

# Women and the Environment in A Dystopian World: An Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's the Year of the Flood

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to observe the intersection of environmental destruction and patriarchal oppression in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* her second novel in the MaddAddam trilogy. Scholars such as Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), and Greta Gaard in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) have put forth the argument that subjugation of women and environmental degradation both have the same root, that is the system of power and control. Atwood shows a dystopian world, filled with unchecked consumerism and scientific hubris where women's bodies and nature are both exploited parallelly. The two protagonists, Toby and Ren showcase different facets of ecofeminist survival. The immense use of bioengineering reflects Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of biopower, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* bringing in the idea of how corporate control regulate human and non-human life through genetic modification and social control. *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008) also shares thematic parallels with *The Year of the Flood*, such as authoritarianism, exploitation and survival. Atwood's novel brings forth the notion that survival and regeneration are possible through collective action, storytelling, and a reimagined relationship with nature.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, dystopian fiction, Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* environmental ethics, feminist resistance, biopolitics, speculative fiction.

## INTRODUCTION

The novel opens up with "We are Stardust. We are golden. And we've got to get ourselves back to the Garden" (Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* 1), introducing the philosophy of ecological reverence and harmony of spirit with nature put forward by Adam One, the leader for God's Gardeners. It encapsulates the desire to "get back to the Garden" to return to a world where the actions of humans do not ravage or dominate nature rather coexist with it an idea central to ecofeminist thought. The "Garden" becomes a reference to biblical Eden as well as a sustainable world that is free of corporate and patriarchal havoc. Atwood uses this reference in order to establish a contrast between the God's Gardeners' view and the selfish, consumerist dystopia dominated by corporations like HelthWyzer and CorpSeCorps.

Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009), is the second novel in the MaddAddam trilogy. It provides us with an exploration of ecofeminism within a dystopian world. The series presents us with a world filled with greed, misuse of scientific endeavours, ecological degradation, patriarchal control, and sexual exploitation. The author uses the point of view of two female protagonists Toby and Ren, to

showcase the gendered dimensions of survival and resistance in an ecologically ravaged landscape. This paper examines *The Year of the Flood* through the perspective of ecofeminism, putting emphases on how the novel critiques the exploitation of women and nature while also imagining alternative modes of existence rooted in ecological and feminist ethics.

Dystopian literature has long been used by writers to criticise the extremes of contemporary society. George Orwell wrote *1984* (1949) against the erasure of individual freedom and totalitarian control, while Margaret Atwood's own *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) showcases the subjugation of women within a rigid theocratic regime. Similarly, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) presents a critique of capitalist exploitation, particularly by showing the distinction of the elite Capitol and the suffering districts. *The Year of the Flood* joins this tradition, while having one major focus, i.e. the mixture of gender and environmental crisis, ecofeminism. Profit is prioritised over ethics, even nature in the novel, where the world is run by scientific corporations. This is also exemplified in *Oryx and Crake* (2003), where extreme scientific ambition leads to the downfall of humanity. In this world, women and nature are commodified and controlled, putting into focus the ecofeminist arguments about the parallel exploitation of both.

Critic Paul W. Harland, in his work on ecological grief and storytelling in Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, puts forward the argument that in *The Year of the Flood* characters like Toby and Ren try to reclaim their agency through storytelling and memory (Harland 590). Their survival is not just physical but it is emotional and ideological, as they work to preserve knowledge and alternative ways of being in a world that seeks to erase them. *The Year of the Flood* presents survival as a collective effort achieved by relationships, narrative, and ecological awareness. Toby and Ren don't just endure but they transform from the inside to survive. By centering female perspectives, Atwood expands the discourse on ecofeminism, urging her readers to reevaluate the interconnection of gender, nature, and power.

### **Ecofeminism: Theoretical Framework**

Ecofeminism, as defined by theorists such as Carolyn Merchant and Vandana Shiva, connects the oppression of women with the exploitation of nature, putting forward the argument that they both have the same origin, i.e. patriarchal and capitalist structures and oppression. Merchant (1980) has the argument that due to scientific revolution we now have a mechanised view of nature, consequently justifying the domination of the environment and that marginalised groups, aka women. Shiva (1988) further extends this argument by showcasing how women, majorly in non-Western societies, act as stewards of ecological knowledge, resisting the forces that seek to commodify life.

As Merchant wrote, "The world we have lost was organic. From the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the image of an organic cosmos with a living female earth at its centre was gradually replaced by a mechanistic world view" (Merchant 2). In accordance with the ecofeminist scholars this shift, enabled the justification of nature's exploitation, while the subjugation of women under patriarchal systems, runs parallel.

Atwood's novel, *The Year of the Flood* thus aligns with these ideas by portraying how the survival of women is linked with ecological consciousness, in this case "God's Gardeners" and resistance of corporate extremism. By infusing ecofeminism into the dystopian framework, this novel provides a critique of contemporary ecological crises, showing how capitalist structures not only degrade the environment but also reinforce gender inequalities. It also serves as a warning to scientific extremism. Atwood's vision suggests that the oppression of nature and women is interconnected, and only through ecological awareness and feminist solidarity can a more sustainable future be imagined.

### **The God's Gardeners: Ecofeminist Resistance**

The God's Gardeners, an eco-religious or eco-conscious cult in *The Year of the Flood*, serves as a crucial counterpoint to the destruction caused by the corporate world. Their philosophy, blending environmental devotion with spirituality, reflects ecofeminist principles of interconnectedness and sustainability. As Adam One, the leader of the Gardeners, preaches: "We are one with the earth, and the earth is one with us" (Atwood 42). This ideology challenges the corporate commodification of the natural pattern of the world and reasserts the ethics of care, where they position women as central figures in ecological resistance.

Toby, initially a skeptic, rises through the ranks and becomes one of the most competent members of the Gardeners, using her knowledge of herbal medicine to heal others, to Eve Six. As Toby says "I had learned to be afraid, but fear didn't get you anywhere. Fear didn't protect you, and it didn't get things done. It was just a gap in your thinking, a kind of blankness, a failure to see the possibilities" (Atwood 96). The quote shows how Toby transformed from a fearful corporate employee to a strong, resourceful member of the God's Gardeners. How she rejected the exploitative system, and embraced a more sustainable, ecofeminist view of life. This puts forward the idea and the novel's ecofeminist stance, that to survive one needs to reject extreme and exploitative systems and return to a balanced life. Toby's ability to navigate both the natural world and human conflict embodies the resilience central to ecofeminist thought.

Ren's journey showcases her struggle to adapt to a new, post-apocalyptic world where the old systems of exploitation have collapsed, however in its place new challenges have sprung. As she mentions "I couldn't remember what normal was like. I couldn't even remember what it felt like to be safe, to be unafraid. The old world was gone, but the new world hadn't yet begun" (Atwood 234). This reflects the disorienting and traumatic shift from a society that was consumer-driven to a world in which survival is based on a return to nature. Ren's personal loss and uncertainty becomes a microcosm for the larger collapse of global systems that once prioritized profit over people and the environment. In the middle of this chaos, Ren's ability to survive is not just about physical resilience but also how she can adapt emotionally and ethically. Through Ren and Toby's experiences, Atwood explores the tension between survival and renewal, as they need to find alternative ways to deal with both the natural world and the new communities. Their resilience is not passive; it is a form of resistance to the oppressive forces that previously governed human interactions, whether through corporate control or environmental exploitation. The female protagonist's ability to navigate this uncertain world, with the ecofeminist ideals of the God's Gardeners, thus puts focus on the importance of having a sustainable and ethical relationship with nature.

Apart from survival, the group God's Gardeners also represent a mode of alternative living. They reject consumerism, advocate plant-based diets, as well as have a communal approach for survival that reinforces ecofeminist ideals. The group thus becomes an anti-thesis to the profit-driven corporations that exploit nature just for economic gain, showcasing human hubris. Thus, the group presents us with the idea that resistance can emerge through sustainable and ethical coexistence with the environment.

### **Women's Bodies as Sites of Control**

Atwood in most of her novels, especially *The Year of the Flood* critiques the commodification of women's bodies, paralleling their exploitation with the destruction of nature. Ren's experience at Scales and Tails, a high-end sex club, lends us a view to the ways in which women are reduced to objects in a hyper-capitalist system. Ren reflects, "They told us we were lucky to be chosen, but it never felt like luck" (Atwood 119). The blatant objectification and sexual as well as mental exploitation of women is shown in

the entire trilogy, through characters like Oryx, Ren, Toby, and Amanda. The economic pyramid that governs Atwood's dystopian world puts into focus the patriarchal control, that mirrors how environmental resources are extracted and manipulated just for profit.

Toby, on the other hand, suffers under the predatory power of Blanco, a violent corporate enforcer. Her struggle for autonomy highlights the broader theme of male dominance over both women and the environment. As ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard (1993) argues, patriarchal societies impose hierarchical dualisms, man over woman, culture over nature, reason over emotion, thus reproducing systems of oppression across social and ecological domains. Atwood critiques this dualism by showcasing how Toby and Ren's survival depends on rejecting these imposed hierarchies and forging new, communal ways of living.

Additionally, *The Year of the Flood* illustrates how corporate and patriarchal systems exploit reproductive capabilities. Women's bodies become sites of control, just as genetically modified crops and animals are manipulated for maximum productivity. This biopolitical control echoes concerns raised by Michel Foucault, who describes how "power structures extend beyond governance and into the regulation of biological life itself" (Foucault 141). Atwood's dystopian vision, then, is not merely about environmental collapse but about how control over the environment is mirrored in the control over female bodies.

### **Narrative Structure and the Role of Memory**

The novel's nonlinear narrative, shifting between past and present, reinforces the idea that history, both personal and ecological shapes survival. Toby's recollections of her life before the pandemic emphasize how the choices of the past create the crises of the present. This aligns with ecofeminist critiques of historical amnesia regarding environmental destruction and gendered violence. As the novel suggests, remembering past injustices is necessary for creating alternative futures.

From an ecofeminist perspective, *The Year of the Flood* critiques the separation between individual memory and collective history. The characters' divergent narratives highlight the tension between personal memory and larger social forces, such as the corporate control of knowledge and the erasure of environmental degradation from dominant discourse. Atwood critiques the way that past events are remembered or forgotten, especially as they relate to gender, ecology, and power. The Gardeners, in particular, are shown to actively preserve a collective memory of the past, blending myth with historical fact, to ensure that future generations understand the mistakes that led to the crisis. This counter-narrative offers an alternative to the dominant, linear historical account that neglects the intersection of environmental and gendered injustices, a central theme in ecofeminist thought.

The characters in *The Year of the Flood* are survivors of an apocalyptic event, and this sense of The idea that the survivors are determined not to squander this new beginning mirrors the novel's ecofeminist critique, where remembering past injustices such as environmental destruction and the exploitation of women is essential for rebuilding a better future. The survivors' commitment to not repeating the mistakes of the past reflects the thematic importance of preserving knowledge, including ecological wisdom and gender equality, in shaping an alternative future.

By alternating between different timelines and perspectives, Atwood also critiques the way knowledge and history are controlled. The Gardeners preserve oral traditions, blending myth and science, ensuring that the next generation understands the mistakes of the past. This approach challenges dominant narratives that justify exploitation in the name of progress, reinforcing ecofeminist calls for a more holistic and inclusive form of knowledge transmission.

## Conclusion

The Year of the Flood presents a deeply ecofeminist vision of dystopia, one that critiques the intersection of environmental and gendered oppression while also imagining modes of resistance rooted in sustainability and solidarity. Through the experiences of Toby and Ren, Atwood exposes the failures of patriarchal capitalism and highlights the necessity of alternative, earth-centred ways of living. The novel ultimately offers a cautious hope: while systemic collapse is inevitable, survival and renewal are possible through collective resistance, ecological awareness, and feminist ethics.

Atwood's novel serves as both a cautionary tale and a blueprint for a more sustainable future. By portraying women as central figures in ecological resistance, *The Year of the Flood* underscores the necessity of recognizing the intrinsic link between feminism and environmentalism. In doing so, Atwood challenges readers to rethink their relationship with both nature and power structures, suggesting that true survival lies in rejecting exploitative systems and embracing a more equitable coexistence with the planet.

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