CHAPTER IV
Edible Woman and Surfacing: Cultural and Environmental Dysfunction

This chapter deals with cultural and environmental dysfunction that may be traced at different levels of the action in Atwood’s novels such as Edible Woman and Surfacing. The environment and the ethos of the modern Canadian society are seen starkly corrupting while there is a bombardment of artificiality and materialism seeping into the life of the characters that inhabit the social landscape. It is interesting to note that both these novels can also be read as novels of feminine protest against a society that is materialistic, consumerist and anti-woman. Both the protagonists in Edible Woman and Surfacing use their own peculiar methods of protest, which look bizarre to a regular inhabitant of society. However, this protest is what they need to spiritually cleanse and physically renounce the evils of society. The vision that Mahatma Gandhi had of a society was linked to the preservation of whatever was good in its culture and environment. Culture and environment are two cornerstones of a civilized society and degradation of these two interdependent aspects of society would lead to destabilization of the family, relationships and society.

Gandhi aimed at the attainment of a culture which transcended the confines of the world. While he believed in the superiority of the Indian culture, he did envisage a larger and an all-encompassing construct of culture which would enable the world to live in greater harmony than ever (Gandhi, India of My Dreams 182). He said that his culture forbade him to belittle or disregard other cultures. He also said that no culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive. Gandhi said that Indian culture “stands for a synthesis of the different cultures that have come to stay in India, that have influenced Indian life, and that in their turn, have themselves been influenced by the spirit of the soil”. Gandhi said that this synthesis of culture will be of a Swadeshi type, where each culture is assured its legitimate place, and not of the American pattern, where one dominant culture absorbs the rest, and where the aim is not “towards harmony, but towards an artificial and forced unity” (Gandhi, India of My Dreams 183).

Culture has variously been described as a tangible and an intangible reality by sociologists and social analysts. Everyone really knows what culture is but it is
difficult to define it as it brings under its ambit many aspects of life and civilization. In fact, everything that we see around us when we live in society forms part of the concept of culture. According to Raymond Williams “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language… because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct systems of thought” (Smith and Riley 1-3).

The concept of culture is viewed as an abstract system: “a system of symbols and meanings, a system of beliefs, a meaning-system, a “pattern-maintenance” system of value-orientations, a deep structure of codes, and so forth. By most accounts culture in its essence is a meaning-system that arbitrarily or conventionally provides the values and beliefs that orient a society” (Halton 109).

Eliot’s concept of tradition and his concept of culture is essentially the same. Culture according to him is a way of life which can be described simply ‘as that which makes life worth living’. Eliot wrote that culture includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people “Derby Day, Henley, Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wenslydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar. The reader can make his own list” (Titus 5). Eliot thus does not think that culture is confined to intellectual and aesthetic activities only but it includes all societies’ activities. Culture to him is a pattern of the society as a whole and it is not always conscious. Similarly, culture cannot be planned because it is ‘also the unconscious background of all our planning’. If we take a culture seriously, we see that a people does not need merely enough to eat but a proper and particular cuisine… Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living (Eliot 27).

Matthew Arnold described culture in a manner that made it an all encompassing reality. He included in it the ‘love of our neighbour, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for stopping human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing the sum of human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it’. Culture has its origin in the love of perfection and it is a study of perfection. It is propelled not merely by the force, of scientific curiosity for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good. The definition of culture is reverberated in the words of Montesquieu’: “To render an intelligent being yet more intelligent!” and in also in the motto of
Bishop Wilson: “To make reason and the will of God prevail” (Arnold). One of the most telling passages in *Culture and Anarchy* is a section in the very first chapter in which Arnold says that “culture is of a spirit like poetry, follows one law with poetry” and this statement confronts the inadequacy of certain middle class religious attitudes which insist that the persons and organizations concerned “can only be reached by the criticism which culture, like poetry, speaking a language not to be sophisticated, and resolutely testing these organizations by the ideal of a human perfection complete on all sides, applies to them.” (Thomas xxviii).

From an analysis of culture, the following characteristics maybe attributed to it:

1. **Culture tends to be different from material, technological, and social constructs** – While it is understood that there may be empirical and complex relations between them, it is also argued that culture has a distinct form, and is more abstract than a “way of life”.

2. **Culture is viewed as the sphere of the ideal, the spiritual and the non-material** - It is understood as a patterned sphere of beliefs, values, symbols, signs and dialogues.

3. **Culture is recognized as having powerful and complex relationship to practices and performances as well** - Much cultural study is engaged in exploring the influence of cultural codes, narratives, and discourses on the specific activities of groups and individuals.

4. **Emphasis is placed on the “autonomy of culture”** - This means that culture cannot be explained away as a mere reflection of underlying economic forces, distributions of power, or social structural needs.

5. **Efforts are made to remain value-neutral** - The study of culture is not restricted to the Arts, but rather is understood to cover all aspects and levels of social life. Ideas of cultural superiority and inferiority play almost no place in contemporary academic study (Riley and Smith, 2).

When social scientists use the term culture they tend to be talking of a less restrictive concept than that implied in everyday speech. In social science, culture is all that in human society which is socially rather than biologically transmitted, whereas the commonsense usage tends to point out only to the arts. “Culture is thus a general term for the symbolic and learned aspects of human society, although some animal behaviourists now assert that certain primates have at least the capacity for culture” (Marshall 137).
Culture is the mould into which the human being is cast. It can be any one of the thousands that exist in the world today, and whatever the mould is he will fit it and not any other. “Culture is the conditioning mechanism employed by a local group in the building of personality” (Landis 7). In a real sense it is culture which helps a human being to become emancipated from his “biological heritage” and helps him to rise above his limitations and supplement it by invented devices. Culture is really a human reality which makes human beings the master of their universe and which helps them rise above the biological limitations of other creatures (Landis 7).

It is important to know culture as it helps in self- understanding. One who understands culture will realize that most of one’s attitudes, activities, tastes and aspirations are derived from the unique cultural system of ancestors and family for every family is in a sense the product of a unique family culture.

The word for culture in Sanskrit is Sanskriti, "refinement," suggesting a means for extracting the spiritual essence of life (Brahman). "Sanskrit" similarly means "the most refined language." The similarity of the two words reflects the close relationship between (1) religious scholarship and (2) culture as a vehicle of spiritual expression (www.hinujagrati.org). ‘Both the words in Sanskrut, sanskar meaning impression and sanskruti meaning culture are derived from the root words sam and kru. Grammatically the two are synonymous. The use of the word sanskar however is confined only to matters pertaining to Righteousness. On the other hand the word sanskruti is also used to refer to the evolved state of life. The meaning of this word has become extremely comprehensive. Nature is comprised of man and the universe around him. Man continues his sojourn of life by making suitable changes in his environment, in other words by creating impressions on Nature conducive for his evolution. Man too is a part of this Nature. So besides external objects he also creates impressions upon his mind, body and intellect and thus changes himself. Both these impressions are included in the word sanskruti (culture). The life of man is fit to be called a life only when he is able to acquire victory over both the external and internal worlds. To make his living happy, prosperous and attractive, man fights both with himself and with society. Both these actions occur simultaneously to varying extents. An impression made by man on an uncut stone which he sculpts into a beautiful idol with the help of a chisel is an example of impressions made on an external object of Nature. Along with this chiselling on the idols which are being sculpted, impressions are also created in his mind in relation to sculpture. With such constant efforts he
becomes skilled in sculpture and seeing and worshipping such idols bestows him with satisfaction.

The impressions created on the mind due to those made on the stone are the spiritual aspects of culture. It is with such worldly efforts of man that Nature consisting of material objects and psychology is generated. This dual creation itself is sanskruti. Though worldly and spiritual adjectives are different yet sanskruti remains one and the same. Agriculture, animal husbandry, architecture, smithy with metals, designing machinery, weaving cloth and generating finance with the help of technology comprise sanskruti in the worldly sense (adhibhautik). Similarly experiencing pleasures from the external world, using nature as a means to fulfill one’s needs and aspirations in that direction depict sanskruti in the worldly sense. Righteousness (Dharma), ethics (niti), law, sciences, various performing arts, literature, dignity and protocol constitute the spiritual realm of sanskruti. Even the performing arts are a means of attaining self-realisation; only their media are external. The aspirations of man are fulfilled due to material progress. However only when this is supported by a foundation of spirituality does it acquire the status of sanskruti (culture). A cultured individual has to control his/her mind, intellect and five senses along with external prosperity. The process of achieving both these simultaneously is termed as sanskruti (Rao 26).

K Chandrasekharan, Tagore professor of Humanities says that it is difficult to define culture. From the dictionary meaning or the word culture or ‘sheel’ it can be understood that this word embraces many attributes which contribute to the perfection of man. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, for instance provides the derivation of culture from the act of cultivating the soil ‘cultura’ in Latin. It is contrasted with the word civilization which is opposed to barbarism which is generally taken as a foreign group’s life and behavior. Culture as stated in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy is not an achieved state of mind but the process of it. In modern usage it refers to a condition and thus can be studied under the following heads:

1. A general state or habit of the mind with close relation to the idea of perfection
2. A general state of intellectual and moral development in a society as a whole
3. As a general body of arts and intellectual work
4. As a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual of a given society

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The concept of a specific culture is the obvious way of expressing relations such as the strong connections between ways of ordinary social and material life and the styles and assumptions of imagination and intellectual work (Chandrasekharan 190-191).

Aurobindo propagated the development of culture. He said that culture belonged to a higher realm than ‘crude and partial conventionalized civilization of the vital type’ (Varma 133-154). Culture, he said signifies the pursuit of ‘mental life for its own sake’. The aim of a complete and integral culture is to raise the ‘internal man, the mind, the soul, the spirit “on the basis of the social, political and economic foundations of a vitalistic civilization”’ (Ibid). The growth of the spiritual age refers to a state even beyond mental and intellectual culture. A truly cultured and accomplished humanity is not satisfied with just the activities of the “sense-mind and the vital mind” but wants the development of the aesthetic, the volitional and the intellectual faculties of man.

S Radhakrishnan in his analysis of culture made a distinction between ‘East’ and ‘West’. He said that the West and Christianity is characterized by dogmatism and the scientific method is limited to exploration of the outer natural world and reliance upon second-hand knowledge. The East by contrast is dominated by openness to inner experience and spiritual experimentation (Partharsarthi 123). The West is rational and logical while the East is predominantly religious and mystical. Even though these characteristics are imagined, we could safely conclude that Radhakrishnan talks of culture in spiritual terms as compared to its materialistic ramifications.

Culture includes more than the idealized ways of knowledge, practice and belief. Culture also includes ‘artifacts, man-made physical objects such as tools, buildings, roads, means of transportation and the like’ (Green 85). An appropriate definition of culture could be taken as follows- “Culture is the socially transmitted system of idealized ways in knowledge, practice, and belief, along with the artifacts that knowledge and practice produce and maintain- as they change in time” (Green 85). Tylor also gives an inclusive definition of culture when he says “Culture is that complete whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and other capabilities acquired by a man as a member of society” (Carver 283).

Quite often culture and civilization are used as synonymous terms while at other times they are made out to be distinct from each other. “A culture becomes a civilization only when it possesses a written language, science, philosophy, a highly
specialized division of labour, and a complex technology and political system” (Green 89). Carver however holds the two as synonymous and says that “culture and civilization maybe defined as everything which the individual has to learn from his social surroundings” (281).

On the other hand Landis says that Culture is another word for civilization. There is a misconception when we link civilization with peoples who represent higher levels of cultural development. Landis is of the view that even primitive societies have a culture and they are often highly advanced in many tasks like handicrafts and wrought art (Landis 14).

Navigation through the complex definitions of the term culture is aided by the use of heuristic devices like Wendy Griswold’s Cultural Diamond. This figure attempts to lay out the four elements involved in the production and reception of any piece of culture (the cultural object itself, its creator/s, its receiver/s, and the social world/context in which it comes into existence and takes meaning). It is worthy to note that while the Cultural Diamond is useful in the study of material cultural objects, its utility in studying non-material culture is somewhat less clear. This goes to prove the complexity of the term (Riley 25).

In order that society continues with all its functions, it is essential that the culture of a people has to be maintained. It allows a sense of continuity to the institution of society and helps to follow the unsaid and the unwritten rules that keep a society in
tact. The loss of culture definitely brings in new values and beliefs but at the same time this change is often followed by numerous upheavals, a tussle between the old and the new. The mentality of every person "is a microcosm that reflects the cultural microcosm of his surroundings (Sorokin 606).

Any idea from a simple technique to abstract philosophies can be included within a culture. Socially relevant ideas can be classified into the four broad categories of beliefs, values, norms and technologies.

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<td>Values</td>
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<td>Racial discrimination is wrong and equal opportunities for all is right</td>
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<td>Norms</td>
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Four Principle Components of all Cultures (Olsen 59).

Gandhi said that he had always acknowledged his debt to ‘Western culture’ but whatever service he had been able to render to India has been due to the his retention of ‘Eastern culture’, to the best extent possible. He said the he would have been “thoroughly useless to the masses as an anglicized, denationalized being, knowing little of, caring less for and perhaps even despising their ways, habits, thoughts and aspirations” (Prabhu and Rao 432). Gandhi said that European civilization is suited for the Europeans, but it will be ruinous if India copies it. Gandhi associated western culture with materialism and a mad race for collecting objects which would be thrown away after they became old. Gandhi said that the never-ending desire for material comforts and their multiplication is a major evil. He also said that Europeans themselves will have to ‘remodel’ their perspective if they do not
wish to perish beneath the weight of all the comforts that are turning them into modern day slaves. He said that for India to run after the ‘Golden Fleece’ is to court certain death (Prabhu and Rao 432). He however desired to adopt what was desirable and good from Western culture and this included the maxim of “Plain living and High Thinking”. Gandhi said that that millions cannot have high living while few who profess to do the thinking for the masses run the risk in a useless search for higher living of missing high thinking.

Gandhi said that life is an inspiration. It is a mission to strive to strive after perfection, which is self-realization. The ideal must not be lowered because of our weaknesses and imperfections. “One who hooks his fortunes to ahimsa, the law of love, daily lessens the circle of destruction, and to that extent promotes life and love; he who swears by himsa, the law of hate, daily widen the circle of destruction, and to that extent promotes death and hate” (Gandhi, Sarvodaya 12). When non-violence is accepted as the law of life it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts. It is a profound error to suppose that whilst the law is good enough for individuals, it is not for masses of mankind (Ibid 9). Gandhi said that if we believe that mankind has steadily progressed towards Ahimsa it follows that progress towards it is still further. Nothing in the world is static. If there is no progression, then there is “inevitable retrogression” (Ibid 10).

Gandhi deplored the empty desire for wealth. He felt that under the name of riches the real effort was to gain ‘power over men’. In simple words “it was the power of obtaining for our own advantage the labour of servant, tradesman and artist. So that the art of becoming rich in the common sense is not only the art of accumulating much money for ourselves but also of contriving that our neighbours shall have less” (Gandhi, Sarvodaya-The Welfare of All 31). In other words, ‘it is the art of establishing the maximum inequality in our own favour’ (Ibid 31). Thus there really is no wealth but life. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who “having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal and by means of his possessions, over the life of others” (Ibid 32).

Another aspect of a human beings’ relationship with the world around him is the environment in which he lives. By environment here we mean the physical environment in which he lives. It is the environment which has an equal, if not a greater share in the development of an individual if weighed with biological factors.
The debate between nature and nurture is now trite and none will dispute the importance of them both.

The environment has been described as surroundings. “It is the sum total of external factors, substances and conditions, which influence organisms without becoming their intrinsic part. Owing to its being a complex of various components, environment is also referred to as environmental complex” (Sharma 9-11). Environment is usually divided into two parts, biotic and abiotic. Abiotic or physical components include climatic and edaphic factors. These include climatic factors like temperature, humidity, rain and snowfall etc. The edaphic factors comprise soil and substratum. Living organisms form the biotic components of the environment. The ability of organisms to utilize, tolerate or combat the various abiotic factors are different and may limit their distribution, behavior and relationship with other organisms.

The term environment is used in various ways in academic conversation. In psychology and biology, environment is frequently put together with heredity, in a thorough division of the causes that shape the character of living things. Since the 1980’s, the sociology of the environment has emerged as a clearly distinct discipline. Most books related to environmental sociology generally cover some or all of the following areas (Marshall 196).

1. The role of industrialism in environmental degradation
2. Origins of environmental movements
3. Influence of Green politics
4. Environmental implications of urbanization and globalization
5. Sustainable development
6. Democracy, human rights and the pursuit of progress

The Oxford Dictionary defines environment as “the surroundings in which a person, animal or plant lives or operates” (Hawker 229). The Reader’s Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder defines environment as:

1. Physical surroundings and conditions, affecting people’s lives
2. External conditions affecting the growth of plants and animals
3. Conditions or circumstances of living

The need for Sustainable Development comes into focus when we talk of the environment today. Sustainable Development is the development which primarily focuses on the basic needs of the people in a continuing and dynamic sense. It is
people-centric as it lays emphasis on creativity, human potential and inner satisfaction. World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) has referred to Sustainable Development as ‘the development that meets the need of the present generations without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs’ (Arora and Talwar 333).

Environmentalism as a social movement involves questioning modern assumptions that nature and its bounty are infinite. It has two main strands. One derives from growing environmental awareness in the West, initially inspired by the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring in 1962. The book was path breaking as it documented the disruptions in the earth’s ecosystems that was being caused by modern economic practices. It also emphasized “the shortcoming of Western rationalism insofar as it perceives nature as “external” to society.” This encourages the belief that nature is an infinitely ‘exploitable domain’ (Mc Michall 215).

Margaret’s Atwood’s Surfacing is a novel of discovery and rediscovery. It is a journey of a woman from nothingness to innate understanding of herself in relation to a materialistic and consumerist universe. She discovers that she has to ‘resurface’ from her human skin and be analogous to nature in order to fulfill her aspirations as a woman and as a speck in the natural order. In Surfacing, Atwood focuses on “the psychological dimensions of sexual politics which can lead a woman to the point of insanity. In this act of victimization of women by men, Atwood holds women guilty too in so far as they show a fatalistic acceptance of sexual colonialism thinking that they are powerless and can do absolutely nothing to save themselves against exploitation” (Kaur 17-18). Atwood said that Surfacing saw many changes in the turns and twists of its events from beginning to end. She was of the view that Surfacing saw many more movements in its events as compared to other of her novels.

She also says that women change from one kind of thing to something that is radically different (Ingersoll 231). In Surfacing we have the protagonist who changes from being city-bred, consumerist and synthetic to something that is more real and whole. She merges with her environment and becomes whole and realizes that the assumed position of a victim that she had been taking all along has to be rejected entirely in order to become whole. “This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone... withdrawing is
no longer possible and the alternative is death” (Atwood, Surfacing, 197). These lines of Surfacing are quite reminiscent of what Atwood wrote in Negotiating with the Dead. She said that all writing and especially of the narrative kind is motivated by a fear and fascination with morality- by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead. The protagonist literally has to travel to an unknown world, into the secrets of the Underworld in order to find out the truth about herself, her unborn child and her dead father (Atwood 156).

So here we see the cathartic effect that nature has on the psyche of the protagonist. Five days in the midst of nature has gifted her with a strength that can help her to go through the toughest of situations and take the most difficult decisions. She goes back to nature to find all the unanswered questions and she has to go back to the dead to find the living. She takes up Satyagraha in order to find the answers to all the questions. Surfacing like other Atwood’s works can be seen “not as unique or peculiar artistic creations (of Atwood), but as voicing the hitherto – suppressed truths of women’s and Canadian lives (Nischik 168). The protagonist in the novel derives her sustenance from her experiences out in the Canadian wilderness and displays her truth or soul force (satyagraha) in protesting against the consumeristic predatory Americanised Canadian modernity.

Gandhi advocated that since Satyagraha is one of the most powerful means of direct action, a Satyagrahi exhausts all other means before he resorts to Satyagraha. He will try every means and knock at every door in order to get what is his right in a civilized manner. Having explored all these avenues he will then use the most powerful weapon that he has which will ensure that his right will be secured. The word Satyagraha is more often than not loosely used and is made to cover all veiled violence. Gandhi was against this and said that “it was a breach of Satyagraha to wish ill to an opponent or to say a harsh word to him or of him with the intention of harming him. Satyagraha is gentle, it never wounds. It must not be the result of anger or malice. ....It is the direct opposite of compulsion. It was conceived as a complete substitute of violence” (Gandhi, India of My Dreams 83).

For Gandhi the corner stone of any human endeavour was the absence of violence. He said that there is no such thing as defeat and despair in the dictionary of a person who bases his life on the principles of truth and non-violence. These two are the ‘activist forces’ you have in the world. A man who wields sanguinary weapons and is intent upon destroying those, whom he considers his enemies, does at least
need some rest, and has to lay down his arms at some point of time. But this is not so for the person who uses the weapons of truth and non-violence as they are external weapons and they are actively working their way whether one is awake or asleep (Gandhi, *My Non-violence* 49). Passive resistance, he said was a misnomer for non-violent resistance. It is direct, ceaseless, but three-fourths invisible and only one-fourth visible. In its visibility it appears ineffective, e.g. the spinning wheel which Gandhi has called the symbol of non-violence. In its visibility it appears ineffective, but it is really intensively active and most effective in its ultimate results. Non-violence is an intensely active force when properly understood and used (Ibid 58).

The publication of the novel *Surfacing* in the early seventies prompted many critics to read *Surfacing* as a “treatise that reflects Atwood’s early critical work in urging the self-consciousness of Canadians and inciting them to acknowledge the heritage of victimhood that is distinctly their own” (Cooke 105). There has been a lot of debate on environmental issues all over the world. The environment has slowly started becoming sacred to all as it has begun to take revenge on us for the trespasses of the past. Global warming, carbon emissions, effluents, ozone and environmental friendly are terms which have become clichés in the backdrop of a frightfully ravaged environment.

In *Surfacing*, the destruction and denudation of the environment is closely related to two major issues which are:

1. American exploitation of Canada and its resources for commercial gains.
2. Decrepitude of moral fabric of individuals which is almost metaphorically mirrored in the corruption of the environment.

This degradation is seen in the opening of the novel when the protagonist talks in oblique ways of the rotting birches and the reason behind the rotting. She says, in the opening lines, “I can’t believe I’m on this 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 seaplanes for hire” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 3). A little later she says that “this is still near the city limits; we didn’t go through, it’s swelled enough to have a bypass, that’s success” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 3). There is an irony when she uses the word ‘success’ as here she refers to material success which is measured in terms of concrete and cement to make roads and bridges. While similar violations against nature may have been previously committed by the narrator, it is her recognition of such acts as violence that indicates her “opt (ing) for life and responsibility” for both
the destruction of individual life forms and the endangerment of the ecosystem as a whole (Kapuscinski 101).

Gandhi was against any form of industrialism which was exploitative. He said that he was afraid that industrialism was going to be a curse to mankind. Industrialism depends entirely upon one's capacity to exploit, on foreign markets being open to you. Gandhi was of the view that the future of industrialism was dark. He also said that machinery had its own place but it must not be allowed to take the place of human labour. He said that he was against not machinery per se but against the multiplication of machinery indiscriminately. He said that the mania for mass-production is responsible for the world crisis. Granting for the moment that machinery may supply all the needs of humanity, still it would concentrate production in particular areas, so that you would have to go about in a round about way to regulate distribution; whereas if there is production and distribution both in the respective areas where things are required, it is automatically regulated, and there is less chance for fraud, none for speculation (Gandhi, Sarvodaya- the Welfare of all 41). Gandhi said that what he objected to was “the craze for machinery”. He said that “the individual is the one supreme consideration. The saving of labour of the individual should be the object, and honest humanitarian considerations, and not greed, the motive. Replace greed by love and everything will come right” (Ibid 44). He further said that industrialism is going to be a curse to mankind. It (industrialism) depends on one's capacity to exploit and hence can never be good for the economy of a country.

In various works by Atwood including Surfacing it is frequently the violent woman who reminds us of the impermanence of national identity and who repeatedly “challenges myths of vulnerability and other narratives central to the Canadian imagery”. As both an ‘ex-centric’ and ‘centric’ Canadian figure the violent woman is reduced to the status of a social pariah even though her behavior is resonant of a larger trend of violence in Canadian society. Such women are relegated to the periphery. Emergent from this use of the brutalizing woman is not only the recognition of how tradition and cultural change are potentially connected but also an awareness of the violent woman’s suitability as national soothsayer (Ibid 101).

David’s comment about the Americans is only an echo of the general feeling of hatred that most Canadians in the novel have for the Americans. “Bloody fascist pig Yanks” (Surfacing 5) sort of sums up the general feeling of hate of America and all that is American. Even though both Joe, David and Anna are Canadians, forever
criticizing the Americans, it is quite ironical that they behave in exactly the same manner as do hungry, selfish Americans. While David wants to capture his wife Anna in the nude for his film ‘Random Samples’ (his wife being just another of the samples), Joe behaves like a prejudiced male who only wants sex and thinks that he is slighted by his girlfriend as he is not ‘successful’ in the conventional sense of the term. Anna on the other hand is a prototype of a synthetic, wooden headed, submissive female who only applies make up and is foolishly not willing to set herself free from David even when the female protagonist destroys the films which contain her nude pictures. She enjoys being victimized and she wants to only remain that way, constantly afraid that David will leave her for another woman.

David speaks disparagingly of Anna when he talks of her ass, “It turns me on when she bends over...She’s got a neat ass. I’m really into the whole ass thing. Joe, don’t you think she’s got a neat ass?” (Surfacing, 90). When her friend throws the film reels into the lake, Anna is unmoved and if at all she is only afraid (she does not feel liberated as she would have been expected to be). She throws the film from the camera onto the sand under the water, and the pictures swim like ‘tadpoles’- “Joe and David beside their defeated log, axmen, arms folded, Anna with no clothes on jumping off the end of the dock...hundreds of tiny naked Annas no longer bottled and shelved” (Surfacing, 170). This act has a highly symbolic meaning as it reveals a total release from time and space. Anna’s friend performed this act to free Anna from tonnes of make-up and sadistic sex-starved men but unfortunately the latter is unchanged and “the green eyes regard me (her) unaltered from the enamel face” (170). It is also interesting to note that it is nature that sweeps away the grime of the pornographic film which now literally floats as a ‘Random Sample’ along the lonely lake.

Marriage for ‘her’ (I will henceforward refer to the female character as her) is as worthless as the post card on which she announced it and denounced it after short intervals to her gullible parents. The idea of holding marriage profane has seeped into the psyche of the characters and it seems to have become a part of the culture of Canadian society. David and Anna hold marriage as a matter of convenience, the protagonist considered marriage once but her boyfriend said he could not marry as he was already married. Looking at it all it is only Paul and his wife and the protagonist’s father and mother who at least give a semblance of a happily married couple. In fact the protagonist pretends to be married when her marriage was already over. “My
status is a problem; they obviously think I’m married. But I’m safe; I’m wearing my ring, I never threw it out, its useful for landladies. I sent my parents a postcard after the wedding; they must have mentioned it to Paul; but not the divorce. It isn’t part of the vocabulary here, there’s no reason to upset them (Surfacing 19). It is evident that even the protagonist is mercenary in as far as she makes use of her wedding ring to gain access to benefits. Another fact to discern is the attitudinal shift of the generation with regard to marriage and divorce. The old timbers in their old fashioned log cabins eat out off the soil and live in near oblivion of the urban world. For them the very word ‘divorce’ is profane, while the new generation with their fancy jobs and shaky romances are willing to throw love out of the window when any trial makes a visit.

Gandhi held marriage as a sacred bond that was a bond of a lifetime. Marriage confirms the right of union between two partners to the exclusion of the others when in their joint opinion they consider such union to be desirable, but it confers no right upon one partner to demand obedience of the other to one’s wish for union. Gandhi believed in true loyalty to the partner and he believed in the sacredness of the duties the bond of marriage conferred on both the partners. However when one partner on moral or other grounds cannot conform to the wishes of the other it is a separate question. Personally Gandhi felt that if divorce was the only alternative, then he would not hesitate to accept it, “rather than interrupt my moral progress assuming that I want to restrain myself on purely moral grounds” (Gandhi, All Men are My Brothers 209). Gandhi was otherwise a strict votary of the principle that a husband and wife have to be a part of each other until death did them part or until something extremely untoward happened in their lives which made living together nearly impossible.

Similarly the attitude to pregnancy and the upbringing of children has very different takes with the newer generation. Pregnancy is a scare and children figure nowhere in the so called ‘romantic relationships’ list. In fact the protagonist’s whole transformation into a new individual is based on her pregnancy and the subsequent abortion. She is sorrowful at the thought that she was alone during her abortion, as if left to die a death before her real death came. “He wasn’t there with me, I couldn’t remember why; he should have been, since it was his idea, his fault. But he brought his car to collect me afterward; I didn’t have to take a taxi” (Surfacing 80). It is worth noticing how she blames him for the abortion and the whole idea of going through it. She even stresses the utilitarian aspect of the whole exercise when she says that he
brought the car to pick her up, as if he was doing her a favour by disallowing her to take public transport.

Gandhi held that men and women were equal in every respect but somehow man has dominated women from the past and women have developed an inferiority complex. He held that it a sacred duty for a woman to give birth and to bring up a child in the most befitting manner. The duty of motherhood which most women undertake requires qualities that are there only in women and not in men. She is the care-taker in every sense of the term. The art of bringing up children of the race is her special and sole prerogative. Without her care the race would definitely become extinct (Gandhi, All Men are my Brothers 205). Gandhi was against the morbid obsession about a woman’s chastity. He said that it was not a hot-house growth. It cannot be protected by the wall of the purdah. He felt it unjust that women’s chastity was questioned whereas men’s chastity was not a matter of discussion at all. He said that chastity was not something that could be imposed from outside and therefore is a matter of self-effort. Chastity thus is a matter that has to be observed by both the sexes. (Gandhi, All Men are my Brothers 206).

The Canadian landscape is shown in a state of total neglect and disarray because of mercenary intentions and commercial profits mostly engineered by the Americans. Throughout the novel the descriptions of land, water and air make the whole atmosphere appear sordid. It seems as if there is no escape from this ruinous landscape. Anna, David, Joe and the unnamed protagonist are on their journey to the village and when they are almost there they see the roads are “rock blasted, trees bulldozed over, roots in the air, needles reddening- past the flat cliff where the election slogans are painted and painted over, some faded and defaced, others fresh yellow and white...mélange of demands and languages, an X ray of it would be the district’s entire history” (Surfacing 10). The Canadian landscape like the psyche of the protagonist gets mildewed and powdery as she advances into the core of the truth about her life and the failures that she encountered at every stage of her existence.

The patterns of marriage have steadily been changing in Canada over the years. From the mid- 1940s to 1970, the generations who married following World War II, were more likely to marry than their elders as conscription and economic problems were rife then. After that since 1973, marriage rates dropped among single people, comparable with those at the height of the Great Depression (Clark 95). Divorce laws were liberalized in 1968 and thereafter there has been an increase in
divorce rates which in turn led to an increase in remarriage. For three centuries Canadians believed that marriage is important for establishing a conjugal relationship and so people’s first marriage coincided with their first union. However now cohabitation before marriage has increased. “Following three centuries of relative stability, the institution of marriage has been in turmoil since the 1970s and the future of the institution is unclear” (Ibid 98).

Atwood’s Survival, a Thematic Guide held the greatest impact of all her works on the developing Canadian consciousness. This work of cultural criticism “extends from the premise that national life generates a community ethos marked by specific beliefs, values, and characteristics, and that the central symbol for Canada... is undoubtedly Survival (Cooke 98). The Canadian Charter had ‘peace, order and good government’ as its cornerstone while the American ideals of ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ stand in direct opposition to the violence and the ‘taking in’ or ‘conquering’” (Ibid).

Since the turn of the century, Americans had begun to realize that their supply of natural resources was limited and that they would need to look outside their boundaries for some of the materials on which a modern economy depends. America thus looked towards Canada for the vast resources that it had. American policies toward Canadian resources during the Cold War fell way below what the Canadian nationalists expected. While Canada did not always succeed in having the policy it chose, the US insisted that Canada adopt American policies in some cases. However America has made attempts from time to time to use the resources of Canada without giving it its deserving due (Mount and Mahant 99).

“Does one believe man is a part of nature, or outside it? If you think man’s a part of nature then all of this, or a bridge over the Welland Canal, has as much right to exist as a beaver dam. But if you think we’re natural, then man’s industry is yet another blight on landscape, something that spoils the natural environment we were once given. I feel that we belong to nature and that we’ve learnt to shape metal and build bridges so we can solve problems that have existed for millennia” (Gilbert 63).

The contradictions between human progress and development have always existed but now they have come into sharp focus because of rapid degradation of the environment and the subsequent ill effects that are visible in changing weather patterns, spread of new diseases and scarcity of natural resources. It is not only conservation that we now talk about but the impending dangers of a world bereft of
all its natural wealth. This concern with the environment is seen in all countries, with
the focus on getting back to being more traditional, while making use of natural
resources.

Gandhi was of the view that man did not live by bread alone and mere
affluence would not be able to secure a balanced and integrated life for people. While
every attempt has to be made to secure minimum standard of living for all citizens, we
should not imitate the highly developed and industrialized countries. Side by side with
economic development and progress, proper emphasis should be laid on promoting
ethical and spiritual values, in both private as well as public life (Radhey Mohan 11).
“Civilization in the real sense of the term consists not in the multiplication but in the
deliberate and voluntary restriction of wants”. Even the Economic Laws of
Diminishing Utility and Insatiable Wants clearly indicate that the more a man has, the
less he is able to derive real pleasure from the articles of consumption. The
satisfaction of one want leads to another and human wants always remain insatiated
and unfulfilled (Ibid).

In Canada too, the aboriginal people have a spiritual tradition much like the
many indigenous people all over the world. To these people, human beings and others
(such as animals, birds, plants, rivers, mountains) are created by the ‘Great Spirit’.
“They are all natural manifestations to be honoured and revered, and in doing so, no
harm will come to the tribe from any source. Furthermore, for these aboriginals,
natural objects were not merely material objects but were alive with a spirit residing
in every one of them” (Dwivedi et al 299).

Gandhi was an advocate of pure rural life and he propagated the same. Gandhi
said that village civilization and city civilization are totally different things. One
depends on machinery and industrialization, and the other on handicrafts. City people
have been getting big profits and good wages, but all that has become possible by
sucking the blood of the villages. In order to make the village flourish, it is essential
to make them self-reliant. Gandhi regarded the growth of cities as an evil thing. He
said that if the hearts of the city-dwellers remain rooted in the villages, if they
become truly village-minded, all the other things will naturally follow and the ‘boil’
or the ‘abcess’ which is really the ensnaring city will quickly disappear. He said that
the village movement is as much an education of the city people as of the villagers.
Workers drawn from cities have to develop village mentality and learn the art of
living after the manner of villagers (Gandhi, Vilage Swaraj 29).
Our attitudes towards nature and how we treat it depends on various factors. They maybe grouped into four major divisions.

1. A desire to dominate and control nature
2. Acquisitive materialism
3. A blind faith in science and technology
4. An unconstrained growth ethic in a limited world

There are however ways by which we can inhabit this planet and preserve the environment. Such an approach must be built on a paradigm which includes at least the following main components:

1. Our values and beliefs, which are based on our religions and cultures
2. Our scientific and technological capabilities, and limits to such innovations
3. The pursuit of material progress
4. Our governing institutions, legal mechanisms, political processes, and ideologies which condition our socio-economic and cultural behavior (Ibid).

The American agenda is often reflected in the mercenary efforts of land greedy exploitative individuals who see Canada as a country with abundant natural resources. The American from Detroit, Mr Malmstron, in Surfacing is a mercenary when he declares that he likes a particular piece of property and he wants to convert it into a modern spa which he calls a retreat lodge with a place for meditation and observation of the beauties of nature. He talks of nature so casually when he says that the place has a ‘rural charm’ and he wants to encash on it for commercial gains (Surfacing 95). On the next page itself David and Joe despise the American agenda. They say that the Americans are “running out of water, clean water, they’re dirtying up all theirs…which is what we have a lot of, this country is almost all water if you look at a map. So in a while, I give ten years, they’ll be up against a wall” (Surfacing 96).

Surfacing almost represents a cultural journey in which a woman is in search of herself and this journey runs parallel to a nation in search of its identity. “Canada versus the United States; English Canada versus Quebec; modernization versus the environment; settler versus Aboriginal; male versus female” (Moss and Kozakewich 138). The novel is read as a novel in which the narrator’s experience of parental loss is merged with the national absence of an “authenticating archetype” (Ibid 138).
Canada has a history, which is an admixture of various influences. The Canadian looks for an identity and this identity lies beneath many layers of cultural influences. Canadian literature is the result of a great many historical, cultural and environmental players which have interacted and yet have been distinct from each other. In Canadian Literature “Nature in its primordial form is always projected as something a pre-man form of existence with its own laws according to which to proceed with in utter indifference to man” (Meiti 99-100). But this relationship between the human being and the environment is always a part of Canadian literature. The slow moving away from nature and its healing effects and a ruthless exploitation of environment and natural resources has a baneful effect on all aspects of human life.

Human beings are a species which go against laws of nature. They either defile nature or meddle with its working, never satisfied with its output, they are always looking for more. In Surfacing, she flays human beings for their evil carnivore ways. She says that we eat them (animals) out of cans or otherwise, we are ‘eaters of death’, dead Christ-flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us life (Atwood, Surfacing 141). We eat for pleasing our senses, not so much to feel healthy and energetic. Food is associated with blood and killing and thus how can it be invigorating and life-giving?

Mahatma Gandhi was strictly against meat eating. Even on his travels abroad inspite of almost being famished, he refused to consume meat. He writes that there is a great truth in the saying that man becomes what he eats. The grosser the food, the grosser the body. Gandhi said that he did not regard flesh-food as necessary for us at any stage and under any clime in which it is possible for ordinary human beings to live. He held flesh-food to be unsuited to our species. We err in copying the lower animal world if we are superior to it. Experience teaches that animal food is unsuited to those who would curb their passions. Similarly Gandhi was against the consumption of liquor. According to his belief, liquor was the invention of the Devil. Gandhi said that liquor robs men of both their money and their reason. For both flesh-meats and liquor the sovereign rule is ‘we must not live in order to eat and drink and be merry, but eat and drink in order to make our bodies temples of God and use them for service of man’ (Gandhi, India of My Dreams 157-161).

In a similar strain Gandhi vociferously campaigned for cow protection. He extolled cow worship and protection. For him the cow represented the ‘the entire sub human world’. In a very moving appeal to the human race to protect the cow Gandhi

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said ‘Man through the cow is enjoined to realize his identity with all that lives...The cow is a poem of pity. One reads pity in the gentle animal. She is the mother to millions of Indian mankind.’ Its protection, Gandhi said, meant “protection of the whole dumb creation of God” (Gupta 65). In India of My Dreams Gandhi said that the cow is as useful dead when she is alive. We can make use of every part of her body—her flesh, her bones, her intestines, her horns, and her skin. Gandhi said that this was his reason for worshipping the cow and putting her at a pedestal where probably no other animal could come a close second.

The crucial thing for Gandhi, as for Kant was not to teach people what is right or wrong, nor to lead them to examine and criticize their convictions, but to get them to do what they know they ought to do (Iyer 69). Similarly, the protagonist in Surfacing knows what she ought to do and she gets these insights through nature and living amongst it for just five days. She lives like a hermit and draws her sustenance from roots and seeds in the forest. She gives up all human trappings like clothes, canned food and a house to live in the wilderness. She gets pregnant in order to bring forth a new life into the world, a new life that is uncorrupted and untouched by modern civilization which is characterized by exploitative practices and cruelties to one another. In Gandhi’s view, the exploitation of one fellow human beings was built into the very structure of civilization. Consumers are constantly manipulated into wishing for things that they did not need and which were not in their interest. Workers were made to do jobs that did not interest them and were low-paying, giving them little opportunity to develop their minds. The poor were ill-treated and weaker nations were oppressed and exploited. For Gandhi European imperialism was a natural “expression of the aggressive and exploitative impulse lying at the heart of modern civilization” (Parekh 82).

There has been a recent increase in books and articles on the history of the Canadian environment. Anna Zilberstein says that in the past five years, numerous studies, research chairs, collaborative grants, databases and websites have been produced or sponsored by Canadian funding agencies, universities and publishers (194). The interest is increasing also because of the general lowering of environmental standards and the overall deterioration of the quality of the air, water and soil. Thus environmental concerns are real and are literally knocking at the doorstep. Canada is now like a sheet of ice with curious tourists looking while others destroy the beauty of this white land. Atwood presents a poignant picture of Canada
in one of her poems *At the Tourist Centre in Boston* when she asks who the dream of Canada really belongs to. She calls it a “hallucination, a cynical fiction, a lure for export only”. She also remembers the cities with “slush machines and assorted garbage” (Daymond and Monkman 629).

In *Surfacing* there is a parallel movement visible in the degradation of the environment and the scouring of the spirit of the protagonist because of her exposure to modern-day living and discordant impersonal relationships. The protagonist has had a journey of her life which is full of unsatisfactory relationships and a scary abortion. She was in love with a man who could not be committed to her as he was already married and had children. When she got into the second relationship, her pregnancy became an embarrassment to her partner and he leaves her to an abortion, all alone. He wants her to abort the baby as if it is like a tooth that the dentist would have to extract.

*The Edible Woman* was written in 1965 before the Women’s Liberation Movement had begun. *The Edible Woman* focuses attention on the “sexual objectification and potential victimization of Marian MacAlpin as she consents to feminity” (Bloom 73). Speaking a kind of a body language, *The Edible Woman* reflects both the cultural identification of women with body and the pervasive fear of the uncontained, uncontrollable female body as it puts the mature female body on display and scrutinizes its isolated parts (Ibid 77). It has almost become synonymous with culture to scrutinize and criticize the female form for what it is or for what it isn’t capable of attaining. Marian is the victim of a cultural onslaught which consumes a woman and considers her to be the icing on the cake. Maria is a victim as she is the owner of a female body and society demands that her body be seen and used for pleasure by a male. The feminist struggle of the 1960’s and 1970’s demanded legal access to abortion and women’s control over their own bodies which brought the “body, reproduction, and life itself irreversibly into the domain of public scrutiny and debate” (Helps 126).

Marian is caught between two worlds; one that vociferously tells her that it is important to stay instep with the conventional fads of the world (a good job, a smart man, a beautiful house, a young look and a great sex life) and another little voice which tells her that she should not end up like Ainsley. She wishes to be the only desire of the man she loves but through the veils of this desire she is able to see how she is being objectified as an article of desire. Her life is very much like the job she is
in-mundane like the surveys she makes and the clients that she comes across. When she feels attracted to Duncan it is in a very prosaic manner, and they often meet over mundane jobs. He irons clothes and the act is one which is symbolic. He is as if trying to rearrange the contours of her life without really being interested in anything that goes on in her mind and her world. Duncan is there but he is outside the realms of her realities.

Marian began with idealistic principles about marriage. She saw dreams of getting married and having either two or four children. She also felt that it would be easy to keep up her marriage with Peter as “so much of it (marriage) is a matter of elementary mechanical detail, such as furniture and meals and keeping things in order” (Atwood, *Edible Woman* 125). However, she slowly begins to believe like Ainsley that life isn’t run by ‘principles but by adjustments’ (Atwood, *Edible Woman* 125) and that is why ‘she contracted out’ (Atwood, *Edible Woman* 195). She is very scared of marriage and it appears to have become a cultural acceptance that marriage is ruinous even though contrary to this feeling Peter says that people who are unmarried are “funny in middle age, embittered or addled or something” (Atwood, *Edible Woman* 125). Even when Peter proposes marriage to her, Maria has a strange feeling and she says that she could see herself ‘small and oval, mirrored in his eyes’. Even though that day could have been counted as one of the best days of her life, she feels belittled in her own eyes after she receives the proposal.

The importance of marriage is slowly waning in Canada and it is probably the onslaught of a cultural change which is bringing about such changes. In *Surfacing* too the protagonist looks at marriage as a trap which ruins her independence and her personality. She wishes to run away from it all and that is why she retreats into a life of the forest, living off the land and trying to give birth to her baby away from the malevolent eyes of society. She painfully remembers how she ran away from a painful marriage but used the vestiges of her nuptial proof—her wedding ring for the pacification of suspicious landladies. She says “My status is a problem, they obviously think I’m married” (19). She does not inform her parents of her divorce as the word did not exist in the vocabulary there. It is clearly a cultural shift in which the earlier generation looks at divorce as profane while the newer generation view it as a matter of fact event that comes with the normal baggage of strained relationships.

The environmental concerns that are seen in the novel *Surfacing* are indeed as grave as the psychological distress of the characters. The environmental degradation
can be largely attributed to American dominance and partly to Canadian impotence and the blighted environment and degraded landscape is a silent witness to the pain that the mute environment goes through as a result of cruel commercial interests. The protagonist in Surfacing bears hatred against all that is American as it has scoured the environment. In fact the novel is almost a tirade against American bludgeoning. The degradation is like a blight which kills everything that comes its way. “The trees will never be allowed to grow again, they’re killed as soon as they’re valuable, big trees are scarce as whales” (Surfacing 43). A few pages earlier too the environment has been scathingly described by the protagonist when she says that the rocks have been blasted, bulldozers have run over the trees, roots have been exposed to the air and pine needles have lost their colour. So called modernization has altered the contours of the land. There are dry dirty election slogans on the cliff with a barrage of names, hearts, initials and advertisements “THE SALADA, BLUE MOON COTTAGES 12 MILE, QUBEC LIBRE, FUCK YOU, BUVEZ COCO-COLA GLACE, JESUS SAVES, mélange of demands and languages, an X ray of it would be the district’s entire history” (11).

A curious thing starts happening in Canadian literature once a human being begins to become strong and starts becoming victorious, as evidence keeps coming in of what Frye in The Bush Garden calls “the conquest of nature by an intelligence that does not love it.” After this the sympathy we have moves from the victorious hero to the fallen giantess and the problem is “no longer how to avoid being swallowed up by a cannibalistic Nature but how to avoid destroying her” (76).

The lakes have already been raised by making dams, and at places are edged by marshes of stale and standing water that have accumulated around the skeletons of trees which died when the water rose. When they go on fishing expeditions from lake to lake, the narrator and her companions meet with surveyors who are felling trees so that they can work out a further raising of the lake that will kill yet more of the life along its shoreline.

But the most frightening symbol of evil wreaked on nature is that of the heron which is decaying and is hanging upside down with a mashed eye. For the narrator, the issue of the destruction of the environment is characterized by blaming it on the Americans who she has all the time known as “others.” She considers Americans as part of the same evil people she thought were destroyed when Hitler died. “It was like cutting up a tapeworm, the pieces grew” (Woodecock 52-53).
Field-Marshall Lord Montgomery said of Canada in 1946 “I saw a great and wonderful country; a land containing in its soil everything that a man desires; a proper land, for proper men to live in and to prosper exceedingly”. Canada is a fascinating country with a great amount of elbow space. Measuring 3.8 million square miles, Canada ranks second in size after Russia. This huge expanse has only 25.5 million people. The largest number of people and the largest number of industries are in a relatively narrow southern belt. As one heads north, the landscape becomes emptier and emptier, “until you reach an endless majestic wilderness almost devoid of human habitation” (Garrard et al 1). The fewer the people, the richer the animal life, which is why the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, and the northernmost regions of Quebec boast the most numerous fauna- “huge white polar bears lumbering over ice floes; musk-oxen and caribou grazing on the tundras; seals and walruses waddling along the shorelines; and occasional packs of wolves prowling the forests” (Ibid 12). Thus Canada is a playfield for a great many interactions between nature and the human beings that inhabit this vast expanse. However, it is in the course of these numerous interactions that the line between simple nature fun and exploitation of these vast expanses have taken place. The exploitation has been rampant with the aim of pure commercial gains and materialistic achievements, gradually losing sight of the place that nature has in the scheme of the smooth running of the universe.

In the early 1970s, Canada was also a “small neutral country” facing American power on the one side and European power on the other, but it was a country where nascent hopes of nationhood were vitiated by internal conflict with Quebec. The 1970s brought the invocation of the War Measures Act, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, and public anger against the storage of American rockets on Canadian soil. Contemporary political commentary such as George Grant’s Lament for a Nation and Barry Lord’s essay “Mericans,” in Al Purdy’s The New Romans reflected a perception of Americans as violent conquerors: “the US Empire rules by force and causes death and destruction wherever it holds power; it is the military, economic, social and psychological source of aggression in the world today” (Gilbert 74).

Besides the environment, it is also the family that is moving on a rope-made bridge that dangles at places and falls at others. The family and marriage today appear to be beset by contradictions. Although marriage remains popular, with high rates of marriage and remarriage, there is a growing feeling that the traditional forms have
become unstable and are even in decline. With the rise in divorce, the increasing trends of cohabitation and the increasing numbers of single parents, the popularity of marriage appears to be waning. These fears about the death/decline of the family “are an old chestnut” of sociological debate (Chandler 38). “The family is a symbol of social order and any loosening of its patterns of dependence and responsibility fuel anxiety about social disintegration” (Ibid 38).

Familism shapes the sexual experiences of women and in the West it has strongly been influenced by Christianity. In traditional Christian thinking good women were praised for their modesty and their lack of sensuality, and bad women were reprimanded “as the temptresses of men” (Chandler 41). Women’s sexuality was confined to marriage and determined by procreation, whereas male sexuality was ‘freer’ and ‘more self-determining’. These gendered differences have contributed to the development of scientific theories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries where women and not men were seen as sexually hungry beings who had to be reined in. Both supplied the grounding for the ‘sexual double standard’ dividing women into chaste and contemptible, modest and available. There have been some changes in the Christian attitudes over the years and now ‘good women’ can enjoy ‘tame domestic sex’ but ‘bad women’ still feature in the passion of ‘the affair’ or sell their services for ‘recreational sex’. And these women characteristically live outside conventional marriage.

Similarly in The Edible Woman Maria is judged by the ‘office virgins’ on the basis of her marital status. It is really part of almost every culture to look at marriage as a defining status symbol even though the value of the institution has been waning over the years. Society almost inevitably categorizes the unmarried woman as a crotchety spinster and an unmarried man as a dangerous creature on the prowl.

“Marian was sitting wedged between two of the office virgins….In situations like this (when men and their exploits with available girls are being discussed) they huddled together for self-protection: they had no children whose cuteness could be compared, no homes whose furnishings were of much importance and no husbands, details of whose eccentricities and nasty habits could be exchanged” (Atwood, The Edible Woman 206).

Inspite of her new-found status, as an engaged woman, Marian is still unable to come to terms with the culturally acceptable baggage that comes along with this status. She feels that she is more often than not being objectified by Peter and he
shows her off as if she were a trophy he won at a match. She has now been ‘ringed’ and so he takes pride in showing her off. He kept taking her all over to cocktail parties so that his friends could know her but she isn’t comfortable with all this and views the men and their wives as “well-dressed and on the verge of being successful”. It is the demand of society that makes her feel objectified and she rejects the artificiality when she runs away from the span of Peter’s camera. When she rejects food (which makes a person socially acceptable, both as a consumer and a producer) she is actually giving up the trapping of a consumerist society which expects one to conform to all the rules laid down by it. There is a lot that is amusing in the early chapters of the novel but we become increasingly aware of a “disturbing, even vaguely threatening atmosphere, as if characters are living in a not-quite-hermetically-sealed, unnatural world” (Keith 30).

Maria McAlpin’s protest is silent and non-violent. The method that she adopts is very similar to Mahatma Gandhi’s Satyagraha. Gandhi called his method of fighting, of resolving conflicts, Satyagraha. Satyagraha for Gandhi always meant far more than the interpretations of the word as ‘passive resistance’, ‘nonviolent resistance’, ‘nonviolent direct action’ and even ‘militant nonviolence’. “The word ‘satyagraha’ was a combination of two Sanskrit words sat (truth) and agraha (firmness) and in effect means the discovery of truth and working steadily towards it, thus converting the opponent into a friend” (Weber 123).

The cornerstone of ‘satyagraha’ as the etymology of the word suggests is truth implying soul or truth force. For Gandhi truth was not a maxim that adorned textbooks, it was the very reason for existence. Raghavan Iyer gives a comprehensive summary of Gandhi’s personal relationship to truth when he says something roughly paraphrased thus: As truth is the substance of morality, man is the moral agent only to the extent that he embraces and seeks truth. By truth is not only meant the abstention from lies, not just the prudential conviction that honesty is the best policy in the long run, but even more that we must rule our lives by this law of truth at any cost...Devotion to truth is the only reason for human existence and the truth alone really sustains us at all times (Iyer 124).

Gandhi was of the view that control of the palate is very closely connected with the observance of Brahmacharya. He said that it becomes easy to observe celibacy if one acquires mastery of the palate. As an external aid to Brahmacharya, fasting is as necessary as selection and restriction in diet. So overpowering are the
senses that they can be kept under control only when they are completely hedged in on all sides, from above and beneath. Fasting is useful, when mind cooperates with starving body, that is to say when it cultivates a distaste for the objects that are denied to the body.

Maria McAlpin like the unnamed protagonist in *Surfacing* is on a lonely journey to reject a purely consumerist, modem society which treats a woman as an object created for the pleasure of the man. Both the characters know the violence of the society that they live in but they do not return violence (whether it is because they know the potency of the enemy or that they believe in the principle of violence would really be another debate altogether). However they retreat and fight for what they believe is the truth of the situation that they are in. Gandhi saw nonviolence as the necessary and only means of realizing the truth. For Gandhi violence arose from ignorance or untruth, while conversely, truth arose out of nonviolence.

Both *Surfacing* and *The Edible Woman* can be seen as works that distinctly put two female characters at the centre stage and endow them with abilities which make them drivers of social change. Gandhi said that women have an innate ability to bring about social change and that is why he exhorted them to take part in large numbers during the freedom struggle in India. He said that India’s salvation depends on the sacrifice and enlightenment of her women” (Gandhi, *All Men* 205). Gandhi believed that a woman could teach the art of peace to the warring world thirsting for that nectar of love and care which a woman has in abundance. He was of the view that a woman has the power to change the world because of her innate understanding of the world around her, her patience and her basic characteristic of being a life-giver and a nurturer. A woman really has the ability to change the face of the world and in these two novels the unnamed protagonist and Maria Mc Alpin serve as Satyagrahis in order to attain spiritual cleansing and to make a deaf society listen to the many trespasses that it is making by being overly consumerist and ‘modern’.

The environment and culture of societies that the characters live in Atwood’s novels are slowly corroding with the effect that it takes a concerted effort on the part of two characters (one in *Surfacing* and the other in *The Edible Woman*) to change how we look at the world. Mahatma Gandhi had been always been an advocate of cultural values and the nurturing of the environment. Many years ago, when the problem of pollution and eco-degradation were not rampant, Gandhi portended gloom with mechanization, and industries taking over like a frightful snarl. He thus
advocated a simple lifestyle with proximity to rural values that would help society to live in harmony. Gandhi said that following such a simple lifestyle would lead to harmonious existence with no clashes and upheavals. Gandhi’s vision of society has been laid thus: “There will be neither paupers nor beggars, nor high or low, neither millionaire employers nor half-starved employees, nor intoxicating drinks or drugs. There will be the same respect for women as vouchsafed to men and the chastity and purity of men and women will be jealously guarded” (Gandhi, *Village Swaraj* 5).

When one talks of going back to nature now, it is a resonance of sorts of what Gandhi advocated so vociferously so many years ago when environmentalism was not at all in fashion. Gandhi believed, like both the female protagonists in our novel that it has to be back to nature if one wishes to regain one’s sanity and equilibrium.