

Exploring the Ecofeminist Landscape: A Comparative Analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a theoretical framework that examines the parallels between the exploitation of the environment and the subjugation of women. The existing research in the field of ecofeminism concentrates on a specific regional level. But a critical, constructive, comparative study across geographical borders is least present in this field. To address this scholarly gap, the current research focuses on a textual comparative analysis of a well-known Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and an Indian writer, Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, through the lens of ecofeminism and post-colonialism. The analysis reveals how the authors challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for the empowerment of women and the preservation of the natural world. Atwood's protagonist exemplifies cultural ecofeminism while Hariharan's characters embody socialist ecofeminism. The current study significantly contributes to ecofeminist literary criticism by comparing a developing nation and a developed country, which is least represented in the existing ecofeminist literary discourse. The article demonstrates how Atwood presents the protagonist's actions as a conscious political decision rather than a biological determination, and it integrates ecofeminist concerns through the symbolic merger with the wilderness. Hariharan explores a post-colonial world where mythology and modernity intersect, using mythology to reveal structural oppression and the resistance of women.

Keywords: ecofeminism, power dynamics, nature, culture, identity, class, gender

Environmentalism and feminism are two of the most important movements of the twentieth century. Ecology and feminism intersect within ecofeminism, manifesting through a diverse range of methodologies aimed at conceptualizing and engaging with environmental issues. Senseless human interventions, modern industrial developments, and technology, along with the emission of greenhouse gases, the depletion of water resources, deforestation, the reckless application of pesticides, electronic waste, radioactive isotopes, and their

emissions, among other factors, contribute to the infertility of the natural environment. Ecofeminism is a theoretical framework aimed at examining the exploitation of the environment through a lens that draws parallels between such exploitation and the subjugation of women. It envisions a novel form of humanism that challenges and undermines prevailing political hierarchies as well as economic systems that perpetuate oppression against women and contribute to the degradation of the ecosystem in its entirety. Margaret Eleanor Atwood a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist and an environmental activist is associated with various genres and writing techniques, encompassing both non-fiction and poetic compositions. The predominant themes permeating most of her works are feminism and environmentalism. On the other hand, Githa Hariharan, an Indian English author, is recognized for her intellectually stimulating fictional works. A prominent feature of her writing is sarcasm as her literary device. She prompts readers to rethink societal conventions by dismantling long-standing taboos, questioning patriarchal norms, and advocating for women's autonomy. Although originating from diverse cultural backgrounds, both writers exhibit a collective theme of interrogating standards, defying traditions, and employing literary devices to communicate impactful themes. The narrative of the novel *Surfacing* depicts the expedition of an unknown protagonist along with her partner Joe and her companions Anna and David, as they venture back to their native town in the northern region of Quebec, Canada, in pursuit of the mysterious disappearance of the protagonist's father. In her novel, Atwood presents her protagonist with an introspective exploration of the natural world, questioning the conventional and prejudiced link between women and nature as being inferior. Likewise, in *The Thousand Faces of Night* Githa Hariharan asserts that the so-called institution of marriage binds women throughout their entire lifetime. Githa Hariharan is an Indian Writer and editor based in New Delhi. She belongs to the second generation of postcolonial women writers alongside authors like Sashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur etc. This paper compares both novels from a few perspectives.

Literature Review

The literature on ecofeminism has evolved over several decades, addressing the interconnections between gender, nature, and power structures. Foundational works by Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) and Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (1988) laid the foundation for understanding how the exploitation of nature is intertwined with the subjugation of women. Early ecofeminist discourse, as reflected in Susan Griffin's work and other pioneering texts, questioned traditional paradigms that segregated nature and femininity as separate spheres.

Theoretical Foundations: Ecofeminism and Postcolonialism

Cultural Ecofeminism in Surfacing

Cultural ecofeminism views both women and nature as victims of patriarchal exploitation and asserts a natural, often spiritual bond between them (Griffin, 1984). Atwood's anonymous protagonist exemplifies this framework by symbolically merging with the Quebec wilderness and rejecting industrial modernity and patriarchal conventions. Her eventual dependence on wild berries and mushrooms and her refusal to shave, for example, represent a conscious restoration to a pre-colonial, holistic identity. This is consistent with Carolyn Merchant's criticism in *The Death of Nature* (1980), which claims that the oppression of women is like the dominance of nature by Western modernity. Through using the dam project as a metaphor for American neo-colonialism, Atwood portrays nature as a sacred zone for female freedom and expresses cultural ecofeminist opposition to technological aggression.

However, cultural ecofeminism has been criticized for essentializing women as 'closer to nature,' as Donna Haraway has put it in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Respond to this by arguing that Atwood uses intentional essentialism, claiming that the protagonist's merger with nature is a deliberate social act to regain agency rather than a biological necessity. Regenerative resistance is symbolized by her image of a child in the forest, which echoes Val Plumwood's plea in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) to destroy the 'mastery' dualisms (male/female, human/nature) (Plumwood, 1993).

Socialist Ecofeminism and Postcolonial Critique in The Thousand Faces of Night

Socialist ecofeminism emphasizes how capitalist and colonial systems commodify both women and nature (Mies, 1993). Through characters like Mayamma, whose lack of economic autonomy and education keeps her trapped in a cycle of oppression, Hariharan's book challenges post-independence India's patriarchal norms as remains of colonialism. A recurrent theme, the river represents the fluid resistance of women like Devi, who struggle with conventional expectations while navigating urban modernity. In her book *Staying Alive* (1988), Vandana Shiva links ecological degradation in the Global South to colonial exploitation and gendered labour (Shiva, 2016). Hariharan challenges legendary narratives to reveal structural oppression using mythology, such as when her father-in-law silences Sita's veena strings. This is further explained in Ashis Nandy's 1983 book *The Intimate Enemy: Colonial Power Ingrained Patriarchal Structures*, depicting women as the preservers of 'tradition' while males accepted modernity (Ashis Nandy, n.d.) Devi's unsuccessful marriage to Mahesh,

a productivity-obsessed corporate executive, criticizes the devaluation of caregiving and responsibility for the environment in neoliberal India. A socialist ecofeminist recovery of collective and artistic work as acts of resistance is symbolized by her final return to her mother, Sita, who re-establishes her relationship with her abandoned veena.

While Hariharan's *Devi* explores a postcolonial world where mythology and modernity intersect, Atwood's protagonist merges with the Quebec wilderness to rebel against industrial patriarchy. In contrast to Atwood's personal, symbolic resistance, socialist ecofeminism emphasizes structural transformation, as demonstrated by Sita's silent Veena and *Devi*'s rejection of Mahesh's corporate worldview.

By juxtaposing Atwood's cultural ecofeminism with Hariharan's socialist/postcolonial framework, the analysis reveals how ecofeminism adapts to diverse contexts; Atwood reflects Canada's concerns about the loss of culture by using nature as a spiritual refuge against American neo-colonialism. Hariharan examines the hybrid modernity of postcolonial India, where myths are used as instruments for challenging authoritarian conventions.

Methodology: Bridging Ecofeminism and Postcolonialism

The study employs comparative analysis based on ecofeminist and post-colonial frameworks to examine how Margaret Atwood and Gita Hariharan oppose the patriarchal exploitation of women and the environment in various cultural contexts; a close reading of both texts enables significant analysis of symbolic language, Atwood's white birches dying as ecofeminist allegory while Hariharan's veena strings represents the silenced female creativity. It addresses critiques of ecofeminism's historical essentialism by highlighting how class (Mayamma's poverty) and colonialism (*Devi*'s hybrid identity) intersect with gender. The texts also contextualize Hariharan's critique of post-independence India's patriarchal modernity as a colonial legacy while framing Atwood's work within Canada's anxiety about American cultural imperialism. A close reading of *Surfacing* demonstrates how Atwood's protagonist's final reliance on wild berries represents a cultural ecofeminist return to pre-colonial harmony, while her rejection of razors reflects her opposition to patriarchal rules. On the other hand, *Devi* overcomes post-colonial hybridity in Hariharan's work. Her departure from Mahesh's corporate perspective embodies socialist ecofeminist rejection of neoliberal exploitation, defined by Huggan and Tiffin's criticism of 'developments' as neocolonialism (Huggan & Tiffin, 2016).

Table 1

Comparative framework: Surfacing and The Thousand Faces of Night

Aspect	<i>Surfacing</i>	<i>The Thousand Faces of Night</i>
Ecofeminist Aspect	Cultural (spiritual connection)	Socialist/materialist
Postcolonial critique	American neo-colonialism in Canada	Colonial Legacies in Indian Patriarchy
Narrative approach	First-person narrative	Mythic polyphony
Symbol of Resistance	Wilderness submersion	Reclamation of mythology

Reclaiming Agency: Identity and Selfhood

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* revolves around three elements, specifically a marriage that ended unsuccessfully, a contentious divorce, and the tragedy of losing family members. The novel exhibits the concept of identity as fluid, with the narrator remaining unnamed and deemed unreliable. The unnamed protagonist undertakes a voyage of self-exploration, grappling with uncertainties regarding decision-making, past experiences, personal inconsistencies, and fractured interpersonal connections. Erik Erikson, an American child psychoanalyst, developed the concept of "identity crisis" to elucidate the inner turmoil individuals endure. Although Erikson primarily focused on adolescents, he proposes that all individuals encounter periods of outflow in various stages of life, necessitating continual redefinition (Erikson, 1994). The anonymous protagonist depicted in the novel traverses the terrain of unaddressed turmoil, while her lack of confidence in her own convictions hinders her ability to convey her representation to external parties. The narrative delineates her quest towards resolving her crisis of selfhood, grappling with one of existence's most formidable challenges. "I have to be more careful about my memories, I have to be sure they're my own and not the memories of other people telling me what I felt, how I acted, what I said"(Atwood, 2010, p. 72) highlights the protagonist's struggle against imposed identities and a return to an original state. The anonymous protagonist is an artist who is manipulated by her own male art teacher. The male teacher undermines her artistic perception and her sense of self as a creator. He refrains from allowing her creative potential to flourish and exploits her gentle and submissive demeanour. He enforces his own concepts onto her artistic work, rendering her a stagnant artist reliant on her male art mentor. Incapable of articulating her own artistic vision on the canvas, she is constrained to conform to the directives of her male mentor. He represents a typical male with male ego who exhibits an intolerance towards female artists aspiring to achieve parity with him. Consequently, she experiences emotional and artistic demise at the hands of her male mentor. It is he who dominates in every aspect of her life. As she herself says:

“One of my drawing was too frightening and I said children like being frightened. ‘it isn’t the children who buy the books’, he said ‘it’s their parents’. So I compromised” (Atwood, 2010, p. 50)

The anonymous protagonist regards herself as a victim; from one perspective, being part of a patriarchal community, she is subjected to victimization by men. According to the protagonist, they not only exploit women’s bodies for their pleasure but also possess greater privileges and wield significant influence in shaping historical narratives. The protagonist shifts between the reminiscences of her early years and the encounters she currently faces. She is not only eager to comprehend and ascertain her role within her family but also within society. As a victim, she experiences a sense of disconnection from her linguistic, cultural, and historical roots, as well as, notably from her relatives, particularly her missing father, she regards herself as someone who has been uprooted. These sentiments prompt within her a compelling desire for renewal “The reason they invented coffins, to lock the dead in, preserve them they put makeup on them; they didn’t want them spreading or changing into anything else. The stone with the name and date was on them to weight them down” (Atwood, 2010, p. 154). This sentiment resonates with the narrator’s own struggle to challenge the past and ‘surface’ to her identity. The protagonist of *Surfacing* is motivated to embark on a quest to recover her vanished sense of self, to rediscover and rebuild it once more.

The three strong female characters in the novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* by Githa Hariharan are Mayamma, Devi, and Sita, who belong to different generations. After enduring dissatisfactory marital relationships, individuals develop an awareness of their constrained existence and embark on a quest to uncover authentic significance and principles. Evidencing a transition towards advancing to a subsequent phase aimed at experiencing an emancipated lifestyle. The emancipation of women from oppression propels them to resist a male-dominated societal structure in pursuit of autonomy and self-definition. In the novel, married individuals challenge their sense of self as they conform to societal norms. Mayamma, the household retainer, epitomizes the traditional Indian female figure who embraces her destiny without scrutiny, adhering strictly to societal expectations. Enduring the injustices enforced by a patriarchal lineage upon women in various roles such as daughters, spouses, daughters-in-law, mothers, and abandoned individuals, she relinquishes autonomy and resigns herself to predestined existence. Characters depicted in Githa Hariharan’s literary work, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, experience a profound sense of identity crisis within the context of their marital relationships, persisting despite their adherence to societal norms. “It is a *Mahabharat* of feminism in which women fight their wars and become victims to their own ambitions, humanity, arrogance and submission” (Khan, 1995). In the Indian cultural milieu, daughters are conventionally socialized to perceive their parental

home as a transitory dwelling, while the marital home of their husbands inevitably transforms into their main residence over time. Upon marriage, a daughter is accorded the status of an esteemed guest by her birth parents. However, when a married daughter permanently departs from her husband's abode and returns to her parents' household, it not only tarnishes the family's image but also engenders a sense of despondency among them. Devi fails to establish her sense of self within the context of male-dominated societal frameworks, whether it be as a spouse in an arranged marriage or as a defiant paramour. Mahesh, her husband was surprised at Devi when she refused to be a mother "You look so fragile, so feminine...It's hard to believe that you don't want a child" (Hariharan, 1992, p. 93). She absconds with her lover, Gopal, from her husband's house and ultimately reunites with her mother, forsaking Gopal as well. Devi recognizes that Dan, her boyfriend Mahesh, her husband and Gopal, her lover expect her to assimilate into their personas. The societal milieu in which Devi is reared mandates her compliance as a virtuous woman who subsumes her identity within that of the man in her life. Upon realizing the dominance of men in a patriarchal society like India, where women are conditioned with distinct societal expectations, she promptly disengages to forge her own unique identity. Sita, who is the mother of Devi, was compelled to relinquish her aspirations for a career in music in order to conform to the societal expectations of an exemplary daughter-in-law. Regarded as an emblem of selflessness, she embodies the virtues of enduring hardships in silence and embracing the harsh truths of existence. Her father-in-law reproaches her for engaging in playing Veena instead of attending to the domestic duties designated to her. He said, "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law?" (Hariharan, 1992, p. 30). In anger, she pulled out the veena strings and responded, "Yes. I am a wife. A daughter-in-law" (Hariharan, 1992, p. 30). The survival of the Indian woman depends upon her husband, father-in-law, and mother-in-law. Githa Hariharan introduces a novel dimension to the psychological intricacy of Indian women by depicting Sita's character. Mayamma, a character in the novel, is a product of societal victimization due to her lack of education, positioning her as the primary subject of oppression. She represents a demographic of women who passively accept their circumstances without objection, influenced by the prevailing notion that a woman's success hinges on her endurance and resilience. Throughout her existence, Mayamma has dedicated herself to meeting the expectations of others. The author highlights the historical trend of conditioning women to endure without dissent the injustices imposed upon them. This enduring silence has persisted over generations. She was initially mistreated by her spouse and later by her son. Mayamma stoically embraces her destiny, enduring the harsh realities of cruelty within the patriarchal social framework of which she is the greatest sufferer. Githa Hariharan is known for her distinctive style of writing, which

dives into contemporary societal issues. Her literary works explore the complete historical narrative of women's roles within the cultural maze, highlighting the emergence of a modern woman true to herself. The female characters in her novel strive to confront formidable challenges and carve out their own place in society, each finding varying degrees of fulfilment based on their inherent characteristics (Pathak et al., 2008, pp. 156–163). Hariharan's protagonist in *Devi* represents a novel archetype of women who do not conform strictly to traditional values nor embrace extreme modernity, embodying a more realistic portrayal. These individuals have successfully reclaimed and reshaped their identities as modern women.

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* is widely regarded as a discourse on feminism with a prominent nationalistic undertone. Within the narrative, Atwood delves into the experiences of an unnamed female protagonist who grapples with psychological distress stemming from self-victimization. Atwood provides a distinctive portrayal of her feminist standpoint in *Surfacing*. The novel's focus revolves around the protagonist's exploration of her submerged inner self. This endeavor involves recognizing the generative energies of existence. The book evaluates Atwood's perspective on the essence of femininity. The novel brings out women's concerns about destiny and identity in a male-dominated world. The aim is to uncover biases held by men towards the creativity and talent of women. This literary work explores the quest for self-awareness and personal growth, aiming to shed light on disparities in power dynamics between genders. The anonymous protagonist challenges the societal tendency to reduce women to mere objects. The female protagonist embarks on a quest to uncover her ancestral origins. Through her pursuit of her missing father, she tries to establish a connection with her past and acknowledges her involvement in the termination of her pregnancy. Demonstrating unwavering determination and resilience, she exhibits her readiness to confront the challenges of existence. Although *Surfacing* focuses on one individual's experience, a key theme in the novel is the interconnections among individuals. The protagonist and her companions are marginalized individuals who struggle to effectively interact with one another. They lead to a solitary and reclusive existence. By exploring the challenges of isolation and communication as well as the protagonist's endeavors to address the issues, *Surfacing* portrays a societal exploration. In her ultimate pursuit, the unnamed protagonist locates her father's remains and encounters a vision of a child she had previously terminated. Uncovering her father's message within the depictions of an ancient Indian rock art, she comes across a photograph in her mother's scrapbook depicting a woman with a prominent pregnant belly, harboring a child within who gazes outward. Comprehending her mother's message, she acknowledges that the sole method of reclaiming her lost sense of self lies in conceiving once more to give birth and nurture a child. Embracing motherhood as a deliberate

decision, she firmly believes that it represents the quintessential element of feminine existence, asserting that only through motherhood can she achieve a sense of completeness. Therefore, she opts to conceive a child with Joe, her boyfriend, to break free from their self-imposed isolation. Consequently, the act of reparenting emerges as the remedy for the protagonist's struggle with identity in Atwood's narrative.

Furthermore, the embrace of nature offers comfort and facilitates reconciliation between the disparate elements of her psyche. Ultimately, at the end of the novel, she undergoes increased emotional depth and reduced feelings of alienation. Her level of kindness towards others diminishes, leading to an interpretation of Joe's desire to marry her as an affectionate gesture rather than an act of dominance. Thus, it is evident that the concept of motherhood and engagement with the natural world serve to establish a sense of self for women. Ultimately, the main character in Atwood's narrative experiences a form of rejuvenation through the contemplation of assuming a parental role while immersing herself in nature. Her journey revolves around the pursuit of a clear and distinct identity, a goal she eventually attains. Annis Pratt considers *Surfacing* as a novel of "a quest for rebirth and transformation" (Pratt, 1981). The protagonist introduces a fresh start for herself and proceeds to pursue alternative social structures through various means. Atwood's modern female protagonist presents the notion that she is simply a typical individual engaged in a continual battle with her flaws to establish her sense of self. Resembling the writer in many ways, the storyteller in the narrative is equally mindful of ecological issues. She desires to establish her sense of self and explore it within the social and psychological realms. The narrative explores the subjugation of women and their tendency to avoid acknowledging their harmful traits. She is compelled to navigate through a life with challenges following a confrontation between societal norms and the untamed wilderness, spanning the realms of past and present.

Indian writing in English fiction has held a prominent position due to the novelist's vivid depiction and articulate expression of the numerous obstacles and challenges encountered by Indian women. Contemporary Indian fiction authors frequently delve into the conflicted experiences of their main characters, who grapple with the tension between traditional values and modern influences. Furthermore, they illustrate the struggles of women not only against pervasive male dominance but also against the societal, cultural, and religious constraints prevalent in today's world. The endeavour to dismantle the structures of unequal power dynamics and alleviate the unseen suffering of women stands out as one of the most daunting tasks of our era. Devi, the protagonist, during her early days, was exposed to tales of mythology by her grandmother as a response to her inquiries, rather than providing straightforward answers. She says "My grandmother's domain, the ritual in which she encased

our arrivals and departures, our visits to relatives or the village temple, was more ambiguous” (Hariharan, 1992, p. 26). The grandmother of Devi skillfully incorporated subtle nuances into the narratives. Devi’s fascination with such mythological accounts gradually instilled a sense of bravery in her. It was through these mythical tales that Devi grasped the concept that a woman’s redemption could be achieved through acts of penance. The influence of these mythical narratives significantly impacted Devi’s mindset. Devi’s fairy tale-like life comes to an end upon her marriage to Mahesh, a regional executive at a multinational corporation. Devi’s existence is replaced with disillusionment as she has consistently prospered from the illusions surrounding womanhood. Upon her marriage to Mahesh, she finds out his strong adherence to traditional Indian values, viewing all aspects of life through a pragmatic business lens, even relationships with family and spouse. Devi came to the realization that for Mahesh, marriage primarily serves as a required societal obligation, fulfilling a mere demographic criterion in his life trajectory. He does not want to disclose anything to his spouse except his sexual needs. In contrast, Devi perceives marriage as analogous to a promising sapling, requiring steady nurturing to thrive and yield enjoyable experiences within her conjugal relationship. The treatment received from her husband was an unexpected form of harassment. After her marriage, she experiences a sense of deprivation, perceiving a loss of all aspects of her life. Consequently, her subconscious mind compels her to seek solace and emotional support from her mother, who is envisioned as a source of guidance for her future endeavors. When Devi’s father-in-law travelled overseas, she found herself in solitude, leading to a sense of alienation that prompted her to seek new companionship. This quest led her to form a friendship with Gopal, a musician whose attentive care towards Devi, musical skills, and affectionate demeanor left a lasting impression on her. Feeling a desire to fill the void within her and free her constrained spirit, Devi made the decision to elope with Gopal. In the narrative of Devi’s life, Gopal emerges as a figure of exoticism, offering her a fleeting sense of liberation as she grapples with her feelings of isolation and estrangement. She is unable to mentally or emotionally connect her opinions and thoughts with those of her male partners. Devi is driven to pursue self-discovery by her curious nature, which nudges her away from the sedentary material comforts of life.

Devi’s mother, Sita, is depicted as a woman of middle age, whose distinctive qualities are evident in the current narrative. Despite her dark complexion, she radiates the light of her character, illuminating her home. She symbolizes sacrifice, unwavering silence, and silent acknowledgement of life’s truths. Following her marriage, she brought a veena with her and would play it in moments of leisure. As a daughter-in-law hailing from a traditional household, she internalizes the rebukes of her father-in-law and unravels the

threads of her passion for playing the veena. However, she directs all her efforts towards fulfilling the roles of a dutiful wife and nurturing mother. She consents to her husband's journey to Africa and her daughter's trip to America to cultivate their skills and ensure a prosperous future. She confronts her husband's demise with the utmost courage and orchestrates a matrimonial alliance for her daughter with a well-educated and successful business executive. She cleans and dusts her long-abandoned veena as a symbolic gesture reflecting her contemplation of embracing a lifestyle aligned with her personal aspirations and acknowledging her unmet desires. Ultimately, Sita seeks comfort for her distressed soul through music, following a period of disappointment with humanity. Her awareness is keenly attuned to the predominant stream of Indian heritage, as she reflects on her history and its relevance to the contemporary era.

Mayamma, the third female figure within the feminine trio, enters marriage at the age of twelve with a frivolous gambler, resulting in a life filled with suffering and sorrow. Despite being left with a son who exhibits brutish behavior, her emotional detachment upon his demise leads to a profound sense of liberation. She becomes a trusted helper for Mahesh's mother, Parvatamma, adeptly showcasing her skills as a housekeeper, cook, and governess, selflessly dedicating herself to the family's welfare. Subsequently, she develops a close bond with Devi, offering solace during her strained relationship with Mahesh. During interactions with Mayamma, Sita perceives echoes of her grandmother and gains insights into ethical and moral principles, akin to the epic tales recounted by her grandmother.

Hence, the female protagonists Devi, Sita, Mayamma endeavor to delineate their individual identities through distinct approaches. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Githa Hariharn portrays a series of interconnected incidents involving male and female characters, exploring themes of love, mortality, and profound solitude. These narratives are skillfully woven with elements of mythology and traditional stories, shedding light on the societal roles of women across different temporal, spatial, and geographical contexts.

Ecological Bonding

In her novel *Surfacing*, Margaret Atwood integrated her ecofeminist concerns through an unnamed protagonist to liberate both women and the environment from exploitation and neglect, aiming to establish a harmonious equilibrium in global ecology and society. The unregulated exploitation of the environment, including deforestation in rural and urban areas, animal slaughter, the emission of toxic gases into the atmosphere, and water contamination, results in severe repercussions on the planet. The narrative of *Surfacing* elucidates the perpetual marginalization and disconnection experienced by the anonymous protagonist

within a patriarchal society. Upon delving into the initial segment of the narrative concerning the formative years of the protagonist from Canada, readers ascertain the deficiency in adequate nurturing provided by her parental figures. The novel is replete with vivid depictions of the encroachment upon Canadian territory and the deterioration of its natural landscapes by external trespassers. Activities such as hunting animals for leisure, indiscriminate littering, altering the traditional structure of communities with the introduction of tourist accommodation, and exacerbating pollution through the recurrent detonation of missiles have all been meticulously observed and chronicled by the narrator of this novel, highlighting the prevalent ecological crisis. Margaret Atwood effectively articulates her dissent to attract widespread consideration to the unrestrained American growth within her nation. She utilizes her novel as a dependable tool to prompt the populace of Canada to rally behind her environmental principles or beliefs aimed at rejuvenating ecological variety. The anonymous protagonist lacks an understanding of the true value of her unique identity until her arrival in Northern Quebec in pursuit of her missing father. This specific geographical setting holds a significant place in her life as it is her birthplace where she experienced her childhood days. The termination of a pregnancy is a form of social mistreatment and is undeniably considered a criminal act. However, she found herself unable to oppose her husband's authoritarian decree during this challenging period. It is imperative for a woman to assert her rights vocally or object to such inhumane practices. Nevertheless, as the narrative progresses, she becomes one with the natural world. As a consequence of her deep connection with her natural surroundings, she liberates herself from the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms in her life. She now harbours a sense of gratitude towards both animate and inanimate elements of the physical environment. Embracing a life characterized by a profound sense of autonomy and independence, she has attained a full realization of her purposeful existence. The narrator feels a sense of dedication to the environment. The subjugation of women and the degradation of the natural world result from power struggles within a patriarchal society. Seeking solace in nature, the protagonist encounters tranquility and reflects on the transformative impact on her feminine identity (Rose, n.d.).

“My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me, I ferry it secure between.....I multiply”(Atwood, 2010, p. 177)

The first sentence of the novel shows the death of white birches:

“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, and I notice they now have sea-planes of hire”(Atwood, 2010, p. 3)

The anonymous protagonist observes her own reflection of personal tragedy within the Quebec scene. She articulates a profound apprehension towards the environment and facilitates the comprehension of the relationship between women and nature for the readers. Throughout her return voyage, she comes to the realization that there has been a fundamental shift in her surroundings. Throughout the novel, Atwood consistently underscores the presence of ecological devastation within the narratives, be it in the context of regulating the dam or the deliberate act of cutting down old trees. She realizes that no one can help her discover her true self therefore she returns to nature. When she establishes a connection between her own existence and that of the other entities in the natural world, she gains the ability to comprehend intricate patterns of nature, encompassing its perpetual cycle of birth and demise. This realization prompts her to believe that true harmony with nature necessitates a symbolic shedding of societal constructs, akin to the vulnerable prey in the ecosystem. Sustaining herself on a diet comprising solely of mushrooms, flora, and wild berries, she immerses herself further into the wilderness, assimilating with the botanical realm. Following the integration of her life with the natural elements, she experiences a profound transformation in her perception of reality. She establishes her physical abode on the planet, recognizing the interconnectedness, diversity, and intricacy of all life forms in the natural realm. She harbors no fear towards any entity, lacking any authoritative figure to dominate her or infringe upon her physical being. In unison with the reverend Mother Earth, she relinquishes the constructs of civilization that contribute to the degradation of the biosphere. It is plausible for her to reconstruct a societal framework that upholds values seeking equilibrium and coexistence with the environment.

Indian literature has historically been intricately linked with environmental consciousness, demonstrating the profound connection between nature and Indian societal values. Various literary genres such as poetry, novels, epics, folklore, and mythological narratives have been utilized by Indian writers to delve into ecological topics, emphasizing the significance of environmental conservation and sustainable lifestyles. These literary creations not only exalt the magnificence and abundance of the natural world but also offer valuable perspectives on the repercussions of human activities on the ecosystem. The interplay between Indian literature and environmental consciousness is characterized by synergy, as both function as medium to advocate for a society that prioritizes sustainability and ecological stewardship. Other than the ancient texts, contemporary Indian writers have also incorporated environmental perspectives into their literary works. They delve into a wide array of ecological topics, including deforestation, pollution, climate change, and the exploitation of natural resources. Renowned authors such as Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh and Anita Desai have adeptly integrated environmental awareness into their

stories, encouraging readers to contemplate humanity's impact on the environment and the pressing importance of sustainable practices. Through the fusion of narrative and ecological themes, these writers elevate environmental issues, nurturing a sense of compassion and accountability among their audience.

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* focuses on Devi, who, after earning a degree from the USA, returns to Madras and succumbs to the oppressive demands of the preexisting system. Her brief dream of a life with her American boyfriend, Dan, was short-lived because she could not imagine living with him. Upon her arrival in Madras, Devi perceives herself to be firmly ensconced within the confines of her mother Sita's protective embrace, often likened to a metaphorical 'secure womb'. Scholars have frequently referred to the maternal womb as a significant aspect of a child's immediate surroundings. Sita harbors aspirations of a traditional, contented marital union for her daughter, akin to the contemporary concept of Swayam Vara. These matrimonial ideal dictates that the prospective bride possesses qualities such as being 'fair', 'beautiful', 'domestic', and 'adaptable', with the expectation that marriage will provide solace and affection in relationships. These circumstances prompt Devi to recall vivid narratives recounted by her grandmother, evoking a similar sense of comforting reassurance. As a six-year-old, Devi found solace in her modest abode within her grandmother's nurturing presence, and the enchanting mythical tales that instilled in her a sense of dignity and gravity befitting a Swayam Vara ceremony. The yearning of her childhood and the quest for maternal care amidst the rural backdrop during her grandmother's stories encapsulated a feeling of displacement, a facet of connecting with nature that underscored the intrinsic need for holistic interconnectedness. The narratives of her grandmother focus on the emotional and cognitive growth of Devi. Marriage represents the pinnacle of a woman's life and her aspirations for the future. Regardless of her level of education, she was required to suppress any feelings of animosity and present herself in a manner befitting a dutiful daughter, even in situations that may challenge her sense of obedience. Devi enters the institution of marriage with Mahesh, described as 'an earnest business professional', holding the position of regional director within a multinational corporation specializing in the production of detergents and oral care products. Mahesh's demanding schedule often necessitates frequent business trips, leaving him with limited opportunities to spend quality time with his wife. The absence of joy and contentment within the institution of marriage results in the isolation and philosophical distress women. The customs intricately shape and define the essence of Indian femininity and its influence on the collective consciousness of the Indian society necessitates adherence to the enigmatic feminine paradigm. Within the framework of Indian societal organization, the enduring legacy of traditional norms portrays women as embodiments of veneration, akin to a 'devi'.

However, Devi is subjected to subjugation and coercion to adhere to a subordinate role scripted by the male perspective. Devi holds certain expectations from her spouse, expecting him to provide support and comprehension on an emotional level, yet these expectations often remain unfulfilled. She expresses contentment that Mahesh is not an impotent individual, yet she lacks the expertise to adapt to the unfamiliar setting. Her inclination lies in acquiring knowledge of Sanskrit from Baba, and she harbours an aspiration to seek employment as a research assistant. Due to the limited activities available at home, she is eager to combat her boredom. However, Mahesh casts doubt on her capabilities and perceives her solely as a homemaker and mother. His desire for Devi to conceive his child, asserting dominance over her body and underscoring the significance of motherhood. Throughout history, women have consistently pursued the profound fulfilment associated with motherhood. In myths, the concept of motherhood holds a sacred significance, with Devi asserting that the role of the mother possesses the power to pacify the tangled, fragmented emotions within her psyche. A crib by her bed will anchor Devi to the realm of reality.

“What is heavier than the earth?

A mother

What is higher than heaven?

A father

Who is the friend given by the Gods?

It is the wife who is that friend and safe refuge, answered Yudhisthira.”

(Hariharan, 1992, p. 86).

However, the process of childbirth differs significantly from the transactional nature of buying or selling commodities. Upon undergoing medical examinations related to fertility, Devi comes to the profound understanding of her deliberate control over her physical being and its requirement. She emerges as the rightful custodian, the sovereign of her own, necessitating a transition from a state of being perceived as an object to that of a discerning and autonomous individual. Devi is drawn to Gopal, her neighbor, and his music inspires her to think for herself.

“My grandmother fed me fantasies; my father, a secretive love. My mother sought me out with hope..... I have minded the lessons they taught me, an obedient puppet whose strings they pulled and jerked with their love. I have made very few choices..... I have stumbled on-stage alone, greedy for a story of my own” (Hariharan, 1992, pp. 136–137).

Devi decides to travel with Gopal in the belief that her life will be better off without Mahesh. She decides to go back to her mother to start again after realizing that Gopal is also self-centered. She is resolved to survive and not

give up, not to be defeated or sad longer, but rather to stay and fight and make sense of everything and start over from the beginning.

The only emotion that can bring about a perfect synergy between man and nature is love. Growing dissatisfaction, enduring insecurity, and faithlessness are the inevitable results of nature's breathtaking spectacle. In addition to her mental instability, Devi felt so alone that she felt like an uneducated child trapped in a woman's body, despite her rebellious and independent spirit, that she decided to elope with Gopal. Indian women's deepest thoughts and minds are typically shaped by oppressive forces that unfairly control their admission and acceptance of failure. Even in this altered environment, women are bound to the conventional ideal of the perfect lady and are unable to voice their resentment towards those who have violated their "pride and dignity". Devi entered marriage without any prior knowledge. Devi was unable to identify herself in a male-dominated environment. Social framework of the arranged marriage society, either as Mahesh's wife or Gopal's disobedient lover. She is unable to express her femininity due to social constraints. She then decides to return to her mother, Sita, who welcomed her into the home but seemed "hesitant and childlike".

Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* reveals different ecofeminist frameworks influenced by their respective postcolonial and cultural settings. Cultural ecofeminism is in accordance with Atwood's writings, which highlights a spiritual bond between women and the natural world as a means of opposing neo-colonial and patriarchal exploitation. In a conscious act of recovering agency, the anonymous protagonist rejects industrial modernity, embraces surviving on wild berries, and rejects patriarchal conventions like shaving to connect with nature symbolically. Carolyn Merchant's criticism of the dominance of women and nature by Western modernity correlates with this (Merchant, 1989). Resonating with Val Plumwood's appeal to demolish dualistic systems, Atwood ignores criticisms of essentialism by presenting the protagonist's actions as a conscious political decision rather than a biological determination.

Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* explores socialist ecofeminist themes through characters like Mayamma, whose lack of economic autonomy and education keeps her trapped in a cycle of oppression. The novel challenges post-independence India's patriarchal norms as a legacy of colonialism, using the river as a symbol of fluid resistance of women like Devi. Hariharan's use of mythology to reveal structural oppression, such as the silencing of Sita's veena strings, is analyzed through the lens of post-colonial theory. Devi's

rejection of her husband Mahesh's corporate worldview embodies a socialist ecofeminist critique of neo-liberal exploitation.

Both novels depict the protagonist's quest for identity and selfhood within patriarchal societies. Atwood's anonymous protagonist grapples with her artistic agency, while Hariharan's characters, such as Devi, Sita, and Mayamma, navigate the constraints of traditional gender roles and societal expectations. The analysis highlights how the protagonists' struggles to assert their autonomy and reclaim their identities are intertwined with their engagement with the natural world and resistance to patriarchal norms.

Atwood's *Surfacing* integrates ecofeminist concerns through the protagonist's symbolic merger with the wilderness, which represents a rejection of industrial patriarchy and a quest for harmony with the natural world. Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* also explores the protagonist's connections to the environment, such as Devi's longing for her rural childhood and Sita's relationship with the abandoned veena.

Conclusion

This comparative study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* reveals the diverse adaptations of ecofeminism across cultural contexts. Atwood's protagonist exemplifies cultural ecofeminism by merging with the wilderness, while Hariharan's characters embody socialist ecofeminist resistance to neoliberal exploitation in post-colonial India. The analysis highlights the intersection of gender, class, and colonialism in the novels, addressing critiques of ecofeminism's historical essentialism. The author's use of symbolic language and mythological narratives to convey ecofeminist and post-colonial themes is also examined. This study contributes to the understanding of how literature can serve as a powerful medium for advocating environmental preservation and women's empowerment in diverse cultural contexts.

Limitations of the Research

While this study offers significant insights into the comparative ecofeminist perspectives of Atwood and Hariharan, several limitations are noted. First, the scope of texts analyzed is limited to these two authors, which may restrict the generalization of the findings across broader literary contexts. Additionally, the qualitative nature of thematic analysis inherently involves subjective interpretation, which might introduce biases. There is also a limitation in terms of the availability and translation of critical texts from non-Western contexts, potentially narrowing the comprehensive understanding of diverse ecofeminist discourses.

Future Scope of Research

Future research could expand the comparative framework to include various authors and texts from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Quantitative methodologies could be integrated to measure the impact of ecofeminist narratives in literature empirically. Moreover, longitudinal studies examining the evolution of ecofeminist thought and its influence on environmental policy and gender studies could provide deeper insights. An interdisciplinary approach combining literary analysis, sociology, and environmental science is recommended to further explore the complex dynamic between gender and nature.

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