ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the relation between individuals and natural world. In the early 1970s, Canadian cultural nationalism positioned wilderness as mark of difference as well as an object of ecological faith. Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing reflects this engrossment with wilderness. In the process of discovering the circumstances encompassing her father’s death, the unnamed protagonist of the novel, retrieves touch with her past and her hidden emotional life. Struggling to repossess her identity and origin, she begins a psychological journey that leads her directly into the natural world. To achieve a true vision, she has to turn away from the normal world and accept a transformation of her existence a literally altered state of consciousness through which the metamorphosed state of nature can be perceived. The paper examines behaviour and reaction of the protagonist in relation to nature and ecological aspects.

Key Words: Nature, Eco-criticism, Exploitation, Femininity, Identity

INTRODUCTION

Ecological survival in Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing

Eco-criticism is a new occurrence in the field of theory and criticism. It shows a rising awareness of environmental issues. It is an analysis of the relation between humans and the natural world in literature. Literary theories deals with the human interest in literature but eco-criticism gives significance to the natural world too. The presence of the non-human in literature is often an inherent part of the text. It is either consciously woven into the text or the sense of environment is at least noticeable.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the eco-critic is to examine the relevance of the non-human to the human and vice-versa in a text. Eco-criticism is often concerned with regionalism, landscape, wilderness and nature writing. The main objective of eco-criticism is to understand human being, through literature, as an indivisible part of the environment and his capability to adjust or alter this relationship.

DISCUSSION

William Rueckert is considered to be the first one to make use of the term eco-criticism in 1978 in his essay titled Literature and Ecology: An experiment in eco-criticism aiming to the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.¹ The uniqueness of Rueckert’s eco-criticism lies in emplacement of the patterns surrounding literature to the ecological web. Cheryll Glotfelty in The Eco-criticism Reader Landmarks in Literary Ecology defines eco-criticism as the study of the relation between literature and the physical environment.² This is the most widely established and well-liked definition. Lawrence Buell in The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination defines eco-criticism as the environmentally oriented study of literature and arts more generally and to the theories that underline such critical practice.³ Margaret Atwood’s surfacing deals with the exploitation and destruction of the wilderness of Canada by those who claim to be sensible and enlightened people. The novel tells us the story of a narrator who
returns to her hometown after several years to search for her missing father. She is at first shocked to see so many changes in the area and the polluted natural surroundings most of which caused by Americans. The economic development and material gain has taken on nature, by using tools believed to be the ways of progress, is unbearable to the sensible narrator to her. The familiar smell of road dust fuming behind and mixes with the gas—and upholstery smell of car is the gift of Americans to Canadian people. J. Brooks Bouson points out that Surfacing rejects the masculinise culture—which is depicted as both rationalistic and dangerously aggressive and idealizes a nature-identified femininity. This rationalistic and aggressive outlook is the bequest of the enlightenment. The modern inheritors of this bequest throughout the novel are called Americans or Americanized Canadians.

Margaret Atwood’s surfing has received mixed responses from various critics all over the world. Margaret Atwood’s teacher, a well known Canadian critic, Northrop Frye calls it an extraordinary novel, which perfectly represents her own critical review of Canadian themes. Surfing deals with the collective victim theme of Canada. Margaret Atwood is seriously concerned with the country’s plight as a political victim. In this novel, she portrays the relationship of Canada and America. She shows that at the border of Canada, America spoilt environment. This is obvious right from the beginning of the novel where there is an image of disease, the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the South. The South, of course, is America. As the novel goes we become more aware of the degree of the widespread damages to nature: rocks blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air. Although at first the protagonist is somehow unusual to the place, she gradually feels affinity with nature and tries to protect it against the damages done by the Americans. As Fiona Tolan argues, in accordance with ecofeminism, the narrator identifies herself as a woman with nature and therefore perceives herself as threatened and victimised. In the novel, on catching a fish, David wants her to kill it but she says the fish is whole, I couldn’t any more, I had no right to these were no longer the right reasons.

Josie P. Campbell claims that surfing goes quite beyond the borders of Canada, except in details of place, despite her polemics in survival the consciousness is the central task of humankind everywhere. Thus it is a great novel, in which the female protagonist returns to the natural world in search of mystic vision. Her quest can equally be represented as a search for identity. These concerns leave Margaret Atwood experimenting with a range of genres including the Gothic, Poetry, Utopian or Dystopian fiction as well as the mythical quest narrative of surfing. The narrator in surfing identifies her parents with Native American totems in her vision, because she has a concern for ecological survival. Margaret Atwood’s protagonists often gain a self-identity by returning to their ancestors and the wilderness. In the words of Joseph Campbell, this arrival to her native land is a penetration to some source of power and a life enhancing return. In Surfacing, Margaret Atwood has written about a search for harmony and wholeness in a divided person. The novel is divided into three parts. Part one describes the nature of Canada and presents the characters. The disappearance of protagonist’s father and her quest for him is depicted in this part. This section lasts on a note of suspense and the narrator’s pretended marriage and divorce and survival of her child. The protagonist rejects her sin of aborted child by fabricating a set-up of trickery and misrepresentation.

Part two goes forward to the search of the narrator’s missing father. She discovers the truth of her father’s disappearance and some awful truth about herself. She admits the truth of her sin. In the third and final section, the narrator moves on from rejection to acceptance. She gets pregnant and believes that her lost baby is surfing within her to forgive her. At the end of this section the narrator emerges as a total human being and with complete feelings. The usual reasons for treating nature aggressively do not sound right to her anymore. Hence, she becomes aware of her body, which is fragmented through her past abortion, as identifiable with that of the fish whose completeness of body she cannot violate by killing. Her sense of identicalness
with nature and its creatures goes to the level that towards the end of the novel she considers herself not as human they mistake me for human being if they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me and hang me up by the feet from the tree in fact, she supposes herself being treated as other animals, especially the disfigured hanged heron.

In our society, males are associated with reason, civilization and culture whereas females are associated with irrationality, insanity, wilderness and bringing up. A very interesting predecessor for the narrator to think of herself as nature is her mother, though she was primarily under the influence of culture and civilization, the law of the father. She tells us about her mother on some days she would simply vanish, walk off by herself into the forest or elsewhere, standing beside the tray for the birds, her [mother’s] hand stretched out; the jays were there too, she’s training them, one is on her shoulder, peering at her with clever thumbtack eyes, another is landing on her wrist, wings caught as a blur. What Carolyn Merchant depicts as the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother, is well illustrated in image of the narrator’s mother.

The narrator considers her mother and herself as sufferers of a culture that is not based on logical and methodical reasoning. She [the mother] hated hospitals and doctors she must have been afraid they would experiment on her, keep her alive as long as they could with tubes and needles even though it was what they call terminal, in the head it always is and in fact that’s what they did. She has a clear vision of this sense of victimhood when she discovers the dead heron hanged upside down, she says why had they strung it up like a lynch victim to prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. This idea of power over nature, central to the enlightenment, gained through reason-generated tools has become the power to kill immoderately, the power to take over nature. This power is typified in the narrator’s father who is the very opposite of her mother. He plays the role of a realistic man and he is what the narrator calls an eighteenth century rationalist. Pragmatism is his religion, he believed that with the proper guide books you could do everything yourself. His job, which remains a mystery, is to help the government to exploit nature, as the protagonist tells us, our father had gone on a long trip as he often did to investigate trees for the paper company or the government.

The narrator goes on searching the clue to her father’s disappearance. She becomes disheartened and thinks that she has done all she could do to find him. Increasing occurrence of her past memories trespasses by the lies and deceptions. She tells many lies to her friends about herself. She recalls her memories and fears that it may start inventing memories. Now the narrator becomes more concerned with her past and is acquainted with something but her action is emotionless. She recalls the painful memories of the abortion. She says. That was wrong. I never saw it. The scraped it into a bucket and threw it wherever they throw then, it was travelling through the senses by the time I woke, back to the sea, I stretched my hand up to it and it vanished.

The narrator calls it a murder and finds that she is herself responsible for it. I could have said no but I didn’t that made me one of them too a killer. Now the narrator admits her past. She lies about her marriage and her child because she wants to escape from the moral responsibility which is the abortion of her child. Now she presents herself as the victim of a broken marriage because it is not her fault only. Her father’s drowning body makes her realise the truth of herself and her mother’s gift of a picture of baby teaches her how to act. She receives it as a message from her mother’s to assume her maternal heritage by bearing a child as in Rigney’s succinct words. Now she must become the mother. When her friends tell her about her father’s death she doesn’t believe them. She is convinced that nothing has died, everything is alive everything is waiting to become alive. The final section of the novel is unquestionably to be understood from a psychological view, an experience in madness. The protagonist withdraws into a primitive animal like state controlled by a number of mysterious initiations. As Eric Ozdemir points out. Surfacing embodies the view of female madness as an expression of
powerlessness and revolt against patriarchal society. The narrator is supposed a mad woman due to her escape from civilization as the narrator says: They would never believe it's only a natural woman, state of nature. This is her revolt against the man-made civilization, against the male dominated culture that distinguishes her as insane: I have become hungry. The food in the cabin is forbidden, I’m not allowed to go back into that cage, wooden rectangle. Also tin cans and jars are forbidden they are glass and metal. I eat the green peas out of their shell and the raw yellow beans, I scrape the carrots from the earth with my finger, I will wash them in the lake first. She tries to stay away from whatever is made in the course of civilization and just stick to nature, like an animal as she carries a blanket to protect herself from the cold weather until the fur grows or towards the end of the novel crawls like a child or animal back into the bosom of the mother nature and she prefers silence to language. She loses all sense of personal identity and reaches a point of total oneness with nature. She believes that if she wants to meet her parents, she must be in the same condition they are in. She suddenly sees her mother and then her father transforming into a fish.

A fish jumps, carved wooden fish with dots painted on the sides no antlered fish thing drawn in red on cliff stone, protecting spirit. It hangs in the air suspended, fresh turned to icon he has changed again, returned to the water. Now the narrator realises that her parents have gone, They have gone finally, back into the earth, the air, the water wherever they were when I summoned them. As Rigney point out: The protagonists return to sanity and to human existence is marked by her recognition that she must have food and shelter to survive, that she is neither animal nor primitive god and is therefore incapable of living alone in the wilderness. To live, she decides, is a responsibility to her parents, to society, to herself. The protagonist wants her baby to be the first true human. She refuses to be a victim and stops thinking that she is powerless. She recognises her past, her problems with Joe and wants to solve them. She no longer wants to have an imperfect relationship and predictable failures. She is full of hope for the future. According to the vision of Atwood’s protagonist, nature is a multifaceted concept, which is remarkable because it helps some of the permeative myths of American like archetypes. Nature is opposed to both the human and the modern world, polyphonic set against the urban mechanised environment and the Americans, mechanized humans. Nature includes true and real human beings who are away from mechanised environment. Moreover, it supposes a link with the supernatural world, communicating with animal and vegetable life. The conception of a fundamental opposition between nature and the technologically destructive Americans has appeared in many pretexts in western thought. Here it is uttered in the representation of the heron. The shape of heron flying above us the first evening we fished, legs and neck stretched, wings outspread, a blue grey. Cross and the other heron or was it the someone, hanging wrenched from the tree. Whether it died willingly, consented, whether Christ died willingly, anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ, if they didn’t kill birds and fish they would have killed us. The animals die that we may live, they are substitute people, hunters in the fall killing the dear that is Christ also.

CONCLUSION

As described in this passage, the heron does not completely fit in the animal world and it speaks against the Americans and accuses the city-machine world. The heron later takes on a fuller dimension and assumes the role of Christ-like victim. This last association is introduced by Atwood in order that the protagonist may deal with the concept of guilt or sin, a concept alien to Algonquian world. In surfacing, the protagonist achieves a state of mind introducing her to a reality which has integrated at least, part of the supernatural into the natural. Yet to achieve a true vision, she has to dispense with the normal world and accept a transformation of her being a literally altered state of consciousness through which the metamorphosed state of ecological survival can be sensed.
REFERENCES


