

# Seeds of Survival: Indian Ecological Wisdom and Dystopian Futures in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy

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## ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy articulates urgent ecological anxieties that resonate strongly with Indian traditions of environmental ethics and ecological justice. Drawing implicit parallels with the philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi, Vandana Shiva, and ancient Indian ecological thought rooted in Vedic and Puranic traditions, Atwood's dystopian vision foregrounds the ethical consequences of anthropocentrism, unrestrained scientific experimentation, and corporate-driven modernity. Through a parallel reading of Atwood's speculative fiction and canonical Indian ecological discourses, this paper argues that the trilogy critiques dominant Western models of progress while gesturing towards alternative eco-centric paradigms embedded in Indian intellectual and spiritual traditions. In the context of growing Indo-Canadian academic engagement and global debates on sustainability, Atwood's narratives function as cautionary tales advocating ecological responsibility, ethical restraint, and harmonious coexistence with nature.

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, environment, Margaret Atwood, Vandana Shiva, ecology, Indian

What if we continue down the road we're already on?

How slippery is the slope?

What are the saving graces?

Who's got the will to stop us?

- Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake*

Interpreting globalization in terms of wealth creation, trading pacts and consumerism will not be definitive without appreciating the attitudinal shift in perspectives of ecology. "Glocalization", that encourages local initiative in line with the big picture, is the clarion call of new eco-movement that has eco-centric nature conservers as vanguards. Humanity is constantly informed by the varied facets of ecology that is little described in a dabble. Ecology is multi-dimensional and likewise, the approaches to appreciate it. Globalization and the sudden speed in human civilization heading for extremes in scientific endeavours usher many new situations that are unseen previously perhaps the opening words of this paper.

Eco-centricism is distinctly sanctified in Vedic values that preach human obligations to preserve the environment. Enshrinement of efforts to preserve nature in its pristine quality is evident in the sagacious reverence accorded by the saints in hymns that are didactic to the posterity to espouse benignity in a harmonious relation with nature. The philosophy in such sermons is composed of dispassionate and

matured responsibility and has the undertones of altruist wish to save salubrious and sufficient resources for future mankind. The traits of pagan cult in propitiating the forces of nature conveys the cosmic piety, good enough to be regarded as a divine inculcation in simple minded people far removed from the materialism and utilitarian concerns of modernity. The categorisation of ancient Indian texts based on their liturgical value undermines the divinity of knowledge borne by them and till modern times, no efforts descried Indian eco-consciousness from these texts.

Vandana Shiva, Ramachandra Guha, Arundathi Roy and others are concerned about the dangerous environmental hazards but these voices are not redressing the plight of the poor and marginalised who live in polluted and hazardous locales, in perfect disharmony with nature. The recent air quality condition in Delhi that was lamented in Delhi Peace summit a wakeup call to many power systems that subordinate environmental concerns before economics. Dirak Ficca in the summit made a strong appeal for transformation of thought and encompassed a broad section of people, united by the cause of helping cultures to peace and healing and willingness to contribute for social and economic justice, harmony and peace (Singh 108).

Nations and cultures are drawn closer on various ecological forums to address the onset of environmental crisis. In the Eco-summits, the first world respects the indispensability of the Third world to forge consensus on collective efforts and compromises. The well-evolved cross-national and cross-cultural academy is the data-providing and ideology-building intellectual arm of such pan-world deliberations. Canadian Studies have percolated into Indian academia and their compatibility, evident in Premananda's testimony (Ramamurthi 85), stems from mutuality in experiencing colonial and post-colonial; immigration and exile; multi-culturalism; consensual insights into racial, economic, psychological, social, demographic aspects and passion for nature. Chellappan contrasts India's ancient history with relatively recent origin of Canada nevertheless with past and multi-ethnic make-up contributing to sameness in the evolution of national literature of both the countries (Ramamurthi 89).

Margaret Atwood is more identified by the cosmopolitanism in her environmental concerns rather than being narrowly categorised as a Canadian novelist. She is an eco-feminist when one considers Stains quoting Frye in 1965 that there was no major Canadian writer whose readers can "grow up inside their work without ever being aware of a circumference" (19). She remarks in Red Shoes about Canadian identity and further says "None of us thought it was really possible to be a genuine writer and remain in Canada" (Sullivan 9). Atwood's *Survival* is critically acclaimed as a practical handbook on Canadian literature. Her *MaddAddam* Trilogy supplements the gaps left by Indian environmental writers and her writings are commentaries flavoured by her ingenious treatment of the otherwise despair inducing dystopian pessimism and gothic elements. Indian perspective through the lens of Atwood helps to envisage more progress and development along with harmony and contentment. The three novels in the Atwood's Trilogy are *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam*, for the pervasive portentous mood, are apocalyptic rather than, science fiction. The brilliant trilogy explores the world of terrifying corporate tyranny, the relentless Crakers, a humanoid species bio-engineered to substitute the human race.

Atwood makes a political statement against the desired authorial objectivity upholding that the connection between the writer and the society will increase in intensity as the society becomes the subject of the writer:

Far from thinking writers as isolated individuals,  
I see them as inescapably connected with society.

The nature of the connection will vary – the writer may unconsciously reflect the society, he may unconsciously examine it and project ways of changing it.” (S.W- 148.)

She creates an opinion that her novels are true reflections of the responses the world around her invoked in her and holds that the imagination puts shadowy forms of thought and feeling like heaven, hell, monsters and angels where a good look at them gives a better understanding of humanity, its wants and limits. For her, imagination is not a pastime or a duty but a necessity. She further says that writing novels and reading them have a redeeming social value because they probably force the reader to imagine being somebody else which is something everybody needs to know (157). In every novel of her trilogy she presents situations to describe the wildness of greed and overzealousness to achieve the uncanny and impermissible ones which can be a potential danger to the very existence of human life on earth. Misunderstood as progress, such trends are discussed in her novels which reflect the dystopian vision where the world turns into rubble of waste resting on the very dead body of civilization and history.

The dystopian view is very similar to that of the concept of pralaya discussed in Indian mythology and philosophy. Indian version of pralaya which has a parallel of Forty days rain in Bible is the point where Atwood tries to reconcile the eastern ethos of respecting nature and the dire consequences that ensue in case of the reversal, with the growing clamour against anthropocentrism in the western world. Her earlier novels like *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale* also has the same features of human excesses leading to a disastrous collapse of civilization and the onset of a paradigm which is grim, gothic and unnatural to extent of being tasteless, loveless and cruelly materialistic. There is a continuous representation of human being as existing outside nature and not a part of nature. His manipulations of nature with trees, animals and human anatomy unmindful of the repercussions causes the reader to synchronise with Atwood's perception of considering a human being as an agent of disaster and chaos instead of the one who is considered above the rest of the creation to oversee the creatures, tend them and co-exist with them after receiving his due from nature which is the notion justifying human existence as per Judeo-Christian versions.

However, refuting the Judeo-Christian paradigm and the Western Great Chain of Being which places human being at the helm of affairs in natural order of creation is not a clear acceptance of Eastern paradigm with nature centred view. But Atwood could be placed in the class of thinkers like Lynn White, Roderick Nash and John Passmore. White in his “The Historical Roots of our Environmental Crisis” despairs the possibility of science and technology as solution to human problems and believed in the Eastern notions of considering all the elements of nature as deities which is also reiterated by Nash. Atwood's philosophy is closer to Passmore's thoughts where he advises the western world to solve their ecological problems only by giving up their analytical and critical approach which they painfully learned. With this aspect one could understand Atwood's inclination towards the Eastern norm of relation with nature where the Western materialistic, critically analytical, physical, progress driven, dispassionate and neutral approach to nature to address the world problems of hunger, thirst and shelter. Instead the oriental compassion driven and ethicality associate in human dealing with nature as the options for sustenance is perceived in her novels. The characters in her novels whether they are heroes or anti-heroes raise their voice for such emotional contact with nature replacing the utilitarianism that is espoused in the Western outlook.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the protagonist Jimmy condemns himself to transgress medical and Bio-ethics as he causes his expertise and knowledge in genetic engineering and creative skill to transplant human organs into pigs. He apotheosises himself for his ability to alter nature's formatting but destined at the climax to be confused, lonely, hallucinating and traumatised. Atwood laments the world as "one vast uncontrolled experiment" and "the doctrine of unintended consequences is in full spate" (267). Crakes associates work on ultra modern inventions and plans like wall paper that changes to match your mood, headless chicken "growth units" that produce twenty breasts in two weeks and a range of medical and cosmetic treatments. Hammill provides real time connections in the scientific efforts which Atwood reflects in her novels in gothic colour (530). The experiments intended to surpass the limits of creation finally end in misery. Atwood's renowned novel *Oryx and Crake*, leaves the readers at liberty to personalize the circumstance and suggest possible alterations that they could conceive.

The miasmal waste pervading the narrative in which Snowman survives the disaster to live a life of caveman: a reversion to the era when man was idyllic and ignorant. But Snowman who is all aware of the perversions he dreamt in the name of science is the exact opposition of the caveman but a standing example to explain how the edifice of civilization, that lies between the early man and his near equivalent at the end, melts with the actions of human being who dream of things not permitted by nature. Margaret Atwood presents the history of human civilization in the cyclic interpretation when the human civilization commenced with pagan reverence for nature which degenerated to a state when human being trespassed every rule that sustains nature. The collapse of the city, the remnants of civilization like the things Snowman collects on the beach, the ugliness of his transformation and the sigh of despair expressed by Snowman yearning for the lost happiness and comfort signify the end of civilization. Hindu notion of civilization is cyclic and explains the passing of time from one yuga to the other where every yuga rolls back with a step up in the greed and cruelty of human being. The destruction of the world caused by extremities of greed i.e. the end of Kali Yuga is portrayed by Atwood in the novel. "... there's a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly glow (3) The offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette against it, rising improbably out of the pink and pale blue of the lagoon. (4) distant oceans grinding against the ersatz reefs of the rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sounds almost like holiday traffic" (1). The opening lines of the novel present the end of civilization, loss of brightness of the Sun, the ruined buildings and destroyed cars and the similar description equates the description of the end of the Kali Yuga when all the built up of human endeavour is laid to waste. Atwood brings the reader close to this concept of Indian belief in the end of the world as it is warned and predicted by many ancient texts which explain the over consumption or squandering of nature's wealth that eventually causes the civilization to perish. As mentioned in many Hindu texts the features of Kali Yuga like greed, arrogance and impertinence to values is visibly described in the manner in which the protagonist turns the world into a lab for his weird experimental ambitions.

Related to the concept of Kali Yuga, the protagonist Snowman in his earlier conditions fits exactly to the description of Kalkian personality described by Adoni like extreme self-sufficiency; unbearable arrogance; overestimation of intellectual supremacy; contempt for ancient wisdom and culture; massive sexual indulgence or excessive sexual repression. Adoni further says that very strong Kalkian personalities are extremely proud of their current "modern society" and believe that our contemporary wisdom is unsurpassable. Adoni believes "There is a tendency to have a certain type of messiah like complex in regards to the sapience of modern science and medicine thousand other ridiculous ideas of the sort are advocate and promoted to not only adults but to children as well" (14-15).

The second book of Trilogy, MaddAddam, The Year of the Flood, has Toby, Ren, Amanda and few others who survived a waterless flood and try to protect themselves from criminally insane painballers and from pigeons. They share some of their past experiences of ten years ago before the pandemic disaster wiped out the face of the earth. In their fight for survival, they meet the thriving God's Gardeners who celebrate good environmental practices. The peaceful green resistance group, Eco-cult proclaimed environmental ethics by their way of living and venerate the efforts of environmentalists like Rachel Carson, Mahatma Gandhi, and Anil Agarwal etc., to emotionally relate human with nature. The Year of the Flood ends after promising a light at the tunnel's end as the characters uphold ethical treatment of nature. Despite their pathos and haunting guilt, the survivors resolve to save the environment. Later, a new religion is founded by Zeb who emerges as MaddAddam. The followers of this religion are newly formed Gardeners trying to search for their founder Adam One who is missing. The novel The year of the Flood unfolds the need for an organic way of living and protecting the environment.

This novel equally describes the post apocalypse with diminished reserves of food and comfort. It presents a gruesome state of affairs with people consuming contaminated food and still liking it:

Yes, there was a bone in the soup. Yes, it was a smelly bone.  
I know you do not eat a smelly bone. But many of the children  
of Oryx like to eat such bones. Bobkittens eat them, and rakunks,  
and pigeons, and liobams. They all eat smelly bones.” (4)

The earth is devoid of healthy food due to the contamination that is pervading all over. Here Margret Atwood points at the Indian idea of Mother Earth which provides healthy food to its children. In the good times of innocence, the Earth gave out grain, the trees were laden with fruits, the rivers with sweet water and good fish. Atwood points at the concept of “Future Shock” which Toffler calls as disease of change because man has failed to adjust himself to the unimaginably rapid changes and technological developments (79). In Dighanikaya's Simgalavadasutta Buddha narrates to Simgaloka that one need to be like a bee which does not harm the fragrance or beauty of the flower and draws the nectar from it to convert into honey. Similarly, a human being is expected to make a legitimate use of nature so that he can rise above nature and realise her inner potential (Batchelor and Brown Ed. 22). The God Gardner's Feast of Saint Julian has its own prayer like constitution:

The universe is held in the hollow of His hand as Saint  
Julian of Norwich taught us in her mystic vision so long ago.  
Forgiveness must be offered, loving kindness must be practiced,  
circles must be unbroken. All souls mean all, no matter what  
they may have done. At least from moonrise to moonset” (507).

This prayer is close to the prayer in Vedas:

Om SahaNau-Avatu / Saha Nau Bhunaktu /  
Saha Viiryam Karavaavahai /  
Tejasvi Nau-Adhiitam-Astu Maa Vidvissaavahai /

Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih  
(Aum! May He protect us both together;  
may He nourish us both together;  
May we work conjointly with great energy,

May our study be vigorous and effective;  
May we not mutually dispute (or may we not hate any).  
Aum! Let there be peace in me!  
Let there be peace in my environment!  
Let there be peace in the forces that act on me!

The third book of the Trilogy, *MaddAddam* begins with the hope to rejuvenate the lost world with green movement with characters engaged in desperate attempts to rebuild the loss. Once again, Atwood mentions of Vandana Shiva of seeds (208), as the seed brings forth a tree to bear fruits and give shelter to the other creatures, so the efforts of Vandana Shiva is praised as tireless warrior against bio-piracy and with all purity of spirit and strength of her resolve, Vandana Shiva “gave herself for the good of the living vegetable” (208).

Atwood remarks about stalwarts whose lives mirrored their love for environment particularly referring to Gandhian vision of non-violence and canonises him as Saint Mahatma Gandhi (429) for his noble deeds, simplicity, peace and harmony with nature. *God’s Gardeners* promote the Gandhian ways of love and service to mankind, wise use of technology and natural resources. Anil Agarwal, who broadcasted the nature-friendly life-style in India, has proposed limited application of science and technology. Atwood obliquely refers to the above idea, and the writer’s celebration of Indian environmental thinkers emanates from a profound understanding of the ideals they proliferated. Sumi Krishna mentions of different philosophical approaches including,

‘Gandhian, socialist, humanist, Marxist, liberal, democratic and others’, while the popular Gandhian approach permeates a large section of public understanding of environmental crises; managerial discourse is scientific in its understanding of environmental problems while radical discourse has more militant attitude towards socio-political activism, however, ignores environmental crises as a problem (411-12).

Atwood’s zealous crusade bears Gandhian approach to enlighten people about the melt down, while the managerial and radical discourse is borne by agencies like *Eco-cult* and *God Gardeners*. Harry Blair discusses four Hindu approaches towards nature as the first appreciates the exploitation of nature endorsing ecological and social order; the second espouses a mutually beneficial co-existence where there is due reciprocation between human society and the entity of nature and emphasizes the important of sustainability; the third category believes in a romantic relation with nature, placing ultimate reality in the natural world and the fourth one is the ascetic withdrawal from nature in an anti-omnivore position, an idealistic eco-friendly ethic (185). The novels in the Trilogy has all the above approaches and being speculative fiction, Atwood designed her novels after the apocalypse and the destruction that ensued in every context, the pathos signified, the happiness lost, the contamination that pervades – in all words and thoughts of the characters the painful nostalgic yearning for the past is evident. *Snowman* realises the path assigned to everyone and the voice inside his head exhorts everyone to tread on a path and be unconcerned about the nature of the path. “All one need to worry is the grace and strength and patience with which each and every one of us follows the sometimes challenging ...” (26)

Atwood finds science as merely an instrument to describe the world and a better one would not be without love (429). Zhang moderates this position pointing that technology is neutral and hold the possibility of both good and bad. He opines that Atwood does not object science and reminds her of the Hot Type Interview where Atwood supports that imagination allows us to ponder before action, the vital query about “what kind of world we want” and Zhang concludes that we are given “the responsibility to choose” (329-30). As Sumi Krishna mentions of different philosophical approaches including ‘Gandhian, socialist, humanist, Marxist, liberal, democratic and others’, while the popular Gandhian approach permeates a large section of public understanding of environmental crises; managerial discourse is scientific in its understanding of environmental problems while radical discourse has more militant attitude towards socio-political activism, however, ignores environmental crises as a problem.

All the three books reflect Atwood’s condemnation of the miasma civilization has created in the name of progress, technology and invention. A gruesome note of rotting and withering is struck in Snowman’s portrayal as a bird forgotten how to fly, his feathers fell out, cold and needing a second skin to wrap himself up; either because he’s missing his main thing, and he doesn’t want us to see. Snowman is sad and deserted. (9) When Crakes children ask for feathers: No, he says. Crake says you can’t. No feathers for you. Now piss off ... but his nature is not fully understood (10). There is no telling what he might do (2). The same is represented in Ecology and Equity by Gadgil and Guha representing India as a veritable cauldron of social conflicts caused because of control and use of natural resources (2).

Atwood identifies writers not as totally isolated individuals but as are “inescapably connected with society”. She says that the intensity of the connection may increase as he unconsciously reflects the society and unconsciously examines the society. Yet she denies any tendency to read her writings as autobiographical (Staines 22). Atwood’s key note address at the Jaipur fest on 31<sup>st</sup>Jan. 2016 and her views on historical and dystopian fiction accentuate her tendentious writing with purpose. Her seven golden points impressed Indians about her crusade to save earth and one identifies the points as the major themes of her novels: Historical and dystopian fiction; inspiration for The Heart Goes Last; Justin Trudeau; Game of Thrones; Superhero with an Identity Crisis; High and Low Culture and Women’s rights. Hatch refuses to polarise Atwood as a high priest of nature and even as contemporary eco-critic for the reason she rejected anthropocentrism like other eco-critical writers but she never nature as the principle theme of her novels. Hatch makes a nobler approach to define Atwood by identifying the trend to breakdown the too easy assumption that “the individual is a being too entirely separated from environment and concludes that in her novels, the environment - land or urbanscape plays a crucial role in “revealing the problems associated with individualism” (181).

The underprivileged and marginalized, especially those living in poor environment, need someone to voice out their feelings. Human has to self-realise and reflect on the futuristic vision of Atwood through which she tries to voice out the need for Indian environmental justice and march towards peace and harmony. Cranny-Francis mentions that a reflexive mechanism is designed to obviate the escapist response associated with dystopia. Since the reader feels relieved of being in a better condition, “the academic rhetoric of the final section demands a response from the readers which necessitates ... a rereading and recognition of the political significance of [Atwood’s] text” (141). The recognition of the political significance of the Atwood text lies not in the sigh of distress to accuse science, materialism, western modern scientific parochialism and capitalism as the culprits but the concreteness of the political significance lies in what Gadgil and Guha teaches not be content with identifying impersonal abstract forces mentioned above but to commit to a proper social -scientific analysis that might “locate these

individual actors in a wider context or undertake something that would give flesh and bone to broad concepts like ‘capitalism’ or ‘science’ (1).

### Conclusion

Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy, when read alongside Indian ecological philosophy, reveals a profound convergence of ethical concerns across cultural contexts. Her dystopian narratives function not merely as warnings but as invitations to reimagine humanity’s relationship with nature. By foregrounding the consequences of ecological arrogance and celebrating models of ethical coexistence, Atwood’s work resonates deeply with Indian traditions of environmental justice.

In an era of accelerating environmental crises, such cross-cultural literary dialogues assume critical importance. Atwood’s speculative futures compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths while gesturing toward sustainable alternatives grounded in responsibility, humility, and reverence for the living world.

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