New Horizons in English Studies 3/2018

LITERATURE

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Women, Nature and Capitalist Patriarchy: An Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009)

Abstract. The aim of the following paper is to analyse Margaret Atwood's 2009 speculative fiction novel *The Year of the Flood*, drawing from the theories of such ecofeminist critics as Maria Mies and Karen Warren. The paper discusses the parallels between the exploitation of nature and animals as well as the oppression of women in the capitalist patriarchy. It explores the construction of women, nature and animals as dominated Others. Special attention is paid to the metaphors binding women and nature as well as to the development of ecological consciousness in female characters. Atwood undoubtedly criticises capitalism as well as genetic engineering, which contribute to the pollution and devastation of nature as well as have negative impact on human beings.

Keywords: ecofeminism, women, nature, animals, Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, capitalism, patriarchy

Introduction

As Shruti Das notices, "the present society is built on the premise that humanity must dominate nature for its development" (2016, 50). It is noteworthy that human beings are considered to have such a substantial influence on the environment that a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, has been declared. The biologist, Eugene S. Stoermer, and Nobel laureate in chemistry, Paul Crutzen, argue that the new epoch began around 1950 and is marked by an array of such signals as the radioactive elements spread across the Earth by nuclear bomb tests, soot from power stations, plastic pollu-

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7295-8619 DOI: 10.17951/nh.2018.3.112

tion, striking acceleration of carbon dioxide emissions, sea level rise, the global mass extinction of animal and plant species, as well as the transformation of land by deforestation (Steffen, Crutzen and McNeill 2007, 614).

Ecofeminists consider domination over nature in the capitalist societies to be connected with domination over women. The French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, explains this relation in her book, *The Second Sex* (1968):

> Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings nature inspires in man. He exploits her; and she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will; Nature is a vein gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and he is the supreme reality; she is contingence and Idea, the finite and the whole; she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself (De Beauvoir 1968:144).

It can be noticed that in predominantly patriarchal societies reason and culture are associated with man, who is considered to be the "Self." In contrast, women are associated with nature and are considered to be "Other" from the dominant men and culture. Ecofeminists see the cause of environmental degradation and women's oppression in these hierarchical dualisms.

Contemporary female writers have been drawing attention to the environmental crisis as well as the oppression of women in capitalistic patriarchal societies; Canadian writer Margaret Atwood is one of them. This paper is a study of her 2009 book *The Year of the Flood* from an ecofeminist viewpoint. The novel constitutes the second part of the well-known *MaddAddam* trilogy and gives an account of events depicted in the first part, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), from the perspective of two female characters, Toby and Ren. The main aim of this paper is to explore Atwood's view of the connection between women and nature as well as indicate parallels between the exploitation of nature and women in the novel. Special attention is paid to metaphors binding women and nature as well as to the development of ecological consciousness in the two female characters. Atwood criticises capitalism as well as genetic engineering, which contribute to the pollution and devastation of nature as well as have a negative impact on women's lives.

Women, nature and capitalist patriarchy

Unlike *Oryx and Crake* (2003), which takes place in the Compounds, i.e. the area where the privileged elites live, *The Year of the Flood* is set in the dangerous, peripheral districts known as the Pleeblands. Similarly to the first book of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, the novel begins in a postapocalyptic world; however, the nature of the disaster which has occurred is not initially revealed. While Atwood's 2003 novel is narrated from the male protagonist's point of view, *The Year of the Flood* is told from the perspective of two women, Toby and Ren. Their stories intertwine with each other and are told in flashbacks. Both

women reminisce about the time before the catastrophe, when they were members of the "God's Gardeners" eco-religious movement. The Gardeners attempted to live in harmony with nature and make preparations for the so-called Waterless Flood:

> A massive die-off the human race was impending, due to overpopulation and wickedness, but the Gardeners exempted themselves: they intended to float above the Waterless Flood, with the aid of the food they were stashing away in the hidden storeplaces they called Ararats. [...] Thus they would survive to replenish the Earth. Or something like that. (Atwood 2009, 34)

The Gardeners are led by Adam One, who predicted the disaster, which they call the "Waterless Flood" referring to Noah's flood story. Since the Gardeners attempt to live in harmony with nature, they manage to survive. The members of the cult grow their own food, refrain from the usage of pesticides and other chemicals, and practice recycling as well.

One of the members of the movement, Zeb, founds an organization known as Madd-Addam, which consists of scientists who have left corporations. They act as bioterrorists with the intention to destroy the centre of power; hence, they have, for instance, designed mice which attack cars as well as microbes that devour asphalt. They are blackmailed and manipulated by Crake into working on his project, known as Paradice: "they ended up as brain slaves in a place called the Paradice Project dome. It was a choice between that and being spraygunned, so they took the jobs" (Atwood 2009, 333).

The first part of the "Paradice" project involves engineering and distribution of the pill called "BlyssPluss," which contains a virus that is supposed to exterminate nearly the whole humanity. It is the result of Crake's concern about the "demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades [in some deprived areas, yet soon] the demand is going to exceed supply for everyone" (Atwood 2003a, 295). As he perceives human beings to be the source of the problem, he resolves to destroy the human species.

Although Jimmy believes that he is the sole survivor of the catastrophe, it is revealed in the second part of the *MaddAddam* trilogy that Ren, Toby, Amanda and two Gardeners have survived as well. One of the surviving Gardeners draws Ren's attention to Jimmy, "another guy down there – [sleeping] in a tree, [talking] to himself, crazy as a bag of snakes" (Atwood 2009, 396). He lives near a group of the so-called Crakers, i.e. self-reproducing human-like creatures engineered to die at the age of 30 and equipped with a strengthened immune system to overcome any disease.

The novel begins with a hymn, which reflects upon the devastation of the Earth by capitalists before the catastrophe. It describes a beautiful garden inhabited by animals and human beings, which is then devastated by "greedy Spoilers" (Atwood 2009, xi). Adam One draws attention to the southern shores of the Mediterranean, which were once a fruitful land, but have now turned into a desert (Atwood 2009, 90). What is more, he describes all the harm done by capitalist corporations:

> the Great Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico; and the Great Dead Zone in Lake Erie; and the Great Dead Zone in the Black Sea; and the desolate Grand Banks of Newfoundland, where the Cod once abounded; and the Great Barrier Reef, now dying and bleaching white and breaking apart (Atwood 2009, 196)

Throughout the novel, Adam One draws the Gardeners' attention to global warming and the rise of ocean temperatures, which has led to the shrinkage of fish species. The fishing industry brings lots of profit and boosts the economy, yet contributes to the extinction or reduction of numerous species. Moreover, some fishing techniques cause habitat destruction: "through the dragging of nets and hooks along the bottom of it, and through the slaughtering of all within it" (Atwood 2009, 196).

Adam One also criticises the practices that lead to the depletion of natural resources in the following lines: "we're using up the Earth. It's almost gone" (Atwood 2009, 239). It is noteworthy that the air is so polluted that the protagonists are forced to wear nose cones in order to protect themselves. In her 2014 book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, Naomi Klein, similarly to Atwood, places the blame for climate crisis and environmental degradation on corporate elites. Klein observes that the patriarchal capitalist economic system treats the Earth as a resource to be exploited in the name of economic progress (Klein 2014, 145).

In one of his speeches, the Gardeners' leader voices his opinion that nature destruction can be blamed on the dualistic hierarchy, which privileges man over nature and animals, reason and technology over instinct:

> […] the Fall of Man was multidimensional. The ancestral primates fell out of the trees; then they fell from vegetarianism into meat-eating. Then they fell from instinct into reason, and thus into technology; from simple signals into complex grammar, and thus into humanity; from firelessness into fire, and thence into weaponry; and from seasonal mating into an incessant sexual twitching. Then they fell from a joyous life in the moment into the anxious contemplation of the vanished past and the distant future. (Atwood 2009, 188)

Man masters and exploits nature through science and technology. Corporations manipulate nature and animals when they perform experiments on animals. As a result of biotechnological interference, numerous species became extinct. The Companies also exploit various bioforms, which threaten people and animals. In contrast, the Gardeners are vegetarians, since they perceive human beings and animals as a part of the ecosystem. They refuse to eat meat simply so as to protect animal life and preserve species. It is worth noting that technology is also represented as a means of control. To be more precise, the police appointed by the corporations, the CorpSeCorps, insert micro-chips into bees at a larval stage so that these flying insects can serve as spies.

The Gardeners reinterpret the teachings of the Bible so as to encourage all the members of their cult to take a biocentric approach to nature. It is noteworthy that spiritualist ecofeminists, such as Susan Griffin and Charlene Spretnak, consider the

Judeo-Christian beliefs that God gave human beings dominion over earth, to have led to the destruction of ecosystems. Interestingly, the Hebrew Bible emphasises that animals were created by God in order to be companions and helpers for Adam; then Eve was created to perform this role as well. The account reinforces the notion that nature and women are intended to serve "Man." The ecofeminists assert that, unless patriarchal religions such as Christianity and Judaism reject the idea of an omnipotent male spirit, females ought to abandon churches and the oppressive confines of synagogues, and practice "earth-based spiritualities" (Tong 2014, 260). As far as the Gardeners are concerned, they accept the Darwinian theory of evolution, which claims that humans have evolved from primates; hence, the humans are not ascribed any features that would make them superior to nature and animals. According to Adam One, human beings failed to follow God's rule to "live the Animal life in all simplicity" (Atwood 2009, 52). In this way, the Gardeners reject the Jewish-Christian tradition, which has contributed to the instrumental and hierarchical treatment of nature and women.

Furthermore, the Gardeners perceive overpopulation as one of the crucial factors contributing to environmental degradation. As the leader notices: "God's commandment to *replenish the Earth* did not mean we should fill it to overflowing with ourselves, thus wiping out everything else" (Atwood 2009, 53). They are in favour of restrained sexual behaviour; consequently, only people who have exchanged green leaves as a sign of marriage can engage in sexual intercourse. Since they perceive death as a gift, the Gardeners reject the idea of expanding lifespan by taking medications engineered by corporations.

Toby and her family are also represented as victims of capitalist forces. To begin with, Toby's mother falls ill as a result of taking supplements engineered by the corporation she was working for. Since no governmental organisations function, public health service appears to be non-existent. Instead, pharmaceutical laboratories produce pills that are actually harmful to health and cause illnesses, so that they can sell a cure for the disease and gain profit. Pilar, one of the Gardeners, warns Toby that: "those Corporation pills are the food for the dead [...] Not our kind of dead, the bad kind. The dead who are still alive. We must teach the children to avoid these pills – they're evil" (Atwood 2009, 105). Atwood depicts the dangers of inappropriate use of science, yet the author actually considers the greed and loss of moral values in capitalist societies to be the main cause of environmental destruction. The writer explains it in her interview for Random House:

> Science is a way of knowing, and a tool. Like all ways of knowing tools, it can be turned to bad uses. And it can be bought and sold, and it often is. But it is not in itself bad. Like electricity, it is neutral. The driving force in the world today is the human heart – that is human emotions. […] Hate, not bombs, destroys the cities. Desire, not bricks, rebuild them. (Atwood 2003b)

Corporations contribute significantly to the death of Toby's father. When the man refuses to sell his land and thus defies one company, he loses his job. In a struggle to find a cure for his wife's mysterious disease, Toby's father spends all his money and

sells their house. Her mother dies in the end and her father commits suicide by shooting himself, since the costs of his wife's treatment ruined him mentally and financially. It is noteworthy that it was illegal to keep weapons at home: "CorpSeCorp had outlawed firearms in the interest of public security, reserving the newly invented sprayguns for themselves" (Atwood 2009, 24). As one can see, corporations introduce changes in policy that help them establish superiority over the average people. In this situation, Toby resolves to bury her father as well as her identity so as to avoid being detected by the CorpSeCorp and suffer the consequences of having kept the gun at home.

The CorpSeCorp has put Toby into a difficult position. She seems to be left on her own, without a college education or money. She rents a room in a building where endangered species are secretly killed. Although it is illegal and high fines must be paid for such wrongdoing, people continue to do so since it is highly lucrative. Since the whole governing system is corrupt, the trade expands steadily. In order to survive, Toby first sells her hair, but then she proceeds to sell her egg cells. As she wants to donate her egg cells for the third time, she discovers that she was sterilised during a botched egg removal. However, she is not compensated for the damage made to her.

Instead of receiving help, poor women are treated as objects to be exploited in the capitalist society. Toby's body is simply commodified. Corporations who are profit-oriented do not care about the results of their actions. Furthermore, women's bodies are represented in terms of market value, as every part of their body can be described as a resource to be used. They seem to be perceived as a "standing – reserve," i.e. either as commodities themselves or as raw material to be exploited for the production of even more commodities.

Nature is commodified as well. At one of Toby's first places of work, skins of endangered animals are sold as costumes, while their meat is sold to a "Rarity" restaurant:

> The public dining room served steak and lamb and venison and buffalo, certified disease-free so it could be cooked rare – that was what "Rarity" pretended to mean. But in the private banquet rooms… you could eat endangered species. The profits were immense; one bottle of tiger-bone wine alone was worth a neckful of diamonds. (Atwood 2009, 31)

What is more, at SecretBurger, where Toby begins to work, burgers are rumoured to be produced from every kind of meat. Unsurprisingly, parts of human beings can be found in the burgers as well. It can be inferred that rare species are considered to be a commodity to be sold and eaten. Gruen draws attention to the construction of women and animals as dominated, submissive Others, which have sustained human male dominance (1993, 61). In Atwood's narrative certain parallels can be seen between the treatment of animals and women. Namely, they are both exploited by capitalist forces; their role in a postindustrial society is to serve. Furthermore, in the name of scientific progress, their bodies are abused as a result of medical research.

Blanco, the manager of the SecretBurger food chain, sexually exploits all his female workers. Any girl who attempts to escape is ruthlessly raped and eventually mur-

dered by him. Toby is reduced to a sexual commodity as well. The man constantly takes advantage of her: "Better, she should thank him: he demanded a thank you after every degrading act. He didn't want her to feel pleasure, though: only submission" (Atwood 2009, 38). Corporate police fail to provide women with help, as "the local pleebmobs paid the CorpSeCorpMen to turn a blind eye" (Atwood 2009, 33). Since the corporations are simply corrupt, young women are not protected against sexual violence and rape. As Seager points out, male violence is used in *The Year of the Flood* as a tool of domination (1993, 209).

Toby is saved by the Gardeners, more precisely by Adam One. The woman takes a chance to humiliate her former oppressor by kicking him in the head. Since she is aware of the fact that Blanco desires revenge, she lives in constant deep fear. When she joins the Gardeners, Toby becomes much more environmentally conscious. The woman becomes more sensitive to the suffering of animals, which is exemplified by the fact that she feels guilty and ashamed, when she accidentally smashes green beetles while collecting some spinach. Therefore, she prepares a tiny grave for them and asks for forgiveness. She also ceases to eat meat.

In God's Garden Toby can develop the skills and knowledge she acquired during her unfinished studies at the Martha Graham Academy. That is, she becomes an expert in horticulture. She is also Pillar's student, who teaches her which mushrooms are appropriate for treating certain ailments. The Gardener instructs her in what way to apply honey on wounds and how to talk to the bees about the news in the Garden. Women also prepare potions using the juice from the poppy plants, valerian, willow, and many other herbs. Injuries are cured with maggots, i.e. larvae of flies, which not only devour decaying flesh, but also destroy bacteria, whereas a spider's web is used to make a wound stop bleeding.

It is essential to pay attention to the protagonist's relation with animals, in particular with bees. Pilar guides Toby spiritually as well and introduces her to the flying insects. Pilar claims that Toby "can always tell the bees [her] troubles." Although Toby appears to be skeptical at first and "initially feels foolish" (Atwood 2009, 100), she gradually gets used to talking to them and begins to treat them as a source of support. When Pilar dies, Toby pays the bees a visit as she feels responsible for maintaining the relationship with them. What is more, when Toby is distressed, she appears to find comfort talking to the insects: "Stand by me,' she said to the bees. 'Be my messengers.' As if they could hear" (Atwood 2009, 254).

Moreover, the bees defend Toby when Blanco attacks her in the Garden. The protagonist runs away knocking beehives down. The bees form a line of defence, so as to protect Toby. Afterward she notices that "they'd sacrificed many of their own in the battle" (Atwood 2009, 255). That is why the woman treats them with respect, which is indicated by the fact that "she always [finds] herself using a formal style with the bees" (Atwood 2009, 258). In the world of destruction, it is her garden and the bees that bring her comfort. Interestingly, instead of turning to God, Toby turns to nature for help; she worships nature. Toby's spiritual connection to bees and nature indicates that women have a less dominating relationship with nature, which reflects the beliefs of spiritual ecofeminists.

Since the time Blanco carried out an attack on Toby and the Gardeners, her life has been in danger. She is forced to hide, and for her own safety her body is technologically modified. She is no longer recognised as Toby and becomes Tobiatha instead: "She'd gone in as Toby and had come out as Tobiatha. Less angla, more latina. More alto" (Atwood 2009, 350). Tobiatha seems not to recognise herself, since her eye colour, hair, skin tone, and voice have changed. Tobiatha begins to work as a manager in the AnnoYoo Spa and any personal information concerning Toby is erased. She changes her identity and has to fight for survival again.

Zeb, one of the Gardeners, recommends for her to think of herself as a chrysalis before metamorphosis. In this way, her transformation is compared to the life cycle of a butterfly. In fact, Toby's outer metamorphosis reflects the inner transformation she has undergone. As a result of the traumatic events Toby experienced, she has changed. Her transformation reflects the development of her environmental consciousness as well. Because of the Gardeners, she became aware of ecological problems and became spiritually connected to animals. Her metamorphosis into a butterfly is carried out with the aid of technology. She now constitutes a hybrid of nature and technology just as the genetically engineered animals in the novel.

Although the Gardeners seem to be ecologically conscious, both Toby and Ren appear to be sceptical about their actions and ideals. For instance, Toby asks: "Why be so picky about lifestyle details if you believed everyone would soon be wiped off the face of the planet?" (Atwood 2009, 47). What is more, after some time she notices that equality does not exist in the Gardeners' community: "Figuring out the Gardener hierarchy took her some time. Adam One insisted that all Gardeners were equal on the spiritual level, but the same did not hold true of the material one: the Adams and the Eves ranked higher" (Atwood 2009, 45).

Women can be leaders in the Gardeners' society. Toby gets the title of Eve; subsequently, she becomes much more respected and is given the chance to teach and influence other women in the Garden. She notices that the number of women leaders indicates "their area of expertise rather than their order of importance" (Atwood 2009, 45). The Gardeners fall victim to patriarchy, too. Although Toby is a leader, she continues to be objectified by male Gardeners, who draw attention to her beauty. For instance, Ren notices that it is inappropriate for Zeb to call Toby a "babe," as she performs the function of the Eve: "It's kind of shocking to hear Toby called a babe sort of like calling God a studmuffin" (Atwood 2009, 399).

The titles of Adam and Eve within the Gardeners' hierarchy resemble the Biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden, in which Adam is seen as superior to Eve. It is worthy to note that in this way Atwood criticises major monotheistic religions, which build power-relations contributing to the subordination of nature, animals as well as women. That is, females are perceived as inferior not only in the corporate patriarchal system, but they are also objectified and oppressed in the Gardeners' hierarchy as well. The author of the novel implies that the Judeo-Christian tradition is not only anthropocentric, but also misogynistic.

Attention should be also paid to the second female character, Ren. Readers learn her story in flashbacks. She grew up in the HealthWyzer Compound. When her mother, Lucerne, began a love affair with one of the Gardeners, Zeb, they moved to God's Garden, where Ren learned to live in harmony with nature. Lucerne's position within HealthWyzer's compound was subordinate to the predominantly male scientists. It is noteworthy that one out of three women leave the compound since they feel suffocated in the male technocratic environment. When Lucerne discovers that Zeb betrays her, she makes a decision to return to the compound with her daughter. Ren attends high school, where she meets Jimmy. She falls in love with him and they develop a romantic relationship. She later learns that he actually dates many other girls. Ren is sexually exploited by Jimmy, who manipulates women's emotions in order to make them satisfy his sexual needs. Ren is heartbroken and when she is reminded of Jimmy, she feels "dumped out and hollow" (Atwood 2009, 301). It seems that both Zeb and Jimmy treat women as usable objects.

Later, Ren studies humanities at Martha Graham Academy. She recalls searching for a job as a college graduate. Even with a degree, her career options are limited either to working at the AnooYoo spa or becoming a sex worker at "Scales and Tales." The corporations refuse to recruit Martha Graham graduates, as they search for "numbers people," i.e. experts in natural sciences, who have a practical approach to life (Atwood 2009, 294). In this way, reason and science are represented as privileged over intuition and humanities. What is more, the number of women working in the corporations decreases as well; they condemn the immoral practices of corporations and consequently abandon them. Just as Birkeland claims, gender imbalance and the devaluation of the *feminine* are mirrored in all spheres of the male-dominant institutions, i.e. science, economics, and planning, which directly influence the environment (1993, 32). This implies that feelings, empathy and intuition, associated with "femininity," are thought to be irrelevant.

Karen Warren asserts that these type of Western world beliefs, attitudes, and values have been shaped by oppressive patriarchal conceptual frameworks, which justify the relationships of domination in general and a male's domination of women in particular (2000, 105). As McHugh explains:

> Man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion exist as hierarchical dualisms in western thought with man, culture, mind and reason having higher value than women, nature, body and emotion. This conceptual dualism leads to the practical outcome of the valued half of the dualism having "power over" the devalued half and thus the "twin" domination of women and nature. (2012, 44)

In other words, these frameworks value hierarchical dualisms, which can be described as oppositional concepts that place higher value on what is identified as "male," "reason," "mind," than on "female," "body," "emotion."

Although Ren originates from the HealthWyzer Compound, her third-rate education, as well as lack of funds and connections present her with few choices. As she

possesses no resources beside her body and dancing skills, she resolves to work in a sex club called "Scales and Tales." The body is Ren's only resource that can provide her with financial profits. Ren explains her choice by the fact that she "needed to be on [her] own" and "wanted to be something else entirely" without "ow[ing] anyone, anything, or being owed anything either" (Atwood 2009, 301). She does not want to be constrained by her mother. Although sex work cannot be described as her dream profession, she perceives it as her best option.

"Scales and Tails" allows men to fetishize women, which reinforces patriarchal power. Ren and all the women working in the company wear the pieces of material that bear a resemblance to fish scales. They also often wear bird-themed "Biofilm Bodysuit" costumes. Thus, they resemble and are associated with animals, which are similarly oppressed and explored in capitalist patriarchy. When the plague breaks out, Ren is locked in a room of the sex club where she used to work before the Waterless Flood. She is saved by Amanda. The girls reunite with their childhood friends and flee into the woods in search of safety; subsequently, they are attacked by dangerous men known as the Paintballers. Ren is raped and severely beaten. The woman is rescued by Tobiatha, who initially fails to recognise her. She compares Ren to a wounded bird. It can be inferred that women are frequently described in animal terms.

Conclusion

Throughout *The Year of the Flood* Atwood criticises corporate capitalism and biotechnology, since she sees them as the source of environmental degradation. Atwood describes the effects of climate change and the exploitation of natural resources and pays attention to genetic engineering, which has led to the extinction of numerous animals. Bioengineers are condemned also for producing pills which are intended to kill people. Generally speaking, Atwood stresses the greed and loss of moral values among capitalists. It is an undeniable fact that man master nature through science and technology. In contrast, God's Gardeners represent a model of sustainable lifestyle. Their ecocentric practices help them survive the plague and save the human race.

Atwood establishes parallels between the biotech violation of species boundaries and sexual commodification of women. Both Toby and Ren are subordinated and exploited sexually. Their bodies are used for the satisfaction of lust and are considered to be a source of profit. The root of practical as well as conceptual domination of women and nature can be seen in the prevailing hierarchical dualisms existing in Western thought. It can be inferred by explorations of metaphors and comparisons, which bind women, nature, and animals, that Atwood depicts their societal subjugation.

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