

Roots of Ruin: Ecofeminist Echoes of Environmental and Gendered Subjugation in Margaret Atwood's Dystopias

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Abstract

This paper explores the intertwined mechanisms of ecological degradation and gendered oppression in Margaret Atwood's dystopian fiction through the lens of ecofeminist theory. Focusing primarily on *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, the study reveals how Atwood constructs dystopian worlds where patriarchal authority and environmental exploitation emerge as co-dependent systems of domination. Drawing on foundational ecofeminist thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Greta Gaard, the analysis situates women's bodies and the natural world as parallel sites of control, commodification, and silencing. Through close textual reading, the article illustrates how Atwood critiques corporate capitalism, biopower, and reproductive control as tools that perpetuate both environmental collapse and gendered violence. Atwood's speculative vision, however, is not solely apocalyptic—it also gestures towards resistance, resilience, and the possibility of reclaiming agency and ecological balance. By examining these "roots of ruin," this article asserts that Atwood's fiction not only reflects the crises of our contemporary moment but also invites an urgent reevaluation of ethical relationships between human and non-human life.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, dystopia, environmental degradation, gender oppression, patriarchal capitalism.

Margaret Atwood, one of the most incisive voices in contemporary literature, has long interrogated the fragile boundary between human ambition and environmental consequence. Through speculative and dystopian narratives, Atwood constructs richly imagined worlds that reflect the dangers of ecological neglect and patriarchal oppression. Her novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* serve as prophetic texts that highlight the interconnected fates of women and nature under systems of patriarchal capitalism. These works foreground a dual exploitation, of the environment and the female body, rooted in the same ideological foundations. Both nature and women are rendered as resources to be controlled, consumed, and silenced.

This article employs the lens of ecofeminism to explore the thematic parallels Atwood establishes between environmental degradation and gender-based subjugation. As a theoretical framework, ecofeminism exposes the structural links between the domination of women and the domination of

nature, often perpetrated by anthropocentric, patriarchal, and capitalist systems. Ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, and Val Plumwood have argued that the subordination of women and ecological exploitation are not coincidental but symptomatic of a broader mindset that values domination, profit, and control over sustainability, interdependence, and care.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood presents a world where environmental collapse has led to mass infertility, resulting in a theocratic regime that reduces fertile women to reproductive vessels. Similarly, in *Oryx and Crake*, the bioengineered apocalypse reveals the dire consequences of scientific hubris and corporate greed. In both narratives, Atwood portrays a dystopian future where power structures view both women and ecosystems as commodities.

This paper argues that Atwood's dystopias serve as critiques of patriarchal domination over both nature and the female body. Through a close reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*, the article reveals how Atwood's work echoes ecofeminist concerns by showing that environmental ruin and gender oppression share common roots and that resistance to one cannot occur without resistance to the other.

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a theoretical and activist movement that exposed the interlinked systems of oppression affecting women and the natural world. The term, popularized by Françoise d'Eaubonne and further developed by thinkers like Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, Val Plumwood, and Karen Warren, critiques the dominant paradigms of patriarchal capitalism, which often exploit both women and the environment through similar mechanisms of control, commodification, and erasure. Ecofeminist theory resists dualisms that place man above woman, culture above nature, and reason above emotion, arguing instead for an interconnected, holistic worldview rooted in mutual respect and ecological balance.

Vandana Shiva's seminal work *Staying Alive* (1988) asserts that capitalist development exploits both women and nature by reducing them to "passive resources." Shiva argues that "what is traditionally called 'development' has simultaneously meant economic growth for some and ecological destruction and social disintegration for others" (Shiva 4). Similarly, Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) critiques the logic of domination that structures Western thought, pointing out how the "backgrounding" of women and nature allows for their continued marginalization and exploitation.

Greta Gaard's work is especially influential in connecting ecofeminism with literary studies. In her essay "Ecofeminism and Climate Change" (2015), she writes, "Environmental justice cannot be achieved without addressing the systemic inequalities that affect women, the poor, and the nonhuman world" (Gaard 26). This inclusive framework allows for a broader, intersectional understanding of ecological and social justice. For ecofeminists, the fates of the environment and women are not merely aligned metaphorically, they are structurally and materially entwined.

In the context of literature, ecofeminism functions as both a critical lens and a mode of narrative resistance. Margaret Atwood's fiction, particularly her dystopian novels, is an exemplary site for ecofeminist analysis. Atwood herself has acknowledged the ecological and gendered anxieties embedded in her narratives, often stating that her dystopias are grounded in real-world phenomena and scientific projections. Her imaginative landscapes, ravaged by climate change, biotech excess, and patriarchal regimes, become cautionary tales that warn against the unchecked expansion of technocratic control and masculine domination.

Ecofeminist readings of Atwood's work reveal how the author reimagines speculative futures where environmental and gender crises are symptoms of a deeper ethical collapse. The commodification of

reproduction, the exploitation of female bodies, and the devaluation of the natural world are presented not as separate issues but as interconnected oppressions with shared ideological roots.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a dystopian society where environmental collapse is inextricably tied to the subjugation of women. The Republic of Gilead emerges in the wake of widespread ecological disasters, radiation fallout, toxic waste, and industrial pollution, that have led to a steep decline in human fertility. In response, a patriarchal theocracy seizes control of both women's bodies and the remnants of a poisoned environment. Through this portrayal, Atwood lays bare how patriarchal institutions use environmental degradation as a pretext to consolidate power and enforce rigid gender hierarchies.

The novel opens with subtle reminders of ecological ruin, cloaked in the narrative's everyday brutality: "The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of which caused sterility in men and women" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 112). This passage makes clear that infertility, a central concern of the Gileadean regime, is not an abstract punishment but a direct consequence of environmental abuse. In this sense, nature itself has been violated and damaged by the same systems of power that now seek to control women's reproductive capacities.

In Gilead, fertile women are stripped of identity and reduced to their biological function. As Handmaids, they are renamed, reassigned, and subjected to ritualized rape called "the Ceremony," supposedly justified by biblical precedent. The reduction of women to "two-legged wombs" reflects what Val Plumwood calls the "instrumentalization of the other," whereby the feminine and the natural are treated not as autonomous entities but as resources to be managed (Plumwood 4). Just as the environment has been subjected to mechanistic exploitation, women's bodies are mechanized and controlled for reproductive productivity.

Atwood establishes a metaphorical parallel between women and land—both are fertile or barren, both are surveilled and regulated. Offred, the protagonist, notes: "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 96). This chilling line captures the ecofeminist critique of how capitalist-patriarchal societies value entities—whether land or women—only in terms of their utility. The natural world in Gilead is no longer a living presence but a contaminated backdrop that legitimizes authoritarian rule.

The role of the state in reinforcing this subjugation is crucial. As Vandana Shiva argues, environmental degradation is never politically neutral; it is closely aligned with systems that marginalize the vulnerable. "Women's struggles are simultaneously struggles for the protection of nature and survival" (Shiva 38). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the repression of women and the destruction of the environment both originate from the same crisis of values—one that prizes control, domination, and purity over care, diversity, and coexistence.

Despite the bleakness of Gilead, Atwood seeds the narrative with subtle acts of resistance—scratched words in a closet, whispered stories, and secret alliances. These gestures suggest that memory and language can become forms of ecological and feminist resilience. In remembering the world before, Offred becomes a custodian of both history and possibility. The voice of the Handmaid—though shaped by trauma—bears witness not only to the violence of the regime but also to the ethical imperative of resistance.

Through *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood constructs a dystopian allegory that shows how environmental ruin and the oppression of women are not separate phenomena, but reflections of the same destructive logic. The subjugation of both nature and the feminine becomes a warning against the consequences of

silencing life in its diverse forms.

While *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts theocratic patriarchy's use of environmental catastrophe as a mechanism for control, *Oryx and Crake* explores the corporate-technocratic dystopia that precedes a more total ecological collapse. In this novel, Atwood imagines a world in which unregulated genetic engineering, consumer capitalism, and biotechnological innovation have not only destroyed ecosystems but also reduced human life—and especially women—to the status of saleable commodities. Through a fusion of satire and science fiction, Atwood crafts a chilling vision of environmental degradation and gendered exploitation as logical outcomes of a world governed by profit and scientific detachment.

At the heart of *Oryx and Crake* lies the destructive power of the biotech industry. The corporations in Atwood's speculative world manipulate animal and human genetics to produce grotesque hybrids like “pigoons” (organ-harvesting pigs) and “ChickieNobs” (headless chickens grown for meat). This relentless commodification of life mirrors the ecofeminist critique of capitalist science, which, according to Vandana Shiva, seeks to dominate nature by turning it into “raw material” (Shiva 45). The natural world in *Oryx and Crake* is not a living ecosystem but a field of extractable resources—an object of endless innovation and manipulation.

The novel's depiction of gender follows a similar logic of commodification. Oryx, the central female figure, is introduced through a fragmented narrative that traces her childhood as a trafficked sex worker, commodified by both globalized sex industries and the voyeuristic gaze of men like Jimmy and Crake. Jimmy remembers first seeing her in a child pornography video, reflecting, “He couldn't get her out of his mind” (*Oryx and Crake* 91). Oryx's body, like the genetically engineered animals in the novel, becomes a site of control, fantasy, and erasure. Despite her central presence, she remains elusive, largely silent, and subject to others' interpretations—an embodiment of how patriarchal capitalism objectifies women, especially in postcolonial contexts.

Greta Gaard argues that “the exploitation of women and nature in global capitalism is not coincidental but systemic” (Gaard 27). In *Oryx and Crake*, this system manifests through the fusion of scientific detachment and market logic. Crake, the novel's mastermind geneticist, views emotions and relationships as evolutionary inconveniences. His “Crakers”—bioengineered posthumans—are designed without sexual jealousy, religious belief, or artistic expression, in an attempt to eliminate the messiness of human life. Women in this new species are even programmed to signal fertility with changing skin colors, reducing reproduction to a biological transaction free of consent or complexity.

Through Crake's worldview, Atwood critiques the ultimate hubris of patriarchal science: the belief that life—human, animal, or ecological—can be perfected, controlled, and standardized. Crake's engineered utopia is, in fact, an act of annihilation: the end of unpredictability, diversity, and emotional depth. The Earth, already devastated by climate change and bio-terror, is “cleansed” of humanity to make room for a sterile, symmetrical lifeform. As Plumwood warns, “The logic of mastery devalues what it seeks to control” (Plumwood 12). Crake's sterile paradise, built on the ashes of complexity, is the final triumph of that mastery.

Jimmy/Snowman, the reluctant witness to these events, serves as a broken prophet in a ruined world. His reflections, though self-absorbed, offer a narrative of grief—for Oryx, for Crake, and for a planet undone by the very technologies it once celebrated. Through his fragmented memories and guilt, Atwood reveals that grief itself may be a form of ecological and feminist resistance: the recognition that something sacred has been lost, and the story must still be told.

Thus, *Oryx and Crake* extends Atwood's ecofeminist vision into a world shaped by scientific colonization and ethical detachment. The commodification of nature and women leads not to progress, but to obliteration—an obliteration that, ironically, attempts to mimic harmony by erasing all difference. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* construct dystopian visions that are chillingly rooted in real-world trajectories—climate collapse, patriarchal control, capitalist commodification, and the devaluation of life. Through ecofeminist analysis, it becomes clear that Atwood is not merely chronicling the destruction of the environment or the oppression of women, but exposing their interlinked subjugation under the logic of patriarchal mastery. In both novels, nature and the female body are exploited, commodified, and ultimately silenced in the pursuit of purity, control, and profit.

The Handmaid's Tale presents a theocratic society where fertility—once a natural process—is transformed into a regulated state resource, while *Oryx and Crake* shows how corporate technocracy reduces life to genetic code and market value. In both, Atwood makes visible the violent logics of domination that underlie environmental degradation and gender-based violence. *Oryx* and Offred, though radically different in voice and setting, are united in their symbolic function: they embody the erased and abused aspects of the human and natural world—used, consumed, and displaced.

Atwood's works resonate powerfully with ecofeminist thinkers like Shiva, Gaard, and Plumwood, who have long argued that the domination of women and nature is not metaphorical, but structurally identical. These novels stand as literary counter-narratives that resist the systems they depict. They invite readers to consider what has been lost—biodiversity, emotional depth, ethical responsibility—and to envision forms of resistance rooted in care, connection, and storytelling.

Importantly, Atwood never offers simplistic resolutions. Her dystopias are not salvaged through violent revolution or technological salvation, but through the act of remembering, of bearing witness. Whether it is Offred's secret narrative or Snowman's fractured recollections, the insistence on telling and re-telling the story signals the beginning of resistance. In this way, Atwood aligns with the ecofeminist belief that healing begins with consciousness—awareness of the interconnections between human oppression and environmental destruction.

In a world where climate change, gender inequality, and technological overreach are no longer speculative concerns but daily realities, Atwood's dystopias feel less like fiction and more like warning. Her works underscore the necessity of ecofeminist awareness—not just in literature, but in policy, science, and cultural thought. By entwining the fates of women and nature, Atwood challenges us to rethink the foundations of our world and to begin, perhaps, from the ruins, to imagine something more just, more sustainable, and more human.

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