but this has been challenged and reevaluated over time. As an example, Shiva (2014) points out the fact that the destruction of the environment directly impacts the lives of the women in the society where women are completely dependent on the natural resources and makes it clear that the relationship between women and nature is not only symbolic but practical and material. In a similar manner, Merchant (2014) states that since ancient times, the patriarchal society, especially science and technology, viewed women and nature as objects of control, exploitation and domination, which is mirrored in literary works as well. Similarly, Plumwood (1993) advocates the notion that feminist principles, including care, interdependence, and respect to life, can provide the remedy to the environmental crisis and can be used to confront the dualist thinking of the separation of humans and nature, as well as men and women. Eco-feminism has not escaped the criticism of essentialism or the idea that women inherently are caring, sensitive or closer to nature which although can be subtly subversive, can still intensify such stereotypes when it comes to interpreting *Surfacing* because, although Atwood uses her complicated portrayal of the narrator, she does not reject it either. In this work, along with ecofeminism, the narrative theory is applied to have a closer look at the way Atwood narrates the story, and how her narrative strategies influence the meaning. The first person narration is a personal and subjective approach to the narration giving the reader a chance to hear the thoughts, feelings and agony of the protagonist directly and casts doubts on reliability and truth. The disjointed memory in the novel is an indication of the mental condition of the narrator who is torn apart by repression, trauma, and loss of identity, slowly finding out the secret truth about her past. Another significant narrative element is silence, because much of what is not said can be as meaningful as what is said and this implies that there is pain, repression, and inability to express traumatic experiences in a patriarchal society. These narrative strategies are not only stylistic decisions, but are closely related to the themes of this novel, as they show that the identity of the main character has been formed, harmed and ultimately re-formed. When one combines the ecofeminist theory and narrative theory, they offer a very detailed and multidimensional framework in which the themes of the novel gender, nature, memory and identity are related to a very specific form of narrative. This mixture allows observing the fact that the story of a main character is not only an inner psychological process but a larger symbolic process of reconnecting with the nature and struggle against the patriarchal domination. Through this, the study not only examines the content of *Surfacing* but also demonstrates how the narrative techniques used by Atwood have been translated into a potent means of conveying the ecofeminist ideas but also how it helps to answer the research questions as it is the connection between the trauma experienced by the

main character, the way it has formed her identity and the way in which it has connected with the environment in a single and meaningful manner.

### 3. Analysis and Discussion

First-person narration is one of the most important narrative techniques that Margaret Atwood employs in *Surfacing*. The whole story is described by the narrator who is an unknown woman protagonist. This is the narrative viewpoint that brings one straight into the thoughts and memoirs of the narrator and his or her conflict emotionally. The effect of using the first-person narration serves as a valuable instrument of disclosing how the experiences of being a woman in a patriarchal society and environmental awareness slowly transform the identity of the protagonist.

The narrator comes out as an emotionally detached and unfeeling person in the first pages of the novel. Her narration is usually confused and alienated. She says to herself, I can never believe that I am on this road again. This is her psychological uneasiness and the unwillingness to address her past. The narrative voice thus expresses a fractured consciousness that is being built up slowly by communicating with nature and memory.

The first-person narrative voice also reveals the tyrannical social organizations that influence the life of the narrator in an ecofeminist viewpoint. Her relationships with men, especially the emotional trauma of the previous relationships, show the effect of the expectations of patriarchy on the female identity. Meanwhile, the narrator starts noticing the destruction of natural environment. These observations associate exploitation of nature with the domination of women.

The voice of the narrator is more self-conscious and philosophical as the story goes on. She starts doubting social values and patriarchal authority through the process of narration. The narrative voice, then, can be seen as a vessel in which ecofeminist consciousness is built up in a slow process. They are illustrated by the personal thoughts of the narrator about the way the identity is reconstructed as a result of psychological awareness and the new attitude to the nature world.

#### 3.1. Memory Dissociation and Psychological Trauma

One more significant story element in *Surfacing* is discontinuous memory. The narrator fails to give her past experiences in chronological order. Rather, the memories will be presented abruptly and irregularly. This psychological division of the narration shows the trauma that the main character underwent and highlights her inability to make sense of her past.

The narrator, throughout the novel, keeps having terrifying memories that she tries to repress at the beginning of the novel. This is because one of the most important memories is the traumatic experience of an abortion that was imposed on her by a relationship in the past. The narrator also later identifies this experience and admits that it had led to an emotional effect on her identity. She tells us, they had planted a death in me. This is symbolic which reflects the emotional pain of the narrator and how she understood the power of patriarchy that dominated her body and personal decisions.

The disjointed memory is the reflection of the identity crisis experienced by the narrator. The fact that she cannot remember the events clearly is the indication of the suppression of painful events. But as the story goes on, the process of recollection becomes critical to the psychological healing. The slow recuperation of the memory enables the narrator to face the reality regarding her past.

In the ecofeminist view, the memory fragmentation is also similar to the broken connection between nature and human. The natural environment around the narrator has been affected by human intervention just as the recollection of the narrator is fragmented and

disjointed. The memory retrieval is thus symbolically an indication of the potential of reclaiming the self as well as the ecological equilibrium.

### **3.2. Hushpuppies and Stifling of Feminine voices**

Another important literary device used in the novel is silence. The narrator would conceal information or fail to use straightforward language to show her feelings. These pauses can be used as a hint of the historical oppression of the voice of women in the patriarchal societies. At different stages of the story, the lead character witnesses what is happening without expressly reacting to it. This silence depicts an underlying-psychological repression. This is evidenced by the fact that she could not put words on her experiences showing that social expectations usually do not allow women to speak about personal trauma. Silence thus turns out to be a figurative expression of patriarchal domination of female expression.

But, silence in the novel also functions as a transition phase in the narrator and his quest towards self-determination. The more the protagonist stays in the wilderness the more she starts to alienate herself to the social language and cultural expectations. At some point she says, This most of all, to be not a victim. This scene is the turning point of the story, when silence is turned to the fight against the patriarchy.

With this metamorphosis the narrator comes to slowly recover her voice and identity. Silence then is not only a symbol of oppression but it is also a part of the process of the psychological and ideological awakening.

The role of nature in the psychological change of the narrator is the focus of the story. Canadian wilderness is not only introduced as a physical location, but a symbolic place, which portrays the emotional state of the narrator.

In the early part of the novel, the narrator notices that there was environmental degradation due to human intervention like tourism and industrial intrusion. These are the observations that highlight the destructive nature of the human society and nature. The ecofeminist theory proposes that the natural world is usually dominated and abused by the patriarchal systems.

Nonetheless, when the narrator continues to spend time in the wilderness, she starts to establish a closer relationship with the nature. This relation enables her to separate herself with the social demands and face her trauma of the past. The wilderness is a place where she gets to rejuvenate her true identity.

On one occasion, the narrator in the novel is symbolic in denouncing the human society and wanting to be in one with nature. This scene signifies the peak of her mental change. The experience that she has with the natural environment enables her to appreciate the fact that human life and ecological systems are interconnected.

This change indicates a chance to transform through reconnection with nature given an ecofeminist view. The re-invention of the identity of the narrator is a denial of patriarchal values and the acknowledgment of a more equal relationship with the natural world.

### **3.3. Additional Analytical Projections**

*Surfacing* could also be analyzed in many more ways:

#### **3.4. The Lake and the Water as a Symbol**

The lake throughout the novel serves as a strong representation of memory, truth and sub-consciousness. The swimming in the lake symbolizes the narrator trying to make sense of the memories he/she has been unable to retrieve and face the untapped experiences.

##### **3.4.1. The Personification of the Animal**

The novel animals represent innocence and the way things should be. The way the narrator responds to the killing of animals is an indicator of her increased consciousness about human violence to the environment.

### 3.5. Another article is the Critique of American Consumer Culture

Another form of criticism in the novel is the modern consumer culture and industrial society which is depicted as ravaging forces that cause destruction of the environment.

### 3.6. Identity and Psychological Transformation

The experience of the narrator may be viewed as the psychological revival which is achieved through the confrontation with the memory and re-identification with nature to re-construct the identity.

## 4. Conclusion

To sum up, the current paper has shown that *Surfacing* can be fully understood based on its themes and narrative form. Using the techniques of the first-person narration, fragmented memory, and silence, the research demonstrates that they actively define the processes of representing identity and ecofeminist consciousness.

Moreover, the analysis identifies the fact that narrative form in itself acts as a tool of psychological conflict and defiance to the patriarchal domination in the work by Margaret Atwood. On the whole, this study adds something to the literary research because it underlines that the form and content are interacted to create meaning in the novel.

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