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**The Porous Body: A Baradian Reading of Ontological Reconfiguration in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing***

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**Abstract:** The landscapes, climate, animals, human beings, a city, the outbreak of zoonoses, a toxic plume; bioluminescent water; trees, concrete structures, all these things have something in common. Whether tangible or intangible, socialised or not, these are all material forms in varied combination of forces, agencies, and other matter. Matter and agency are interconnected in numerous ways. Their constant interaction with each other plays a huge role in the formation of the world that we live. This study reviews specifically the changes that agencies establish through nature and human interface during globalisation. Globalisation is an intra-active agency that has the ability to make changes on the growth of a country. Its hegemonic impact affects the economic system explicitly and the value system implicitly. The constant process of this 'intra-action' between women and fast changing environment is represented on Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's works. Her novel *Surfacing* is referred to bring out varying levels of 'interaction' endured by the protagonist due to the onslaught of globalization on the basis of feminist theorist Karen Barad's concept of agential realism. According to Barad, differences are generated in this world through the intra-action of human/ non-human matrices. Matter whether living or non-living is not passive in Barad's agentic world, but is a means of generative becoming. In this sense matter has to be understood as something that has its own semiotic dynamics and it is also an essential part of environment's semiotic and cultural evolution. Thus, the paper provides an understanding of the complex relationship between the human and the non-human worlds in terms of agency.

**Keywords:** *Agential Realism, Materialism, Intra-action, Ecofeminism, Globalisation*

Globalisation has increasingly brought changes in this moving world whether it be objects, people, ideas, thoughts, knowledge, information, environment or animals all are connected through complex interconnected, physical, geographical, virtual, social, material, political, economic and cultural processes. All these are identified as matter and agencies interconnected in numerous ways. Their constant interaction with each other plays a huge role in the formation of the world that we live. Our biosphere consists of interacting agencies and matter. It is through these intermingling matters and agencies that this world exists. Interconnections are sometimes natural, some are born out of compulsion, choice or daily practices. An intermingling and complicated web of connections, and human understanding of them, is the pivotal point to understand of the concept of agential realism. In this paper I aim to figure out the changes that agencies establish through nature and human interface. These networks of agencies and matter are represented in various metaphorical forms can be read through *Surfacing*, the novel of Canadian writer Margaret Atwood.

According to feminist theorist Karen Barad, “. . . matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming-not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency” (*Material Feminism* 139). Her concept on materialism finds parallels with quantum physics, philosophy, feminist theories, environmental theories and cultural studies. Materiality of human body and nature opens up the possible space for feminist theories. Analysing text under this context helps us for a close reading of social reality. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman find that,

. . . material feminism seeks a thorough redefinition and transvaluation of nature. Nature, as understood by material feminism, is rarely a blank, silent resource for the exploits of culture. . . Instead, it is an active, signifying force; an agent in its own terms; a realm of multiple, inter- and intra-active cultures. This sort of nature-a nature that is, expressly, not the mirror image of culture-is emerging from the overlapping fields of material feminism, environmental feminism, environmental philosophy, and green cultural studies. (*Material Feminism* 12)

Material feminism is greatly obliged to the concepts generated by the quantum physicist and feminist theorist, Karen Barad, her theory of agential realism has been pivotal to the new materialist and post humanist theories of material agency.

Material world consists of agents in both human and non-human forms. The anthropocentric degradation of the environment whether deliberate exploitation or unintended consequences of the scientific advancement, human agents remain the central figure responsible. Humans survive in this planet with the constant process of ‘intra-action’. According to Barad, both physical matter and social situation are co-working yet independent phenomena. She studies how distinctions are cultivated through the intra-action of these agencies. Humancentric ethos has become a normal part of their social

reality. Such a culture and their attitude towards nature cannot be seen as separate entities. Because both these aspects play an intermingling agentic role in its ongoing existence.

*Surfacing* highlights the agentic role between human and non-human world. The novel portrays the story an unnamed Canadian woman who returns to her remote childhood home in Quebec with her boyfriend Joe accompanied by another married couple Anna and David in search of her missing father. When the unnamed heroine returns to the Quebec wilderness, she is surprised to see the pristine Canadian space depleted with aggressive American ecological imperialism. She navigates through Quebec where human practices are often bound up with materiality which is seen as a normal part of scientific advancement. The setting of the novel Canada has its own fair share of conflicts due to American invasion. Agents like water, trees, and other inhabitants of the environment produce its effects on the human, and the protagonist of *Surfacing* is concerned about that. Through her Atwood narrates multiple types of devastation and the possible dangers of people's lives initiated through corporate globalism. Building of dams and bridges across lakes, cutting of trees are all a part of globalisation. The nameless narrator used to live in an unnatural concrete construct. For her city life symbolises nothing less than rigorousness and restriction. She discarded city life to live in familiar scenic space close to nature. She recalls the city as a "pervasive menace". Natural spaces have lost its familiarity because of globalisation. Humans impose networks of exchanges across living and non-living matter, therefore implementing the influence on so-called passive objects on the ecosystem and end up resulting in the vulnerability of both. Americans invaded into this passive Canadian space where they spread new culture, greed, violence and exploited the landscape. The narrator was devastated to see the comfort space littered and polluted. Globalisation paved way for the Americans to cross the border. The Americans, "They exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (*Surfacing* 247). They encroached the land with new diseases, avarice and assault. She says as she ". . . go in through the neck-high grass mixed with wild raspberry canes . . . past the burn heap and compost heap. I should have unearthed the garbage, to see how recent it is; there's a pit also, where the burned tin cans are smashed flat and buried . . . . My father viewed as an archaeological problem" (*Surfacing* 55). These changes in the environment brought changes on the native inhabitants. Humans should consider non-human agents not as objects for which we are masters but as co-existing agents sustaining in an ecological network. The colonial practices laid the groundwork for the exploitation of the environment. The joined outcome of colonialism and patriarchy, cultural homogenisation and territorial expansion left the people with a continuous sensation of displacement and disconnectedness. Ultimately the narrator ended up as a representative of the geographical alienation experienced by the Canadian community.

Canada is one of the many countries where such kind of agentic processes are taking place. Most of the processes ends up resulting with a negative impact. The introduction of modern advancements to enhance efficiency and productivity is laudable from a developmental perspective but it brings alongside a whole lot of negative effects. Humans will have to endure the conflict that arise as a result of globalisation and resource extraction. “Developed” nations have a tendency to utilise other nations as a ‘waste world’ which means a disposable geography. That means all the other under developed nations are a waste world for them. They use the power structure to take the advantage of resources from other nations as part of their consumer culture and later discarded when the utility is over. But what they are actually forgetting is, they are creating a waste world for themselves. America treats Canada as a huge inventory of pure materials which can be liquidated. When the resources are depleted, the developed nation moves to a new domain leaving behind the people of the earlier arena to inhabit the waste of the previous invasion. We have witnessed this in *Surfacing*. The powerful manipulate the culture and belief systems where the individual and communal identities and values are anchored deeply. Globalisation is one such ongoing force that determines the cultural realities of all communities around the world. It brings a massive hegemonic change which affects in complete magnitude at all walks of life. Globalisation is an intra-active agency of neocolonialism. It continues to subjugate its inhabitants that broadly include human beings and nonhumans alike which ultimately impacts the growth of a country. It explicitly impacts the economic system and implicitly the value system. The novel *Surfacing* illustrates the varying and ongoing magnitude of this aspect. The novel presents how the female character is successful in articulating her ethnic identity as a strategy of resisting the change. The nameless protagonist is connecting her local struggle to the global either by defending traditional farming or by opposing pollution, land filling and colonisation. She carries all the scars of disappointment and moral rot of this painful process.

As stated earlier, matter and discourse are not individual autonomous entities but it is an intra-active phenomena, where the agency has the power to influence the other. Agency is always under a constant flux of change. As a result, agency can influence both human and nonhuman natures in different ways. What these intra-active phenomena signal is, how urbanisation and anthropocentrism can bring a long-term change in the cultural and social practices. Matter is a continuing process of embodiment where human and the non-human agencies, nature and culture, body and identity all are bound together in a web of connectivity and flux. We cannot juxtapose these binary divisions right away. Because the world is caught in the midst of complicated environmental issues like pollution, global warming, flood, draught, depletion of eco system, contamination of water bodies, zoonotic diseases and so on. Changes are ongoing in terms of social constructions, practices and attitudes. Such changes should enable us to view the matter through one another. It must also reduce the anthropocentric values and destructive practices of humans. On that sense matter is an active

participant in the world's existence. Barad does not support the separateness of matter. For her everything is connected to everything else. It is the spatial, ontological and epistemological differences that separates humans. At the same time, we should also understand that matter means difference. More accurately, it is the evolving difference that can bring about change.

Material feminist theorist Rosemary Hennessey explains that, “a rigorous materialist theory of the body cannot stop with the assertion that the body is always discursively constructed. It also needs to explain how the discursive construction of the body is related to nondiscursive practices in “ways that vary widely from one social formation to another” (*Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* 46). The power in its fullness of materiality assigns identity on the bodies of less powerful. One form of assigning such identity is through language where body becomes a metaphor/ matter of negative practice. Such practice plays an agentic role in making it a social reality.

The character David from the novel establishes his ontological status as a ruler of biotic sphere which includes non-living matter. Moving outside realm of anthropocentric supremacy enables one to develop a wider view about their natural space. It also helps to develop a holistic respect to the differences of human and non-human world. But a person like David is unwilling to shed his supremacy which causes wound in female characters' psyche. He views women in general—as props for his patriarchal pleasure which causes emotional and psychological pain in the female characters. Any one who upholds anthropocentric views, is that matter who, recognises himself/herself as the very eminence of dominance, knows only to treats others as inferior. Hence, the ‘other’ agent survives without any identity.

Matter whether living or non-living is not passive in Barad's agentic world. But it is a means of generative becoming. In this sense matter has to be understood as something with its own semiotic dynamics and it is also an essential part of environment's semiotic and cultural evolution. Atwood gives the readers the images of human and non-human evolution through her novels. For instance,

I head for the garden and prowl through it. . . . I eat the green peas out of their shells and the raw yellow beans, I scrape the carrots from the earth with my fingers, I will wash them in the lake first. There is one late strawberry, I find it among the matted weeds and suckers. Red foods, heart colour, they are the best kind, they are sacred. (*Surfacing* 42)

These descriptions of material natural space are useful in bringing out the parallels between the human and the non-human world. The change of primary matter into varied forms of life, the arrival and survival of living beings and ecosystems, their diversity surplus environmental conditions are all proof of the life- sustaining, surviving creative potential of nature. Despite of all the variations matter and discourse emphasise mutual connection and interdependence on all domains. Despite all

differences, the very thought of existing in a co-constituted and interconnected human and non-human world are the basic notion of ecological consciousness. It is not the end of human centred approach but it is a conscious ongoing dynamism to develop care and space for all organisms.

The nameless heroine of *Surfacing*, portrays anti-American sentiment. Their invasion with an intention of consumerism and industrialisation disrupted Canadian environment and identity. She says, “They can’t be trusted . . . if they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me or bludgeon in my skull and hang me up by the feet from a tree” (*Surfacing* 238-9). She is in fact predicting her fate like that of senseless killing of a heron. It was hung upside down by a thin rope looped over a tree branch by the Americans. She is openly acknowledging her hatred against them especially the “change” brought in by them. Because, “. . . they don’t want you to have anything they don’t have themselves” (241). She adds, “My country, sold or drowned, a reservoir; the people were sold along with the land and the animals, a bargain, sale, *solde*” (169). They are the manipulators who wants to change the Canadian psyche and make it impermanent. They invade into any place like a virus and create destruction. Therefore, everything became very transient for her, very unpredictable. She takes seriously David’s fear for the Americans. David says that when they have nothing else to sell from the Canada, they will reduce them to less than an album photograph. It only takes a brink of an eye for them to convert the Canadians to a disintegrating matter. Parallel displacement takes place on nature too in the form of uprooting the trees, killing of animals, construction of dams and bridges.

As we move further into the novel, we seem to realise that the protagonist is not only searching for her lost father. She is also searching for her lost self from the past. She used to live in a busy space with the pain of guilt over an abortion. Her mental pain developed out of the anguish from aborting her child and lack of love. She also sees herself as a living victim of modern civilisation controlled by American consumerism. But as the novel progresses, she gains courage to come out of the victimisation. This victimisation took place because the protagonist allowed herself to remain in a patriarchal space. The dehumanising attitude of the people surrounding her, put her into a restricting space which she thought of as normal. But she found liberation from this self-imposed misconception when she found harmony with the nature space around her.

Every space in the world has its own purpose and every aspect of nature has something to contribute to the living world. When humans invade into this ‘natural space’ to manipulate its usual purpose, then nature will react. Such reactions have far reaching environmental consequences which may affect the entire biosphere. Which is exactly like the invasion experienced by the protagonist. After the initial numbness and passive compliance, she takes control of her own self. She refuses to be the same submissive woman that she was in the past. She learns to survive with her internal strength without becoming a victim.

What makes the man to invade into the sacred space of nature? It is his belief that he is the unifying force behind everything in nature. Man is only one among the many living creatures in this world. But he thinks of himself as the fulcrum from where he can control the entire world. This belief forms the focal point of anthropocentrism. It makes them think that he is the best of all creations. All other creations become ‘other’ in his eyes. So, nature for him is something to be possessed to implement reification and to manipulate. The problem faced by women is even worse. “She is a projection of another’s desire, who then haunts man as his always elusive, seductive, unreliable Other”, says Donna J. Haraway (*Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms* 176).

The intricate bonding of the protagonist from this creative narration and her pro-environmentalist reverence form a “. . . complex network of material and mental- cultural relations. . . .” (*Material Ecocriticism* 55). Post structuralist critic Elizabeth Grosz says that life itself is a complex network of agents. It doesn’t have fixed pattern of development rather unforeseen, random aimless changes may or may not constitute the formation of relations in life. For her, one must go further than finding faults in the nature/culture binary division. In nature/culture dualism, men treat nature as a property for them to exploit and exert their power. Material feminists’ argument is that, we need to come up with new ways of reconceptualising nature and culture rather than role reversal. If this reconceptualisation takes place, nature will no longer be a plundering space for industries and social development. Barad argues that nature and culture are mutually constitutive and entangled agents. Culture is nature because culture is the process of creating agential divisions like knowledge, change, growth and complexities reflected in nature. Nature is a continuous becoming which has the power to act, resist and reorganise reality along with humans. Nature is also culture because all the inventions and interventions implemented by humans on nature characterise life itself. Nature/culture binary division is a western construct established by men to identify women with nature. Feminists reject this concept because men always identify nature as a passive matter, which opens before them the possibility of establishing patriarchal concept. Humans are not just some materials set over and against matter for humans, culture is matter with complex structural organisations that it constitutes culture. In this novel we can see how the nature friendly culture gets replaced by disruptive consumer culture. We have seen characters exploit their own dwelling place. They cheat the women they marry and the children they beget. For these characters nature is no longer means of existence but money. Despite of the cultural and national differences, their attitude towards urbanisation and materiality remains the same. It is the materiality of culture that makes Canada a utility for American consumption. *Surfacing* serves as a powerful reminder of how American capitalist culture and industrial technology homogenize Canadian wilderness, in the form of environmental destruction, trade and consumption of animals and so on. Therefore, we need a universal code of conduct to acknowledge agencies urgently.

Urbanisation quickly replaced the status of nature from an organic space into a materialist world that demands unethical consumption. Nature gradually became an industrial space/ landscape constantly controlled and manipulated for economic requirements. This kind of controlling culture brought in change and promoted the growth of power over nature as well as on the less powerful such as passive females. Finding an equivalent status between the nature and the women have reduced the status of women as a passive being and her inferiority is seen as ‘natural’ by men. The association of women with nature itself was identified as the core concept of misogyny. Simone De Beauvoir advocates that women are a part of the unconquered nature. She incarnates nature. The social marginality that she faces under the term femininity is something that should be condemned. Unfortunately, this marginality is borne by them along with nature. Karen Barad suggests that the ‘margin’ is an agential boundary that eliminates a specific gender from experiencing equality and agency. On the other hand, man develops an identity of himself as a primary agent and an active subject of nature. The fact that all living beings are intra-actively connected agents of nature is purposefully ignored. By doing this the power structure is denying space for a passive gender and nature as long as it is a site of passivity. Therefore, in the social construction man successfully implement his misogyny and they are successful till now to maintain this intact. A well-constructed society always believe in the erasure of difference, sustaining ecological balance and they condemn the struggle between themselves for religion, money or other equal rights.

Human beings are a blank slate where social labels in terms of colour, nationality, gender and religion are added. There are poor and rich, healthy and disabled, young and old, fat and lean, queer and heterosexual communities. They all need the equal acceptance regardless of their identity. Involving oneself in the protection of bio and cultural diversity is a learning process of restoration. It simply means that all living beings whether they are abled or disabled have the same right to live in this planet by keeping aside the false ideology behind monoculture. A fundamental understanding behind this study is that a performative material- discursive practices with whom we share the earth can create a sustainable planet. Matter is an active porous agential force that participates in the becoming of everything.

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