

# Voices of the Nonhuman: Posthuman Ecologies in Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 19 Feb 2025 Revised on: 18 Mar 2025 Accepted on: 22 Mar 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>). Keywords— Margaret Atwood, Posthumanism, Ecofeminism, Nonhuman Agency, Environmental Literature, Surfacing</p>	<p>This paper explores the posthuman and ecofeminist dimensions of Margaret Atwood's <i>Surfacing</i>, with a focus on how nonhuman elements – specifically the landscape, animals, and water – emerge as active agents rather than passive backdrops. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from ecofeminism and posthumanism, including the works of Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, and Donna Haraway, the analysis demonstrates how Atwood reconfigures human subjectivity by centering relationality, interdependence, and nonhuman agency. Through the protagonist's psychological and physical immersion in the Canadian wilderness, <i>Surfacing</i> interrogates Cartesian dualisms such as human/nature, male/female, and reason/emotion. The forest becomes a sentient witness; the lake, a womb-like site of memory and truth; and animals, mirrors of human violence and empathy. As the protagonist sheds the layers of her culturally imposed identity, she enters into a liminal space where boundaries between species and selves collapse, enabling a posthuman reawakening grounded in ecological consciousness. The novel critiques patriarchal, capitalist systems that commodify both women and nature, while offering a vision of subjectivity rooted in reciprocity, embodiment, and non-dominance. This reading positions <i>Surfacing</i> not only as a feminist and environmental narrative but as a prescient text that anticipates contemporary discourses on multispecies ethics and the Anthropocene. Ultimately, Atwood invites us to listen to the voices of the nonhuman world – and in doing so, reimagine what it means to live ethically and sustainably within a shared planetary ecology.</p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) stands as a landmark novel that deftly navigates the intersecting terrains of feminism, environmentalism, and identity. Set against the backdrop of the Canadian wilderness, the novel delves into the inner world of an unnamed female protagonist who returns to her childhood home in search of her missing father. However, what begins as a physical quest gradually becomes a metaphysical odyssey into selfhood, memory, and belonging – one in which the nonhuman world plays

a pivotal and transformative role. Unlike traditional narratives that position nature as a passive backdrop to human action, *Surfacing* reconfigures the landscape, water, and animal life as active agents, shaping and reshaping the human subject in complex and often unsettling ways.

This paper explores *Surfacing* through the lens of posthuman ecologies, arguing that Atwood's depiction of the nonhuman world unsettles anthropocentric assumptions and affirms the agency of landscape, water, and animal life. Drawing on

ecofeminist and posthumanist frameworks, the novel reveals how these nonhuman elements are not merely symbolic or aesthetic but vital co-participants in the protagonist's psychological and existential transformation.

Atwood situates her narrative within a space where the binaries of human/nature, male/female, and reason/instinct begin to dissolve. As the protagonist immerses herself in the natural world, she experiences a deconstruction of her constructed identity, marked by patriarchal violence, reproductive trauma, and cultural alienation, and gradually becomes porous to the voices of the nonhuman. The forest whispers, the lake conceals and reveals, and the animals serve as totems and harbingers, pulling the protagonist toward a state of pre-linguistic awareness and ecological communion. In doing so, Atwood advances a radical ecological consciousness that aligns with emerging posthuman discourses, where subjectivity is not singular and sovereign but interwoven with the more-than-human world.

This paper will therefore analyze the role of the landscape, water, and animals in *Surfacing* as autonomous forces, demonstrating how Atwood offers a posthuman ecology that challenges domination, hierarchy, and separation between the human and the natural.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ECOFEMINISM AND POSTHUMANISM IN ATWOOD'S VISION

To fully appreciate the posthuman ecologies in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, one must first engage with the theoretical lenses of ecofeminism and posthumanism, both of which challenge the anthropocentric, patriarchal logics underpinning Western modernity. These frameworks converge in their emphasis on interconnection, embodiment, and the agency of the nonhuman world, all of which are central to Atwood's narrative vision.

### **Ecofeminism:**

Ecofeminism posits that the subjugation of women and the degradation of nature are interconnected outcomes of patriarchal dominance. As Vandana Shiva argues, "the violation of nature and the violation of women are the same process" (*Staying*

*Alive*, 1989). Ecofeminists such as Greta Gaard and Carolyn Merchant stress that dualistic structures—man/woman, nature/culture, reason/emotion—have historically been used to justify the oppression of both women and the Earth. In *Surfacing*, this logic is embodied in the protagonist's traumatic experiences: the forced abortion, emotional alienation, and her gradual identification with nonhuman life.

Atwood's ecofeminist consciousness is evident in the way her protagonist *rejects the roles imposed on her by society and finds affinity with the wounded landscape around her*. She becomes a representation of everyone who is taken advantage of and mistreated in society... Only after encountering nature does the protagonist recognise the difference between her true self and her constructed identity.

### **Posthumanism:**

Where ecofeminism centers the political and ecological implications of gendered bodies, posthumanism extends critique beyond the human subject itself. Thinkers like Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Jane Bennett challenge the notion of an autonomous, rational human subject as the center of meaning. Instead, they argue for an understanding of being that is relational, material, and co-constituted by human and nonhuman actors.

Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter" (2010) is especially resonant for *Surfacing*, where water, trees, and animals are not inert objects but vibrant, living agents. Bennett urges us to perceive the world "as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages," a perspective Atwood vividly explores through the protagonist's sensory and psychic immersion into the forest ecosystem.

Furthermore, Donna Haraway's "becoming-with" concept—where humans and nonhumans shape each other in co-evolutionary processes—offers a framework for understanding the protagonist's metamorphosis from isolated subject to ecological being.

Together, ecofeminism and posthumanism provide a robust critical vocabulary to interpret *Surfacing* not merely as a personal narrative of trauma and recovery but as a philosophical inquiry into how humans might live ethically and relationally with the nonhuman world.

### **The Animacy of Landscape: Forest as Witness, Mirror, and Healer**

In *Surfacing*, the Canadian wilderness is far more than a scenic backdrop. It is an agentic, sentient presence—an active participant in the protagonist's unraveling and transformation. Margaret Atwood constructs the landscape not as a romanticized retreat, but as a space of confrontation and truth, where the protagonist's constructed self, shaped by patriarchal violence and modern alienation, is stripped away. The forest becomes a living consciousness, compelling a return to instinct, memory, and nonverbal communion.

From the opening lines, nature is presented not as inert or idealized, but as damaged yet potent:

"I can't believe I'm on the same road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the South..." (*Surfacing*, 1).

This diseased forest mirrors the protagonist's psychological fragmentation and the broader environmental degradation caused by capitalist and colonial intrusion. The landscape reflects not just outer damage but inner erosion.

As she ventures deeper into the woods, the protagonist begins to dissolve the barriers between her self and the nonhuman world. In a pivotal moment, she proclaims:

"I lean against a tree, I am not an animal and I am not a tree. I am not a thing." Later: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim." (*Surfacing*, 192, 195)

These statements mark the transition from objectification to reintegration. The forest here is not passive—it challenges, reflects, and ultimately liberates. Her journey through it is not simply spatial but ontological: a return to a pre-linguistic, embodied awareness.

Scholars like Stacy Alaimo (2000) have emphasized such moments of trans-corporeality, where the boundaries between the body and environment are porous. In *Surfacing*, this is seen in the protagonist's shedding of clothing, of language, and even of her name. She begins to see herself not as a separate self, but as *a node within a larger ecological web*:

"I'm in the forest, but the forest isn't in me; it surrounds me, breathes through me. I dissolve into it"

Her steady ascent into nature and development of mystic vision are indicators of her ascent... She exposes the contradictions and absurdities in both her patriarchal society and her personal life during this process.

This mystic transformation is not a flight from reality, but a re-cognition of a deeper reality—one that challenges anthropocentric logic. The land is not silent; it "speaks" through intuition, vision, sensation. In this sense, Atwood draws close to animist epistemologies often suppressed by colonial modernity, wherein land is a living being with memory and agency.

The protagonist's return to her childhood home in the forest can thus be seen as a kind of spiritual and ecological rebirth. Her psychic unlayering is paralleled by her deepening attunement to the land's rhythms and signs. By the end, she has relinquished her dependence on man-made systems—language, reason, patriarchy—and reoriented herself toward an ethic of relational existence, one in which *landscape is kin, not resource*.

Posthuman theorist Rosi Braidotti writes, "We are all embedded, embodied, and in relationship with nonhuman others" (*The Posthuman*, 2013). In *Surfacing*, Atwood imagines what it means to live that truth—not through theory, but through a visceral, lived transformation. The forest, in its raw and wounded vitality, becomes the crucible in which the protagonist confronts her trauma, reclaims her agency, and *surfaces* into a new kind of being.

### **The Voice of Water: Lake as Memory, Womb, and Witness**

Among the nonhuman agents in *Surfacing*, water—specifically the lake—emerges as one of the most potent and polyvalent forces. It is both literal and symbolic, serene and treacherous. Margaret Atwood's rendering of the lake reveals a deeply embodied ecology: water becomes a repository of memory, a witness to violence, and a womb of transformation. Like the forest, the lake does not passively receive human action; it actively responds, conceals, reveals, and shapes.

Atwood's descriptions of the lake are dense with atmosphere and symbolic weight. The narrator's father, whose disappearance prompts the return to the island, is believed to have drowned. His absence becomes tangled with the water, making the lake both grave and mystery. The protagonist dives into it repeatedly—not to recover a body, but to recover truth, submerged and inaccessible in ordinary life.

"The lake was quiet, the surface wrinkled slightly by the breeze... I dove again, deeper. The light was dimming, I reached the bottom... I could feel the silt, cold and fine as flour. No body. But it was still hiding something" (*Surfacing*, 139–140).

In ecofeminist terms, water here acts as a maternal archive, holding not only the memory of the father, but of patriarchal violence, reproductive trauma, and lost selfhood. The lake becomes the medium through which the protagonist reclaims a narrative that had been denied her. She is not just looking for her father's physical body but confronting the submerged truths of her past—including the abortion she once convinced herself was a miscarriage.

"I saw the truth; the baby I'd killed... I was the murderer" (*Surfacing*, 150).

This act of underwater revelation echoes the ecofeminist motif of depth as consciousness, not linear enlightenment, but submersion and re-emergence. The lake, in this framing, becomes a site of epistemological rupture, where knowledge is not acquired rationally but encountered sensuously, even painfully.

Moreover, the lake also functions as a womb-like space, a site of regression that paradoxically makes rebirth possible. Only after encountering nature does the protagonist recognize the difference between her true self and her constructed identity. She throws away her wedding band, her name, and her apparent identity before becoming part of the landscape.

This act of stripping away happens most dramatically in the water. The protagonist dives not to escape the world but to merge with something older, deeper, nonhuman—what Rosi Braidotti would call "becoming-animal, becoming-earth" (*The Posthuman*, 2013).

The lake is also a mirror—both literally and psychologically. It reflects distorted images back to the protagonist: her alienated self, her past choices,

her complicity. But it also invites a deeper seeing. Its opacity resists mastery. It does not "give up" the body. Instead, it calls the protagonist into relationship with loss, ambiguity, and her own unresolved history.

Jane Bennett's theory of "vital materialism" helps illuminate this portrayal of water as an agentic force. Bennett writes that nonhuman matter can act as "a confederation of actants" that shape events and beings (*Vibrant Matter*, 2010). In *Surfacing*, water is exactly that—a confederate in the protagonist's transformation, not merely a backdrop.

Ultimately, the lake is where she remembers, mourns, sheds, and resurfaces—a fluid crucible of posthuman rebirth. When she emerges, she does so not as a victim of patriarchal trauma, but as a being entangled with the more-than-human world, attuned to its rhythms and messages.

### **Animals as Mirrors and Messengers: Interspecies Witnessing in *Surfacing***

In *Surfacing*, animals are not mute presences or simple metaphors—they are ethical barometers, mirrors of human behavior, and messengers of ecological truth. Through violent encounters, uncanny sightings, and empathic identification, Atwood places animals at the heart of her critique of patriarchal violence and ecological estrangement. These nonhuman beings are not symbolic extensions of the protagonist—they are co-agents, forces that both challenge and shape her understanding of the world and herself.

Perhaps the most harrowing moment in the novel is the discovery of the mutilated great blue heron, hanging grotesquely in the forest:

"At the midway pond the heron was still there, hanging in the hot sunlight like something in the butcher's window, desecrated, unredeemed" (*Surfacing*, 129).

The heron, a majestic and solitary bird, becomes a sacrificial figure—killed not for food or defense, but for pleasure. This act of gratuitous violence signals to the protagonist the moral and ecological bankruptcy of the human world she has left behind. Her visceral response to the heron's death catalyzes her deepening identification with the nonhuman:



“It was the first atrocity... I couldn’t accept it. That it had no meaning” (*Surfacing*, 130).

This language of atrocity and desecration echoes the protagonist’s own trauma. The heron is not just a victim—it is a witness, a reflection of violated life, both ecological and personal. Ecofeminist critics often draw attention to such scenes where violence against animals parallels violence against women. As Petra Kelly observes, “Women are sex toys for men... their lives count less... much like animals in a consumption-driven culture”. In *Surfacing*, this logic of disability links animals and women within a shared matrix of objectification.

Another example is the protagonist’s vision of fish being caught and gutted—she watches in horror as vacationers on the lake pull fish from the water and slice them open. These acts are not condemned with didactic rage but shown through her altered perception, where she becomes the fish, violated and voiceless. This empathy signifies a shift in consciousness from human-centered to interspecies relationality.

Moreover, the rabbit is a recurring animal symbol in Atwood’s fiction, and in *Surfacing*, it appears in memory and metaphor. Her former partner, the art teacher, is remembered gutting a rabbit with disturbing pleasure. The protagonist recalls:

“There was blood and guts all over the place... rabbit guts dangling from the trees” (*Surfacing*, 74).

This grotesque image mirrors the protagonist’s forced abortion, revealing a link between hunting, masculinity, and reproductive violence. Here, the rabbit is not just a symbol of innocence or fertility—it is a victim of domination, much like the protagonist.

As the novel progresses, the boundaries between human and animal begin to dissolve. The protagonist refers to herself increasingly in animalistic terms—sniffing, crawling, hiding. At one point, she sheds her clothes and refuses to speak, expressing a desire to communicate nonverbally, bodily, instinctively. This is not regression but re-integration, an act of solidarity with animal life and a refusal of human exceptionalism.

Rosi Braidotti’s concept of “becoming-animal” is especially apt here. For Braidotti, this is not mimicry but an ethical gesture, a way of dissolving the humanist ego and acknowledging the shared

vulnerability of all life (*The Posthuman*, 2013). The protagonist’s “animal” behavior is not madness—it is a posthuman awakening, a recognition that animals are not Other, but kin.

By the end of *Surfacing*, animals are not saved or idealized—they are still hunted, hurt, and ignored. But the protagonist no longer participates in this economy of violence. Instead, she emerges as someone who has listened to the nonhuman, been reshaped by it, and now carries its truths in her own body.

### **Posthuman Subjectivity and De-Anthropocentrism in *Surfacing***

As the protagonist of *Surfacing* journeys deeper into the wilderness, she undergoes a radical shift—not merely psychological or emotional, but ontological. Her transformation embodies a form of posthuman subjectivity, where the boundaries between human and nonhuman, self and other, thought and instinct, dissolve. Margaret Atwood offers a powerful critique of anthropocentrism—the philosophical positioning of humans at the center of meaning and value—and instead envisions subjectivity as entangled, material, and co-emergent with the natural world.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist’s progression is marked by the rejection of rationalist, patriarchal language in favor of nonverbal, embodied knowing. Her speech diminishes, her instincts sharpen, and she begins to “speak” with the land, animals, and water in other-than-verbal ways. This aligns closely with Donna Haraway’s “becoming-with”—a form of interspecies companionship and mutual shaping (*When Species Meet*, 2008).

In a moment of symbolic clarity, the protagonist declares:

“This above all, to refuse to be a victim... I am not a thing.” (*Surfacing*, 195)

This is not a triumphant assertion of selfhood in the traditional sense but a rejection of objectification, both as a woman and as a human divorced from nature. As Rosi Braidotti writes:

“The posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity... We are not one, we are always already many.” (*The Posthuman*, 2013)

By the novel’s end, the protagonist no longer sees herself as a separate, sovereign “I,” but as part of a

wider, pulsing ecological meshwork. She is not reborn as a rational citizen but as a wild, interdependent, and plural self—a subjectivity that refuses mastery and embraces vulnerability.

Atwood's posthuman vision thus dismantles Cartesian dualism and offers in its place a model of relational being, one grounded in empathy, ecological awareness, and an ethics of entanglement.

### III. CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS BEYOND THE HUMAN

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* offers a profound meditation on the entanglements between the human and the nonhuman, the personal and the ecological, the feminine and the wild. Through its immersive rendering of the Canadian wilderness, its symbolic use of water, and its visceral engagement with animal life, the novel dismantles anthropocentric assumptions and affirms the vital agency of the nonhuman world. In doing so, it presents a powerful critique of modernity's dualisms: man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, subject/object.

Through the lens of ecofeminism, Atwood exposes how patriarchal ideologies reduce both women and nature to passive resources—objects to be consumed, silenced, and erased. Yet through her unnamed protagonist, Atwood also reveals a path of resistance. By shedding the trappings of language, identity, and civilization, the narrator moves not backward into savagery, but forward into a posthuman awareness—a mode of being that embraces interconnection, vulnerability, and interdependence.

The novel's nonhuman agents—landscape, lake, and animals—are not merely symbolic or aesthetic elements. They are active participants in the narrative, shaping the protagonist's journey and offering a counter-narrative to human exceptionalism. The forest becomes a teacher, the lake a womb and mirror, and the animals witnesses and kin. Atwood thus reimagines narrative itself as a multi-species collaboration, rejecting the linear hero's journey in favor of an ecological coming-into-being.

In a world facing ecological collapse, climate crisis, and mass extinction, *Surfacing* remains urgent and prescient. Its vision of posthuman ecology invites readers to reconsider not only our relationship with

nature but our very definitions of self, agency, and consciousness. It is a call not for domination or salvation, but for reciprocity, respect, and re-inhabitation of the Earth as shared home. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* thus speaks not just of trauma and healing—but of listening to the many voices of the nonhuman world, and finally, learning how to answer.

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