Margaret Atwood and the Politics of Ecofeminism

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Abstract: The paper discusses Margaret Atwood’s early work, especially her novel Surfacing (1972), in the context of second-wave feminism, the development of the ecological discourse, and the specific cultural movements and theoretical directions characterizing the Canadian context in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Margaret Atwood's fictional work (novels and poems) and non-fictional work (critical essays) reveal a constant preoccupation for Canadianness, filtered and explained via the combined discourses of environmentalism and feminism. At the crossroads, ecofeminism in the specific Canadian context unfolds as a narrative of national identity, women’s position and the role played by nature in the collective imagination, sometimes a victim of humans, sometimes the Evil North, unyielding and dangerous.

Keywords: Canadianness, ecofeminism, Evil North, national identity, women’s position.

Introduction

The second-wave feminism permeated literature and criticism, especially influencing the writings of English-speaking women authors in the 1970s. One of the most conspicuous examples is offered by the Canadian novelist, poet, and theorist Margaret Atwood, whose outstanding literary career has been instrumental in increasing the popularity of Canadian culture worldwide. Margaret Atwood’s preoccupation for environmental issues and deep interest in gender discourses have made her one of the best known ambassadors of ecofeminism in North America.

A very prolific writer, Margaret Atwood has been noted for the diversity of both the genres she tackles and the themes advanced. Margaret Atwood has a strong reputation as a novelist, poet, short story writer, literary critic and theorist, cultural historian, and feminist thinker. Her writings develop subjects that vary from women’s condition, ecology, cultural diversity, home and exile, Canadianness and nativeness, etc. In the last forty years, Atwood’s writings have informed theoretical fields including politics, gender, history, sociology, and literary criticism. The Canadian writer’s work has frequently and explicitly been associated with the developments and positions adopted by feminism, which she calls, pleading for impartiality, regarded as “realism” (Atwood in
Tolan 2007: 2). Just as feminism itself is the result of both activism and theoretical concern, Atwood’s writings display a permanent contact with feminist ideology and an original, personal approach to broader issues related to gender, femininity, and sexuality.

Nature, the impact of wilderness on the human consciousness, and the specificity of Canadianess are elements that widen the scope of Atwood’s writings, conveying a peculiar mode to the general theories of ecofeminism in the way in which gender related issues meet the problematics of ecology and environmentalism. Though many of her novels focus on this type of discourse, this paper discusses one of Margaret Atwood’s pioneering fictional works, the novel Surfacing (1972), looking at how this work interferes with her non-fictional material on gender, Canadian identity, or the impact of nature/wilderness on the individual.

Born in Ottawa in 1939, Margaret Atwood spent most of her childhood in the region of Quebec, her family following the father, an enthusiastic entomologist, in his pursuits, the children finding themselves, until the age of early adolescence, more often in the middle of wilderness than in urban environments and rarely spending a full year in school. This isolated, nomadic existence—which offers much of the inspirational material for Atwood’s fiction, including the novel Surfacing—is bewildering for most western readers, especially for the Americans, as the writer notes, but seems quite plausible to the Canadians, whose collective imagination includes the vast expanses of uninhabited, woody land (Howells 2006: 12). Writing since the age of five, Margaret Atwood developed her writing talent in a context—the fifties—in which Canadian culture was virtually unknown and, paradoxically, ignored even by the Canadians themselves, since Canadian literature was not taught in schools and rarely exported. In the 1960s, during the specific civil and cultural movements of that period, Margaret Atwood played a major part in promoting Canadian literature and culture abroad.

Ecofeminism and Literature

Ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, is—to paraphrase the subtitle of an anthology on this subject, edited by Karen J. Warren (1997)—the study of “women, culture, and nature.” It states mainly that there is a close connection between the treatment of and the view on women and underprivileged categories (in terms of class, race, ethnicity, education, etc.), on the one hand, and nature, on the other. Like most philosophical discourses of the late 20th century, ecofeminism is a cross-cultural, multidisciplinary critical examination of nature and society. Among the academic or vocational areas it covers, ecofeminism is related to the theories and terminological kits of anthropology, biology, chemical engineering, environmental studies, communication sciences, and, quite significantly, literature. Its social character and high degree of involvement stems from the fact that it emerged from a variety of areas of activism, such as peace movements, labour movements, healthcare and anti-
nuclear movements. In the past thirty years, critics and analysts have observed the challenges of ecofeminism, as a political movement and theoretical position, to mainstream Western thought (Warren 1997: xi).

Some feminist thinkers (Chodorow 1999) believe that the division between men and women, mind and body, society and nature results from the distinct sense of self men and women have. While men have a sense of self as separate, women have an interconnected sense of self. This has led to two different ethical systems—the separate self, operating on the basis of an ethic of rights or justice, and the interconnected self, which makes moral decisions on the basis of an ethic of responsibilities or care. A feminist like Alice Walker (who calls herself “womanist”), looks for the feminine legacy of creativity and finds it in the way women interact with nature in traditional activities like childcare, gardening, and housekeeping. In her view (2011), the garden is the locus of female agency par excellence. Particularly in North America today, environmentalism and ecofeminism frequently go hand in hand with postcolonial studies, the practices of ecology and feminism being aimed at rejecting their traditional, colonial, “white” underpinnings (Gaard 1993), in studies of Native American populations and the notion of epistemic responsibility. In a critique of 17th-18th century European notions that slavery is “natural,” many ecofeminists see a connection between the environmental justice movement and the civil rights movement and acknowledge the role played in both by women of colour (Dorceta Taylor in Warren 1997).

Out of these varied directions, ecofeminist literary criticism emerges as a hybrid discourse, at the crossroads between environmental criticism and feminist literary criticism. It provides readers with a special cultural lens through which they can see how nature writing unfolds in connection with representations of gender, knowledge, power, sexuality, desire, etc. Gretchen T. Legler remarks that “environmental concerns have mysteriously not made their way, until recently, into the profession of literature.” (in Warren 1997: 227) Today, it is the declared mission of both ecology and feminism to annihilate the patriarchal environmental ethic which has used and abused land (gendered female in Western philosophy and religion since Plato) with the catastrophic results noted at present (Griffin 2000). Reading literature (or nature writing, in its fictional and non-fictional dimension) in this key may lead to the creation of a “more viable environmental ethic” (Legler in Warren 1997:230) because literary texts have a massive influence on how we conceptualize our relationship with nature—a landscape, a territory, plants, and animals. Legler identifies seven ways in which authors writing about the human relationship with nature have re-imagined, in the ecofeminist tradition, or can re-imagine this connection:

1. “Re-mything” nature as a body endowed with qualities traditionally ascribed only to the mind;
2. Giving up the binary divisions: inner and outer space, self-other;
3. Re-eroticizing human relations with the “bodied” (not necessarily anthropomorphized) landscape;
4. Transforming the author into a participant in nature;
5. Articulating an ethic of caring and friendship when defining the human relationship with nature;
6. Abandoning the Cartesian body-mind division, advancing the idea that “bodies know”;
7. Following Adrienne Rich’s politics of location, giving up the universal in favour of “bioregions” and the locatedness of individuals and communities.

The Pioneer and the Evil North

In both her fictional and her non-fictional work, Margaret Atwood investigates the human relationship with nature in the specific context of Canadian culture. A respected authority in Canadian studies, Atwood is a direct follower of Northrop Frye, one of the first Canadian thinkers to gain international renown, whose *Anatomy of Criticism*, published in the 1950s, is still regarded as instrumental in widening the scope of literary studies and criticism and making them interdisciplinary fields of research. In militating for the recognition of Canadian literature (*Canlit*, a counterpart or complementary pair of *Englit*), Atwood identifies several themes or “cultural obsessions” which characterize the discourse of Canadianness. Rejecting the colonial mentality which, until the 1960s, regarded Canadian literature as a second-rate copy of English-speaking literature, Atwood advances the idea that being different doesn’t make Canadian fiction (as well as Canadian identity) inferior. In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (http://www.houseofanansi.com/Assets/ProductAssets/Survival.pdf), Atwood meditates:

> If you were a rocky, watery northern country, cold in climate, large in geopolitical expanse, small but diverse in population, and with a huge aggressive neighbour to the south, why wouldn’t you have concerns that varied from those of the huge aggressive neighbour? Or indeed from those of the crowded, history-packed, tight little island, recently but no longer an imperial power, that had once ruled the waves? (1972: 15)

While the island is the central theme defining British literature, and the frontier characterizes US American fiction and culture, Canada must seek a different identification. Borrowing and adapting creatively Northrop Frye’s notion of the “garrison mentality,” Atwood considers survival, *la survivance*, the cultural obsession of Canadianness. If the frontier, specific of US American mentality, implies expansionism, spirit of adventure, aggressiveness, and optimism, the “garrison” is a symbol of fear, lack of initiative and agency, need for protection, the unassuming position of the individual who accepts subordination. While it is also a theme in Canadian political life (for example, the constant concern for the survival of the French in the Quebec region), coping, barely making it defines the history of the North, where the first pioneers fought for their lives in the hostile Arctic territories and in the vast wilderness expanding from East to West and from North to South. The hostility of nature, weather conditions, and landscape is still perceivable in many scarcely populated areas, covered by forests, lakes, and precipices. If
“hanging on and staying alive” are the only options available, the individual tends to regard himself as a victim. And, indeed, victimization (connected with a clear inferiority complex) is also denounced by Atwood as a characteristic of Canadian identity. However, she argues, being a victim should not imply a passive, static attitude, because Canadian literature has forged four major “victim positions” (1972: 43):

1. to deny being a victim (while putting the blame on others, within the same victim group)
2. to acknowledge being a victim (while attributing this to a powerful force beyond human control)
3. to acknowledge being a victim (while refusing to be resigned to one’s fate)
4. to be a creative non-victim (which Atwood describes as “a position for ex-victims when creativity of all kinds is fully possible.”)

This last position is by far the best advisable, since it also satisfies the abstract potential hidden by the notion of Canadianness. Survival is, thus, a multi-faceted, adaptable idea while Canada is a state of mind, inhabited with one’s body and with one’s head, “the kind of space where we easily get lost.” (Atwood 1972:12) This Canada, for Atwood, is a two-faced nature: Nature the Monster, the evil North, reminding of the wilderness the pioneers confronted putting their lives in danger, and Nature the Threatened, the landscape which has remained, here, remarkably unchanged, despite the common threats of the modern world—pollution, overpopulation, and tourism.

The typical human relationship with nature circumscribed by the garrison mentality and the notion of survival is illustrated by Margaret Atwood in her fictional work, most explicitly in the poem entitled Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer, where the author challenges the classical (in fact, US American) perception of the pioneer prototype. While, for the Americans, the frontier is an ever-expanding space, filled with natural and human potential, an open territory which, when properly confronted, yields most conveniently, and the pioneer is a strong, hyper-assertive, ultra-focused, though somewhat ragged, white man who transforms wilderness into gardens, pastures, and cornfields with the sheer force of his sinewy arms and the well learned skills of fighting, (see, for example, Walt Whitman’s epic poem O Pioneers) for the Canadian author, the pioneer is a victim. The more open the territory, the more claustrophobic the man feels, while the walls of the house he builds cannot protect him from a nature which is hostile because he cannot decipher the messages conveyed by trees, birds, and animals. Though he tries to work with the tools borrowed from his aggressive neighbour, the American pioneer, taming nature is impossible for a Canadian in Canada (Atwood 1987: 60-64):

He dug the soil in rows,
imposed himself with shovels,
He asserted
into the furrows, I
am not random
The ground
replied with aphorisms.
Rather than forever going west, as in the American frontier narrative, the Canadian pioneer finds himself “in the middle of nowhere,” alone, vulnerable, and lost because he obstinately refuses to accept that “the absence of order” in the nature he tries to subdue is, in fact, as nature would tell him if only he would listen, “an ordered absence,” which is nature’s own defense strategy. The roles are reversed: “the fields defend themselves” efficiently, [things] “refused to let him name them” while the pioneer “resists” by daylight but is finally “invaded” by the forces of nature, concentrated in a whale. Had he attempted to live by the rules of trees, fields and wolves in the North, with them, rather than against them, success would have been possible, through negotiation. The key to survival in the Canadian wilderness is to be sought and applied, as Atwood put it in her Thematic Guide, creatively.

Nature Threatened

One of the genres Atwood excels at is post-apocalyptic fiction. A branch of science fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction comprises novels and stories set in a world which is trying to cope with survival after a catastrophe, which may be a nuclear disaster, a flood, pandemic, extraterrestrial attack, dramatic climate change, etc. These narratives are usually evoking a society which has returned to a pre-technological (if not completely natural) state. The proliferation and success of the genre in the past several decades has been largely due to the development of the ecological discourse, the raised environmental awareness, and the activism of special interest groups. Margaret Atwood’s first post-apocalyptic novel is The Handmaid’s Tale (1985), a novel set in the near future, in a theocratic society, whose government has overthrown the super-power of the United States and keeps women in subjugation. An unknown accident has caused such severe pollution that species have grown extinct and humanity has grown sterile. The few women who are still, miraculously, fertile, “the handmaids,” are important for the communities and are, therefore, kept prisoners in the homes of the military elite, who must do their duty and produce heirs who will keep humanity going. This happens in a special ceremony, which reminds of ancient fertility rituals. When a handmaid finally is with child, she is worshipped by the entire community, who has come to value reproduction above all, although, this being a male-centered society, women in general are held in little esteem. While the male society is simply and unequivocally divided in two categories–elite and non-elite, for women, there are numerous subcategories strictly regulating their status in relationship with the male elite: Wives, Daughters, Handmaids, Aunts (who train and monitor handmaids), Marthas (infertile women with a compliant nature who lead a life of domestic servitude), Econowives (the wives of the male non-elite), Unwomen (sterile women who are incapable of “social integration” and are therefore exiled in the “colonies”), and Jezebels (prostitutes and entertainers of the male elite who are, after a period of use and abuse, discarded in the same
“colonies”). The message of the novel is an indirectly ecofeminist one: after humanity has neglected the world to such an extent that a cataclysm has destroyed life as we know it now, the victims are the most exposed and vulnerable representatives of the human and non-human species: women, children, and nature.

*Oryx and Crake* (2003) and its sequel, *The Year of the Flood* (2009) are novels about humankind surviving a bioengineered apocalypse, in which a brilliant scientist has re-invented the world with the help of genetic mutations. In the latter, the survivors of a mysterious biological catastrophe, called the Dry Flood, self-proclaimed as God’s Gardeners, having been deprived of both today’s facilities and liberties, and of language and memory, try to ascribe meaning to their everyday lives, by naming the days of the week and plants. In a paper devoted to this topic (Perceec and Şerban 2011: 545), I argued that the survivors of the western world, returned to a primitive state on the scale of cognitive evolution, have grown estranged from many of the elements that made up their identity kit for many centuries: the knowledge of the outer world, the domestication of wilderness, the recognition of the plants’ importance in the kitchen, herbalism, medicine, decorative arts, general conversation. In the aftermath of the great accident, the survival of the species—a theological and scientific preoccupation in western thought—is in the hands of the Gardeners, preachers of a new eco-religion. They are aware that life after the Dry Flood is possible only with the respect for all forms of life on earth, an attitude which blends faith, scientific awareness, and tolerance. Representing a nature-worshipping cult in the middle of a post-apocalyptic, atheist humanity, the Gardeners are the new hermits, living frugally on the top of an abandoned building, wearing uniforms and practicing survival techniques. Unlike the consumerist society around them, they hold dear other values and role models, which are nature and community-oriented.

**Deep Inside and on the Surface**

*Surfacing* (1972) is Margaret Atwood’s second novel, published in the context of the intensification of the second-wave feminism and the early days of environmental studies. It is commonly regarded as the work that most closely associates novel writing to Atwood’s poetry, holding common ground in terms of both themes and style (Tolan 2007: 35). After *The Edible Woman* (1969), with its consciously poetic metaphors and ironic style, where Atwood applies theories of feminism related almost exclusively to sexual politics, in *Surfacing* she combines the directions that will consecrate her as a promoter of Canadianness—feminism, ecology, and national identity. The novel takes over many of the subjects Atwood tackles in *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, published in the same year. For example, as Tolan observes (2007: 36), the victim status appears in the way the theme of individual and collective guilt is developed, while issues of autonomy and identity are omnipresent, the
latter especially conspicuous in the context of the Canadian cultural nationalism of the 1970s.

The book tells the story of an unnamed female heroine, a freelance book illustrator, born in French-speaking Canada, although into an English-speaking family, currently living in the United States, who decides to make a trip back to her hometown. Together with her boyfriend, Joe, and their friends, the married couple David and Anna, she wants to see the country she left as a child and, hopefully, find her missing father, who had probably drowned in the lake behind the family cabin. In the wilderness of Quebec, the protagonist meets her past in her childhood house, recalling events and feelings, while trying to find clues for her father’s mysterious disappearance. Little by little, the past overtakes her and drives her into the realm of wildness and madness. When she realizes she is pregnant, after she had once given up a baby whom her husband did not want, the heroine chooses to live in isolation, giving up civilization gradually, until she finds herself alone in the forest, only with the animals surrounding her.

The ending of the novel is open, showing the protagonist standing on the lake side, with the forest behind and her lover, on a boat, calling her, ready to make a choice: return to her former life, now enriched with the hermit-like experience she has lived for a while, or remain in the middle of nature and give birth to a creature that will not be perverted by any of the pressures and norms of civilization. The themes that emerge at the surface, as the novel’s title suggests, distilled by the heroine’s consciousness, are numerous: the protagonist’s gender identity (contrasted with her mother’s life story and with her friend’s, Anna’s position, of a wife continually humiliated and bullied by her husband), her isolation or separation in national terms (once as an English-speaking citizen in the French-speaking region of Canada, then as an “American”/foreign tourist in Canada), her guilt and victimization, which reflect the Canadian inferiority complex.

The novel was written in the context of two revolutions: the second-wave feminism and the so-called Quiet Revolution in Canada, both taking place in the late 1960s. The Quiet Revolution was a period of numerous reforms in education and economy, engendering a greater political autonomy for Quebec in comparison with other Canadian regions and initiating a series of debates about national identity. Moreover, Canada’s struggle to impose itself as a nation alongside—or, rather, despite—the huge aggressive neighbour, as Atwood called the United States, ignited numerous contradictory discussions about the role played by Canada in North American and international politics and, more importantly, its contribution to Western culture, in general. However, in this latter debate, the boundaries are blurred, since no black and white picture of American-Canadian relations should be drawn in a global world, inclusive, tolerant and open-minded. This lesson in *Surfacing* is offered by Margaret Atwood when she pictures David as a misogynist and a nationalist, who attributes all guilt to “American tourists.” Apparently, this category is responsible for the extinction of herons, who have been hunted brutally, for the entertainment of drunkards sailing their boats on Canadian lakes. However,
after the scene describing a crucified heron and stories of how the Americans did this because they have no respect for Canadian nature in particular and the environment in general, it turns out the “Americans” had been, in fact, Canadians.

Returning to the depiction of Canadian nature and man’s relation with the unspoiled environment, it has to be noted that such narratives are not success stories or pastorals, but, as Andreea Șerban observes in her doctoral thesis on Margaret Atwood (2010: 23), epic tales of a world dominated by a peculiar state of mind, that of being “bushed,” lost, confused—a psyche engendered by the overwhelming Canadian experience, which shaped a particular colonial (and postcolonial) mindset. While the American frontier is vast, open, expanding, Canadian wilderness is too large to grasp and settle, its natural environment being so powerful that, paradoxically, it is perceived as “unnatural” (Frye 1995: 220). Șerban also notices that “going native,” a Canadian expression denoting a simplified lifestyle, is ambiguously connected to insanity and Canadian literature displays a long history of “bushing” incidents. In the encounter between humans and wilderness, nature is at the same time victimized by the colonizers and a victimizer, refusing people its nurturing potential.

Coral Ann Howells (2006: 74), comparing Atwood’s interest in nature with that of biologists and feminists such as Donna Haraway (who declares, among other things, the nature-culture dichotomy to be false), notices that their writings are projected against a background of “concern with the urgent preservation of a human place in a natural world in which the term “human” does not imply “superior,” or “alone,” and in which what is fabricated or artificial is less satisfying than what has originally occurred.” In Surfacing, it is clear that Margaret Atwood embraces the idea that being human implies accepting unconditionally the whole range of physical life and intellectual, spiritual state, denying any part of the inner or outer world resulting in endangering nature. From birds, waters, and forests, to unborn babies, all life forms seek and should be granted sanctuary by humans (women especially) for the humans’ sake, who, in this way, secure the necessary balance in the world and, in fact, care for their own well-being.

Surfacing offers all the clues for the articulation of the belief in an innocent, authentic self, which “surfaces” when the corrupted (and corrupting) civilization is forsaken to the benefit of a more natural, more intuitive, more “feminine” human organization, where what feminists and ecologists perceive as patriarchal violence ceases all forms of physical and mental aggression against the “body.” Unspoiled nature, fragile and threatened in Margaret Atwood’s second novel, takes the form of the forests of Quebec, the embryo developing in the protagonist’s womb (and the memory of another baby, from the past), and the heroine herself. Early in the novel, the threat is materialized in the human aggression coming from the “South,” in fact where America and urban civilization lie. The protagonist, as a Canadian woman, joins this side of the battling camp, leaving the “South” for “tourists,” men like Joe and David, aggressive, Americanized, consumerist culture, on the other side (one of the first images that strike the heroine is the signpost announcing their
arrival in French-speaking Canada, whose message is corrupted by a graffiti reading *Fuck you!* and, below, *Buvez Coca-Cola*. Tolan (2007: 44) observes that, just as *The Edible Woman* used a set of “blunt” metaphors (the female-shaped cake devoured by Marian’s boyfriend) to make the feminist point, *Surfacing* opposes patriarchal rationalism and matriarchal intuition just as “bluntly,” in the heroines’ parents. While her father, a scientist studying the native traditions and nature of Canada, admired the 18th century rationalists, logic, and do-it-yourself guidebooks, her mother would, “on some days, simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest” (2001: 46), her mysterious powers and innocence aligning her with nature.

In the ecofeminist scheme, the narrator consolidates the connection between two forms of aggression and victimization: upon her own body, by means of the abortion imposed on her by her husband a long time ago, and upon the natural environment, concentrated in the island on the lake, littered ruthlessly with “orange peelings, tin cans, a rancid bulge of greasy paper, the tracks of humans” (2001: 104). The epitome of the victimized nature is the dead heron, a member of a species on the verge of extinction, who is crucified and mutilated in a cruel and morbid ritual by a bunch of drunk tourists, as I indicated above, presumed American by the disgusted locals, in fact Canadian. This ambiguous metaphor complicates the otherwise simple (if not simplistic) and explicit theme of guilt and innocence which permeates the discourse of the entire novel. This complication is apparent in the despicable evocation of the masculine character David, whom the narrator regards as “a second-hand American,” embodiment of aggressiveness, self-sufficiency, and intolerance, and in the male-female relationship offered by David and Anna: while David is cruel and cynical, humiliating Anna and forcing her to accept his superiority, his wife is his accomplice, a co-conspirator against herself and against other women.

In the second part of the book, the narrator tries to regain her connection with archaic feminine wisdom, symbolized by the absent mother, whom the heroine had forgotten and who “surfaces” in her mind only when she returns to her birthplace. Initially attempting to find out what happened to her father, the protagonist goes back in time to regain her mother figure, a repressed matriarchal heritage, which she had disregarded until then, being educated in a masculine society, according to masculine standards. Her acceptance and respect for the mother, also signaled when another repressed memory surfaces (that of the forced abortion), is archetypally significant: the masculine culture is subsequent, ulterior to the feminine one, although it has subsumed the earlier, nurturing, more innocent, feminine nature/culture. This hypothesis derives from Northrop Frye’s notion that maternal myths are older than the narratives issued by the patriarchal, tool-using, urban communities (1971).

The reversed process of recovering memories of her mother results in surfaced images of her mother’s skills, amplified by her childish imagination, which invests them with a witch-like potency. The heroine remembers, for example, how her mother took her small brother out of water, apparently bringing him back to life: “She leaned over and reached down and grabbed him
by the hair, hauled him up and poured the water out of him” (2001: 68), or how she drove away wild animals “with arms upraised as though she was flying, and the bear terrified” (2001: 73). The omnipotent mother from her infancy is contrasted by the omnipotent father of her adolescence and adult life. Significantly, the mother emerges only when the heroine abandons city life, the group of friends who accompany her in the Canadian adventure, and embraces the wilderness of the forest and the lake. Nature has on her the effect of making her regain her respect (even awe) towards her mother and longing for the lost child. The intensity of these feelings prepare her to accept the life that is growing inside her with serenity and detachment and to make the decision of protecting and loving this small creature, whom she pictures like an archaic god or spirit of the forest, being covered in fur, like an animal.

The apocalyptic image of humanity, with Canadian-American tourists torturing herons and a nationalistic and misogynistic macho and womanizer, makes the narrator want to give up her human side, withdrawing in the middle of nature. This withdrawal is gradual: first she abandons the house and lives in the garden (a form of nature, but also an extension of humanity), then she moves deeper and deeper into the forest, refusing cooked or processed food, clothes, and ultimately, articulated language. Living in a burrow, she imagines raising her baby outdoors and never teaching it language. When hunger and exhaustion overwhelm her, she seems to return to sanity, in the terms her friends understand normality and civilization. She decides to return to her fellow human beings, but this choice is not to be regarded as failure, but the success of a victim who has turned a disadvantage into an asset: She looks at herself in the mirror and sees a “natural” woman, which urges her towards the resolution of never feeling powerless again. She sees Joe waiting for her on the lake and pauses in the cabin on the island, hesitating before she makes the final step. The peculiar form of madness which seizes the protagonist (this form of “going native”) reinforces the ecofeminist claim that women and animals are often fellow sufferers and join efforts to resist the pressures and prejudices of society.

Conclusions

Commenting on her early novels, Margaret Atwood once said, “I don’t consider it feminism: I just consider it social realism,” (in Tolan 2007: 2). Her fictional work discloses a dialectical negotiation between activism and theoretical, academic discourse in the area of feminism, with a peculiar emphasis on environmentalism as a cultural notion, and with specific, personalized elements of Canadian identity. Although Surfacing (1972) has been eclipsed by later novels, this early work remains significant for a certain direction of study and concern, symptomatic of the civil and cultural movements that altered the geopolitical map of North America in the late 1960s. Surfacing, like Atwood’s poetic work, her essays and theoretical-critical writings, documents creatively pioneer life, nature’s relationship with its animal
and human inhabitants, and human dislocation, all landmarks of North-American identity. While contemplating nature, Atwood carefully dissects the contemporary Canadian and American societies, with their opportunities and threats. Despite its lack of popularity compared to other Atwoodian novels, \textit{Surfacing} is a surprisingly optimistic piece of fiction, where the protagonist, an exponent of Canadianness, shakes off all past encumbrances, gaining the physical and spiritual ability to return, as the title announces prophetically, to the surface.

**References**

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