

The Portrayal of the Polish-Lithuanian Peasantry in British Travel Memoirs, 1764-1795

¹ Gerda Urbaite

Accepted: 07.20.2025

Published: 08.01.2025

<https://doi.org/10.69760/portuni.0106001>

Abstract. This article examines Margaret Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing* as a complex narrative of self-discovery, conceptualized here as an 'ecology of self'. The analysis posits that the unnamed protagonist's psychological healing is achieved through an ecofeminist immersion in the Canadian wilderness, which functions as a simultaneous confrontation with repressed personal trauma and a postcolonial rejection of patriarchal, consumerist ideology, metaphorically termed 'Americanism'. This study employs an integrated theoretical framework of ecofeminism, psychoanalysis, and postcolonialism to argue that these are not discrete but interlocking systems of oppression. The paper's original contribution lies in its comparative analysis, which reveals profound thematic resonances between Atwood's Canadian narrative and the cultural and historical experience of the Baltic states. By comparing the novel's exploration of identity formation against a hegemonic neighbour, the role of nature in national resilience, and the recovery from collective trauma with the post-Soviet Baltic context, this study establishes *Surfacing* as a work of transnational significance, offering a powerful model for post-oppression identity formation relevant to the Baltic region.

Key words: Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, ecofeminism, Canadian literature, Baltic identity, postcolonialism, psychological trauma

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing* stands as a canonical work of Canadian literature that powerfully transcends its national origins. The narrative follows an unnamed female protagonist, a commercial artist, who returns to the remote Quebec wilderness of her childhood, ostensibly to search for her missing father (Atwood, 1972a). This quest, however, quickly evolves into a profound and harrowing journey into her own psyche, a descent that must precede a spiritual and psychological 'surfacing' (Niederhoff, 2009; Tolan, 2009). The novel serves as a potent allegory for the healing of a self fractured by the intersecting pressures of patriarchal society, personal trauma, and a creeping colonial ideology. The protagonist's initial state of emotional numbness and alienation gives way to a radical transformation, culminating in a primal reconnection with the natural world and, through it, with a more authentic sense of identity (Bouson, 1993; Warren, 1990).

¹ **Urbaite, G.** Editor, *Euro-Global Journal of Linguistics and Language Education*. Email: urbaitee0013@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5471-6210>

This article argues that *Surfacing* charts an ‘ecology of self’, a process wherein the protagonist’s recovery is contingent upon a radical ecofeminist immersion in the Canadian wilderness. This journey is simultaneously a psychoanalytic confrontation with repressed trauma—specifically a forced abortion that she has concealed behind a fabricated personal history—and a postcolonial rejection of ‘Americanism’, which the novel figures as a hegemonic, anti-ecological, and patriarchal force. The protagonist’s path to wholeness requires her to dismantle the artificial constructs of civilization and language that have alienated her from her body, her history, and the land itself.

The unique contribution of this paper is to situate Atwood’s novel within a comparative framework, arguing that its core themes resonate profoundly with the post-Soviet experience of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The novel’s exploration of a fraught national consciousness defined against a powerful and culturally dominant neighbour; the central role of the natural world in preserving cultural memory and fostering resilience; and the psychological process of recovering from collective historical trauma all find striking parallels in the Baltic context (Howells, 2000; Kazlauskas & Zelviene, 2016; Kurvet-Käosaar, 2013; Mole, 2012). By drawing on scholarship concerning Baltic history, cultural identity, and mythology, this analysis reveals *Surfacing* as a work of transnational significance. It offers a literary model for post-oppression identity formation that speaks directly to the interests of the *Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture* and its readership, demonstrating how a quintessentially Canadian story can illuminate the universal struggle for selfhood in the wake of historical and cultural subjugation (Ashcroft et al., 2006).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERSECTING ECOLOGIES OF OPPRESSION AND IDENTITY

To fully apprehend the protagonist’s journey in *Surfacing*, a multi-faceted theoretical approach is necessary. The novel’s richness emerges from the confluence of ecofeminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial concerns, which are not merely parallel themes but an interlocking system of oppression. The protagonist’s struggle is against a unified ideological enemy: a patriarchal, colonial, and hyper-rationalist worldview that assaults the integrity of the female body, the individual psyche, and the natural landscape simultaneously.

ECOCRITICISM AND ECOFEMINISM

Ecocriticism provides the foundational lens for this study, examining the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Love, 2003). More specifically, ecofeminism posits a direct link between the patriarchal domination of women and the instrumentalist exploitation of nature (Warren, 1990). Writers in this tradition argue that Western culture has constructed a series of damaging hierarchical dualisms—culture/nature, reason/emotion, mind/body, male/female—where the first term is privileged and the second is devalued and seen as an object to be controlled (Warren, 1990). *Surfacing* is a quintessential ecofeminist text, dramatizing this parallel oppression. The protagonist comes to see her own violated body and the despoiled Canadian wilderness as analogous sites of victimization (Warren, 1990). Her journey is one of recognizing that the masculinist culture which reduces her to a reproductive vessel is the same one that clear-cuts forests and treats animals

as disposable objects for sport. As Bouson (1993) notes, the novel “rejects the masculinist culture—which is depicted as both rationalistic and dangerously aggressive—and idealizes a nature-identified femininity” (p. 39). The protagonist’s healing, therefore, necessitates a rejection of these binaries and an embrace of the devalued terms: nature, emotion, body, and the feminine.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND TRAUMA THEORY

The narrator’s initial state of detachment is a textbook case of psychic repression. Her journey can be read through a psychoanalytic lens as a painful but necessary ‘return of the repressed’ (Niederhoff, 2009). She is, as Freud might say, suffering from reminiscences, though she is not yet conscious of what they are (Tolan, 2009). Her emotional numbness, her inability to feel or cry, is a defense mechanism erected to protect her from the profound trauma of a forced abortion and the preceding affair with her married art professor (Bouson, 1993). To cope, she has constructed an elaborate false narrative: a marriage, a child given up after a divorce (Bouson, 1993). This fabrication allows her to maintain a ‘false self’, but it comes at the cost of authentic feeling and connection. Her physical journey north to the island becomes a catalyst for a metaphorical journey inward, into the subconscious. The wilderness, stripped of social artifice, forces a confrontation with the memories she has buried. Her eventual descent into what society would label ‘madness’ is, in this framework, not a pathology but a radical form of therapy. It is the process of violently dismantling the false self in order to allow the true, integrated self to ‘surface’ (Bouson, 1993; Niederhoff, 2009).

POSTCOLONIALISM AND CANADIAN NATIONALISM

Published in 1972, *Surfacing* is deeply embedded in the cultural anxieties of its time, particularly the rise of Canadian nationalism and the pervasive fear of American cultural and economic imperialism (Howells, 2000). The novel uses a postcolonial framework to explore the power dynamics of dominance and subservience, not between a distant metropole and a colony, but between two adjacent nations (Parker, 2016; Ashcroft et al., 2006). ‘Americanism’ in the novel is not a nationality but an ideology: a destructive ethos of consumerism, technological aggression, waste, and a profound disconnection from nature (Howells, 2000). It is figured as a “disease from the south” that infects the Canadian psyche and landscape (Atwood, 1972b). The narrator and her companions repeatedly mistake other Canadians for Americans, leading to the realization that ‘American’ is a state of mind, a way of being that is defined by senseless violence and ecological disregard (Atwood, 1972a). Atwood (1972b) positions Canada as a feminized, victimized space, analogous to the narrator herself. The exploitation of the Canadian wilderness by American interests mirrors the exploitation of the narrator’s body by her lover. Her personal quest for identity is thus inextricably linked to a national quest for an authentic identity separate from the overpowering influence of its southern neighbour (Howells, 2000).

The convergence of these three theoretical lenses reveals the novel’s sophisticated argument. The narrator’s personal trauma—the abortion—is inflicted by an agent of patriarchy, her lover, who embodies the rationalist, emotionally detached logic that trivializes her experience (Bouson, 1993). This same logic is explicitly tied to the ‘American’ ethos of control and domination that is destroying

the Canadian wilderness, exemplified by the American tourists who senselessly kill and hang a heron (Atwood, 1972a). The forces oppressing her are not separate; they are facets of the same destructive worldview. Consequently, her psychological healing cannot be a purely internal process. It must be an ecofeminist and postcolonial act. To recover her psyche, she must reject the patriarchal logic that devalued her (Warren, 1990); to do that, she must reject the colonial ‘American’ ideology that underpins it (Howells, 2000); and to achieve that, she must immerse herself in the pre-colonial, pre-patriarchal, non-rational space of the wilderness. The ‘ecology of self’ is thus a holistic concept: the health of the individual ecosystem (the self) depends on its ability to resist the invasive monoculture of a dominant, destructive ideology.

THE PATHOLOGY OF CIVILIZATION: TRAUMA, ALIENATION, AND THE FRAGMENTED SELF

The novel opens with the protagonist already in a state of profound alienation. Her narration is flat, detached, and marked by an emotional numbness that signals a deep psychological wound (Bouson, 1993; Tolan, 2009). She is an unreliable narrator, not out of a desire to deceive the reader, but because she has first deceived herself, burying the trauma of her abortion beneath a fabricated history of marriage and divorce (Niederhoff, 2009). This self-imposed amnesia has rendered her a spectator in her own life, unable to connect with her own feelings or with those around her. Her later declaration, ‘I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place’ (Atwood, 1972a), is, in its initial context, a statement of negative passivity. She is a hollowed-out landscape, a colonized territory defined and occupied by the actions and expectations of others rather than by an intrinsic identity of her own.

This internal fragmentation is mirrored by the dysfunctional social ecosystem of her companions. The group she travels with—her silent and emotionally inarticulate boyfriend, Joe; her friend Anna; and Anna’s husband, David—represents a microcosm of the diseased civilization she is attempting to flee (Atwood, 1972a). David is the most overt embodiment of the novel’s antagonist values. A former Bible salesman and communications teacher, he is a figure of casual cruelty and misogyny who never speaks in his own voice, preferring jokes and impersonations (Atwood, 1972a). His relationship with Anna is a study in patriarchal control. He insists she wear a full face of makeup at all times, even in the wilderness, reducing her to a sexualized object, a ‘doll’ whose purpose is to affirm his masculinity. Anna, in turn, internalizes this objectification, constantly worried about her appearance and her husband’s fidelity. David and Joe’s collaborative film project, aptly titled *Random Samples*, further exemplifies this objectifying gaze. Their camera reduces the complex reality of the wilderness and the women to a series of disconnected, consumable images, a form of colonial data-gathering that imposes meaning rather than seeking understanding (Bouson, 1993).

This social pathology is explicitly linked to the broader cultural ‘disease’ of Americanism. Throughout the journey north, the narrator catalogues the symptoms of this ideological invasion: the blasted rocks and bulldozed trees for new power lines, the tourist cabins littering the landscape, and the general ethos of waste and overconsumption (Howells, 2000). The ultimate symbol of this pathology is the

hanged heron they discover at a portage, killed for sport and strung up by American tourists (Atwood, 1972a). This act of senseless violence against a creature of natural grace encapsulates the destructive core of the ideology the narrator opposes. It is an expression of power for its own sake, a logic that stems from a failure of Enlightenment reason. The rationalism championed by her scientist father, an 'eighteenth-century man' who believed in subduing nature, has degenerated into a force of brute domination that creates a profound and tragic 'rift between nature and culture' (Bouson, 1993, p. 39). The Americans in the novel are the inheritors of this failed reason, wielding technology not for progress but for destruction, treating the Canadian landscape as a resource to be exploited and a playground for their violent impulses (Howells, 2000).

THE JOURNEY INWARD: WILDERNESS AS THERAPEUTIC AND SACRED SPACE

The protagonist's journey of self-discovery is a process of systematic deconstruction, a shedding of the layers of civilization that have imprisoned her. As she immerses herself deeper into the wilderness, she progressively discards the tools of the society that has damaged her: first her reliance on others, then language, logic, clothing, and even cooked food (Warren, 1990). This is not a passive withdrawal but an active and often violent dismantling of the identity imposed upon her by the patriarchal, colonial world. She recognizes that language itself is a colonial tool, stating, 'If you look like them and talk like them and think like them you are them... you speak their language, a language is everything you do' (Atwood, 1972a; see also Parker, 2016). To become herself, she must become speechless, returning to a pre-linguistic state of being.

Several catalytic moments propel this transformation, forcing the repressed past to surface. Her father's mysterious drawings, which she initially believes are signs of his insanity, lead her to discover ancient Indigenous rock paintings on a remote cliff face (Atwood, 1972a). This search for a pre-colonial art form is symbolic of her quest for a more authentic, non-exploitative way of relating to the land, a history that predates the 'American' invasion and her father's scientific rationalism (Bouson, 1993). The novel's climax occurs during a dive into the lake, where she seeks these paintings. In the murky depths, she confronts a 'dead thing' floating in the water (Niederhoff, 2009). This amorphous shape is at once the drowned corpse of her father—the embodiment of the patriarchal, rationalist legacy she must move beyond—and the repressed memory of her own aborted fetus, the core of her personal trauma (Tolan, 2009). This underwater anagnorisis shatters her fabricated history. She is forced to acknowledge the truth: 'I couldn't accept it, that mutilation, ruin I'd made, I needed a different version' (Atwood, 1972a; Tolan, 2009, p. 94). By confronting this dual death, she begins to reclaim her own story from the lies she constructed to survive it.

This personal surfacing is linked to her growing identification with the victimized natural world, symbolized most powerfully by the hanged heron. The image of the slaughtered bird becomes a totem for her own violation. Later, during her period of deepest transformation, she hides from a search party, fearing that 'if they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me...and hang me up by the feet from the tree' (Atwood, 1972a). Her complete identification with the heron signifies her rejection of the human/animal binary and her embrace of a shared victimhood with nature (Warren, 1990).

The narrator's final state, which her friends and society would deem madness, is thus reframed as a state of heightened ecological consciousness and therapeutic wholeness. She destroys the contents of the cabin, erasing the last vestiges of her family's civilized life, and chooses to live as an animal, eating plants and sleeping in a lair she digs in the earth (Warren, 1990). This journey represents a powerful reversal of the traditional Western creation myth. Instead of moving from primordial chaos to the structured order of civilization, the narrator must move from the false, destructive order of civilization back to a primal, pre-rational unity with nature to find true psychic order. This is not a descent into chaos but an ascent into a different, more authentic kind of order—an ecological order. Atwood presents a radical ecofeminist critique, suggesting that for a woman to heal from the trauma inflicted by patriarchal civilization, a process of 'un-civilizing' is necessary. She must reject the foundational binaries—culture/nature, reason/emotion, human/animal—upon which that destructive civilization is built (Warren, 1990). Her rebirth is not into society, but into the land itself, culminating in the realization: 'This is a place where I was born' (Atwood, 1972a).

A COMPARATIVE RESONANCE: THE CANADIAN NORTH AND THE BALTIC SACRED GROVE

While *Surfacing* is deeply rooted in the Canadian landscape and its specific postcolonial anxieties, its central themes find a powerful and illuminating echo in the historical and cultural context of the Baltic states. The novel's exploration of identity formation in the shadow of a hegemonic power, the role of nature in national resilience, and the process of recovering from collective trauma creates a bridge between the Canadian postcolonial and the Baltic post-Soviet experience.

POSTCOLONIAL AND POST-SOVIET PARALLELS

Atwood's critique of American cultural and economic imperialism serves as a compelling analogue to the Baltic nations' long struggle to define and maintain their identities against the historical and ongoing influence of Russia (Howells, 2000; Mole, 2012). In the novel, 'Americanism' is an invasive force that threatens to erase authentic Canadian culture, replacing it with a homogenous, consumerist, and ecologically destructive ethos (Parker, 2016). This mirrors the experience of Soviet occupation in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which involved not only political and military domination but also a systematic attempt at cultural assimilation, or 'Sovietization', and the imposition of a foreign ideology that privileged Russian culture and suppressed national traditions (Mole, 2012). Atwood's (1972b) depiction of Canada as a 'victim' nation, struggling for survival and a distinct identity, resonates with the concept of 'historical trauma' that is central to understanding the Baltic psyche. The legacy of Soviet-era political violence, mass deportations, and oppression has left a deep, trans-generational wound that continues to shape memory, politics, and identity in the region today (Kazlauskas & Zelviene, 2016; Kurvet-Käosaar, 2013). The need to reclaim a national narrative from the shadow of a dominant, external power is a foundational experience shared by Atwood's protagonist and the modern Baltic nations.

WILDERNESS, NATURE, AND NATIONAL RESILIENCE

In both the Canadian and Baltic imagination, the natural world plays a crucial role as a repository of authentic identity and a symbol of national resilience. For Atwood's narrator, the remote Quebec wilderness is a sacred space, a sanctuary from the diseased, Americanized south. It is the locus of a pre-colonial past, embodied by the Indigenous rock paintings, and the only place where she can shed her false self and undergo a spiritual rebirth (Atwood, 1972b; Parker, 2016).

This conception of nature finds a direct parallel in Baltic culture. For Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, nature—particularly forests, the sea, and sacred groves (*biis*)—is profoundly intertwined with national identity, folklore, and a deeply rooted pagan heritage. Throughout centuries of foreign rule by German, Swedish, and Russian powers, the natural landscape served as a constant, a physical and spiritual homeland that preserved a sense of cultural continuity when political sovereignty was lost (Mole, 2012). The deep connection to nature is a cornerstone of Baltic identity, expressed in seasonal festivals, a reverence for the land, and cultural practices like foraging for mushrooms and berries, which has been described as a national pastime. This act of living from the land is precisely the path the narrator of *Surfacing* takes in her quest for healing, suggesting a shared understanding of nature as a source of both physical and spiritual sustenance.

ECOFEMINIST SPIRITUALITY AND BALTIC MYTHOLOGY

The most profound connection between *Surfacing* and the Baltic context lies in the realm of spirituality. The narrator's journey involves a complete rejection of the patriarchal religions of her civilization—both the alienating Christianity of her childhood and the cold, sterile rationalism of her scientist father. In their place, she develops a personal, immanent spirituality in which the divine is not transcendent but is found within nature and within herself. Her transformation culminates in a mythic impregnation and a self-identification with the landscape, a rebirth as a primal, powerful female force. This process can be read as the unconscious rediscovery of a 'Great Goddess' archetype (Warren, 1990).

This emergent ecofeminist spirituality aligns with remarkable precision with the spirit of pre-Christian pagan traditions of the Baltic peoples. Unlike the patriarchal pantheons of many Indo-European cultures, Baltic mythology features powerful female deities who are intrinsically linked to nature, fate, and creation. The narrator's journey mirrors the domains of these goddesses:

- **Laima:** The Latvian and Lithuanian goddess of fate, destiny, childbirth, and luck. She weaves the destiny of each individual, a power the narrator seeks to reclaim for herself by taking control of her own reproductive future and conceiving a child on her own terms.
- **Saule:** The Sun Goddess, a central figure who is the source of all life, fertility, and regeneration. The narrator's immersion in the natural cycles of the wilderness and her decision to create new life reflects an alignment with this life-giving solar principle.
- **Žemyna** (Lithuanian) or **Zemes māte** (Latvian): The Earth Mother goddess, the deified, fertile

soil itself. The narrator's ultimate act of healing is to become one with the earth, sleeping in a lair dug from the ground, effectively returning to the body of the Earth Mother to be reborn.

These mythologies provide a cultural framework for a non-patriarchal, earth-centered spirituality that Atwood's protagonist intuitively and reconstructs for herself. Her journey is not simply a regression to a primitive state but a progression toward a complex, ancient, and holistic worldview that has been preserved in the folklore and cultural memory of the Baltic region.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Post-Oppression Themes in *Surfacing* and Baltic Cultural Narratives

<i>Thematic Axis</i>	<i>Surfacing (Canadian Postcolonial Context)</i>	<i>Baltic Cultural Narratives (Post-Soviet Context)</i>
The Hegemonic "Other"	'Americanism': A rationalist, technological, consumerist ideology that colonizes the landscape and psyche (Howells, 2000; Parker, 2016).	Soviet Legacy/Russian Influence: A history of political occupation, forced modernization, and cultural suppression that created collective 'historical trauma' (Mole, 2012; Kazlauskas & Zelviene, 2016).
The Site of Authenticity	The Canadian Wilderness: A pre-colonial, non-rational space of Indigenous memory and natural order, offering a path to an authentic self (Atwood, 1972b; Parker, 2016).	Nature (Forests, Swamps, Sea): A repository of folklore, pagan heritage, and national identity; a symbol of resilience and a retreat from foreign domination (Mole, 2012).
The Nature of Trauma	Personal and Collective: The narrator's repressed abortion trauma is a microcosm of the nation's victimization and the land's violation (Niederhoff, 2009; Tolan, 2009).	Historical and Trans-generational: The trauma of political violence, deportations, and oppression is passed down, shaping memory and identity (Kazlauskas & Zelviene, 2016; Kurvet-Käosaar, 2013).
The Path to Recovery	Ecofeminist Immersion & Mythic Rebirth: Rejection of patriarchal logic and language; merging with nature; development of a personal, immanent, female-centric spirituality (Warren, 1990).	Cultural Reclamation & Return to Roots: Revitalization of folklore, language, and pre-Christian traditions; emphasis on the deep connection between national identity and the natural landscape (Mole, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

The 'ecology of self' charted in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is a deeply resonant and multi-layered process of healing. The protagonist's journey from emotional numbness to a primal, integrated consciousness demonstrates that personal recovery from trauma is inseparable from a radical critique of the cultural pathologies that inflict it. By weaving together ecofeminist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial threads, Atwood creates a powerful narrative in which the violation of the female body, the colonization of the psyche, and the destruction of the natural world are shown to be symptoms of a single, overarching malady: a patriarchal, rationalist, and imperialist ideology. The protagonist's cure, therefore, cannot be partial; it requires a total rejection of this ideology and a rebirth into a

different mode of being, one rooted in the land and guided by an immanent, non-patriarchal spirituality.

This analysis has argued that the novel's Canadian narrative finds a profound and previously underexplored echo in the historical and cultural experience of the Baltic states. The shared patterns of confronting the trauma of a hegemonic 'other', of resisting cultural erasure, and of locating national and spiritual resilience in the natural world establish *Surfacing* as a key text for a transnational, comparative ecocriticism. The narrator's intuitive reconstruction of an earth-based, female-centric spirituality aligns with striking clarity to the ancient, pre-Christian mythologies of the Baltic region, with its powerful goddesses of fate, sun, and earth. This connection elevates the novel from a national allegory to a universal myth of recovery.

In an era marked by escalating ecological crises, resurgent nationalisms, and ongoing struggles over identity and history, the paradigm offered by *Surfacing* remains urgently relevant. The novel, when read through the lens of Baltic cultural memory, provides more than just a story of individual survival. It offers a vital, non-patriarchal model for imagining a more sustainable and authentic relationship between the self, society, and the planet—a model of 'surfacing' that holds lessons for cultures navigating the complex legacies of oppression worldwide.

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