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## **Dealing with Eco Feminine Subjectivity in Margaret Atwood's Novel**

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### **Abstract:**

Ecofeminism is the term which emerged with the movement rose in US during 70's and 80's. the movement for stopping or controlling the degradation of women and environment. Ecofeminism is the term which deals with depletion of women and environment. It draws a parallel line between misuse of nature and women. The term was first used by Francoise d' Eaubonne a French writer. Since then, various activist, socialist and scholars, authors are working on environmental issues. Margert Atwood a famous Canadian writer has been among such authors whose work clearly deals with ecofeminist perspectives her unnamed narrator of surfacing is in search of identity and relates herself with nature. The award winning The Handmaids Tale offers us the story of offered who become the silent toy of commander to whom she was ceded. Atwood has always been vocal about her view on ecofeminism whether it be through her books or through her work. The paper will deal with such perspectives on ecofeminism by Margaret Atwood.

**Keywords: Degradation, Ecofeminism, Environment, Nature, Women.**

### **Introduction:**

Margaret Atwood is a renowned writer of Canada who was born on 18 November 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. She is the second child of Carl Edmund Atwood, an entomologist, and Margaret Dorothy a former dietician. Atwood spent most of her childhood in North Quebec and kept on travelling in-and-out between Ottawa. As a reason she was unable to attend full-time school until the age of twelve. She attended Leaside high school in Leaside, Toronto and graduated in 1957 from Victorian college Toronto, where she was taught by the legendary writers Jay Macpherson and Northrop Frye. In 1961 she started pursuing her masters with the

fellowship and completed it in 1962, from Radcliffe College of Harvard University. In 1973 after separating with Jim Polk, an American writer, Atwood formed a relationship with fellow novelist Graeme Gibson who died in 2019. She wrote about Gibson in her latest poem *Dearly*.

Atwood being a living legend had a love for writing from very tender age. Her interest in literature invoked her to write professionally when she was just sixteen years old. She holds numerous honorary degrees from various institutes including the Sorbonne, NUI Galway as well as Oxford and Cambridge University. She has received more than fifty-five awards including two Governor General awards, the first she won in 1966 for "*The Circle Game*"; and the second for her 1985 novel, "*The Handmaid's Tale*, the sequel of which, "*The Testaments*" won her the Booker for second time. The list of awards won by Atwood is just endless.

Atwood is a well-established writer not only in Canada, but also internationally. Her works mainly poses Canadian approach which revolves around human actions that praises the natural world and castigates materialism. She is popularly known for prose fiction and feminism theme in her works, which deals with new beginnings perspective and role reversal. At teen age, her favorite writer includes the famous dark mystery story writer Edgar Allan Poe. She writes creative nonfiction and memoir as well as historical, speculative, science and dystopian fiction. Atwood writes in an exact vivid and witty style in both prose and poetry. Her novels are sarcastic jabs at society where her heroines fight for self and survival in society.

Though Atwood is always regarded as a feminist writer her environmentalist view point cannot be ignored and most of her fiction and non-fiction work has some or the other elements of environment, nature, and climatic change as the central themes. On reading the works of Atwood one cannot resist to find an inarguable theme dealing with the rights of women and environmental issues. Many of her works deal with eco-feminist perspective through understanding the relation and interconnection of women with nature which highlights that exploitation of environment and female comes from same sources that is patriarchy.

Ecofeminism is basically that branch of feminism that sees environmentalism with regard to women and earth as its foundation. The term was coined by the French writer. Though the scope of ecofeminism is very vast and dynamic, ecofeminist theory asserts on feminist perspective. Main points dealing with ecofeminism are:

- The term ecofeminism is coined by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book “Le Feminisme ou la mort” in 1974.
- Ecofeminism relates the oppression and domination of all marginalized groups (women, children, poor) to the oppression and domination of nature (animals, land, water, air, etc.)
- Ecofeminism analyze and explore the connection between women and nature
- It asserts that both women and nature should be respected
- It basically sees the relationship between the serious environmental damage done to earth and repression of women.

When it comes to defining ecofeminism, it is very vast subject and is not confined to one movement. A book “Ecofeminism” was also written in 1993 by Vandana Shiva a well-known author and ecofeminist of India. Ecofeminism is like a group of concepts and thoughts that emerged as a part of cultural movement in 1970s. Richard Twine the renowned researcher, author and environmentalist defines ecofeminism as

*“Differing accounts that wove together a perceived interconnection between the domination of women and nature”*

Ecofeminism includes both radical and cultural aspects as well. The former observes how man has been controlling and deploying earth and women from past so many centuries the latter focuses on, how ecological conditions affect women more than men hence it is a new way of approaching nature. Ecofeminism also aims to challenge the inequalities in gender, class, race that prevails in society.

Female being the main part of society becomes an integral subject for most of the novels worldwide and becomes the theme which has been common in most of the author from past many decades. Margaret Atwood is among one of such authors. Her novels cover the prevailing theme, dealing with quest for identity of protagonist. Feminism without a doubt has been widely explored in the novels of Margaret Atwood. She focuses on the issue with depiction of her enslaved female characters. For her feminism means,

*“Human equality and freedom of choice”*

Her most works whether it be *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Bodily Harm* (1981) *The Handmaid's Tale* (1983) *The Testaments* (2019) all provides a successful theme of feminism. Besides targeting the prevailing mindset of domination by male in society and modern capitalist society, these novels also provide the quest of heroines. Her first novel "*The Edible Woman*" is the story of a character who is confused between her marriage and career. She finds that she cannot eat and feels like being eaten. The novel is outstanding and went on to become a classic.

"*The Handmaid's Tale*" was written in 80s the time of pushing back. And what was pushing back is the uprising of different kinds of feminism. The capitalist society was in favor of putting women back at home in their rightful sphere (according to the so-called sphere developed by themselves). In the novel Atwood partly answers that question. If they are doing so and going to shut women back to the home and deprive them of all the facilities, then how would they do it and what would you do to reverse the steps that had helped to their being, control their jobs and the things they had at that point of time. The novel divides women into five categories according to their roles in Gilead including wives, handmaids, Marthas, aunts and unwomen.

When asked about "*The Handmaid's Tale*" feminism, Atwood replied to The New York Times

*"If you mean an ideological tract in which all women are angels and so victimized, they are incapable of moral choice, no. if you mean a novel in which women are human beings –with all the variety of character and behavior that implies –and are also interesting and important and what happens to them is crucial to theme, structure and plot of the book, then yes. In that sense many books are 'feminist'."*

"*Cat's Eye*" a novel of 1988 was based partially on Atwood's own life. The novel is about childhood in Canada in 1940s and 50s that talks about the young girl a social outcaste an occasional cruelty of female friendships.

Margaret Atwood's novel look at demonstration of feminism and politics in detail with extraordinary force. Most of her work shows the female protagonist as main subject of her novels and her search for identity. She recreates women's subject in her writing and work. Atwood began writing when woman's awareness was developing. Her novels depict women oppressed in

dominated culture while they look for their identity and freedom. Though her work has always been regarded as feminist by literary critic, Atwood doesn't want to be called so. She says that a term feminist can differ from situation to situation and time to time. She clearly says that feminism is not about believing women are always right. Her most famous and talked about work "*The Handmaid's Tale*" is very elaborative book dealing with feminism it explores the rights which women are deprived of, like to read and write in Gilead (fictional place) and their mere identity depends on the work they have been allotted to do, like handmaids who are regarded as walking womb. Her latest novel the sequel of "*The Handmaids Tale*", "*The Testaments*" gives a vivid portrait of female resistance, where Agnes and other under aged girls were sexually assaulted by Becka's father who was a doctor by profession. On being asked about the latest novel "*The Testaments*" Atwood says, "Green is new Red" defining the cover page of the novel. Her works deals with the problem of women's survival in the male dominated society and have always been dealing with power between men and women. The version of feminism supposedly puts women on a pedestal, even the model of angelic perfection. Another version claims women, "are so victimized they are incapable of moral choice" thirdly which Atwood seems most comfortable in promoting, is the feminism that states women are full and flawed human beings.

The book won 1985 Governor General's award and the first Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987 and also many other prestigious awards.

Ecofeminism relating to the rights of animal gave rise to vegetarian ecofeminism that asserts on omitting the oppression of animals from feminist and ecofeminist analysis. Many ecofeminists believe that meat eating is patriarchal. In an interview of 2009 Atwood has stated that

*"I shouldn't use the term vegetarian because I am allowing myself gastropods, crustaceans and the occasional fish, Nothing with fur or feathers though" and hence a Pescatarian.*

Climatic change and growth of industrialization has brought new tension with it, which effects both human and animal to a great extent worldwide. In early 1960s and 1970s the scholars of Canada focused their attention towards the genre of animal story this form of writing

includes authors like Margaret Atwood, Northrop Frye, John Sndols, James Polk, and Lucas. Margaret's "*Oryx and Crake*" focuses on a lone character Snowman, who finds himself in a critical situation of being accompanied with the creatures called Crakers. Who earlier was a real boy and was a peer of Jimmy named Glenn and the experiment and pharmaceutical engineering which occurred under the purview of Jimmy converted him into a creature. The work has been shortlisted for 2003 Man Booker Prize for Fiction as well as for 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction. This is also adapted as television serial.

The Ur-mother in "*Oryx and Crake*" is Mother Nature herself which is captured, tortured and mocked in classic gothic fashion but elusive and indestructible. Atwood repeatedly makes observation about relationship between animal and human in her works. A large portion of "*Oryx and Crake*" covers the genetic modification and change of animals into human which results in hybrids like pigeons, rakunks, wolvogs and crakers. Their main function is to make question on the limit and ethics of growing technology and advancement of science and the most importantly on what does it mean to be a human. Atwood and her work on animal and human relation is a prevailing theme in most of her novels one of the character of "*Surfacing*" remarks that-

*"The animals die that we may live, they are the substitute of people ....and we eat them otherwise: we are eaters of death, dead Christ -flesh resurrecting inside us, granting us the life".*

Power differential can have serious and fatal consequences on women and children. Many researchers, feminists, therapists, activists and scholars have recognized it long ago. Documenting the presence of problem in the society like rape, domestic violence, and childhood abuse are now the common and basic headlines of our day- to-day newspaper but what the women feel after such trauma is very uncommon and not explanatory. What all women have is commitment to share feminist values, which implicitly frame the questions they ask and the implication they draw from the answer. Various books and articles can be seen dealing with the topic. But what we have to understand is that it is not the problem of an individual but society as a whole. The burden of violence on women and environment which includes animal and earth itself has to be shared by community as whole. Its outcome is to be faced by the community itself. So it becomes our responsibility to understand and eradicate this social evil which prevails in society especially in present scenario. Women have always been regarded as body of use in

some or the other way and hence suffer the most. *“Life before Man”* (1979) *“Bodily Harm”* (1981) the two novels focus on Atwood working in a realist mode. The daily detail of a moment has been shown in *“Life before Man”* depicting unfulfilling relationship. Each book considers the relationship and violence and decay. Critics consider debate about the use of realism and fantasy in both of these novels.

*“Life before Man”* has been praised for the perceptive of realism. Margaret First realist novel and therefore some regard it has the best novel. Even its melancholy was judged powerful. However, many reviewers were not positive about the novel regarding it as a lifeless book. Sherrill Grace saw a selfish view, a grey and empty book, although in 1981-86 critics praised its moral realism and heroes’ struggle. Margaret Atwood a flag bearer of dystopian work has her inspiration from George Orwell whom she started to read at very early age. Talking about his *Animal Farm* and 1984 she said-

*“In time for it to appear as a lurid paper back with quite sleazy cover when I was of an impressionable age as a young teenager”.*

She always wanted to write a dystopian novel herself in order to understand how it feels to be a part of one. Dystopia is just reverse of utopia. Where everything is devastated and unbalanced and there is suffering prevailing everywhere. Atwood is brilliant in showcasing one. Her novels have always shown us the dystopian future.

Atwood has been Canada's most prolific writer from past many decades and the current situation has polished her reputation. She is always vocal about her thoughts. *“The Testaments”* marks her return to landscape of iconic dystopia after three decades. Liberal activist invokes Gilead as a warning of real world.

The signature handmaids uniform a red gown with white bonnet, have used at women's march for abortion ban protest throughout the world. Many commentators have gone so far to declare Donald Trump’s America as Gilead. Atwood used to dismiss the notion that her fiction was secretly telling the truth but *“The Testaments”* suggest that she has changed her mind *“Dear reader”* she writes in a promotional letter.



*“Everything you have asked me about Gilead and its inner working is the inspiration for this book. Well, almost everything! The other inspirations is the world we have been living in. In showing inside working, The Testament we see the power structure which Offred, in her confinement can't see. The novels revisit the form of The Handmaids Tale as well as its setting. Both novels follow the style written by female and ends with the male historian describing those sources from the perspective of the restored liberal democratic order”.*

Aunt Lydia, a notorious character of *“The Handmaids Tale”* is approaching the end of her life she writes all her accounts in secret. Other new character, a teenager speaking from somewhere beyond Gilead's reach: Agnes the granddaughter of commander, and Daisy who lives in Atwood's native Canada doesn't remember anything about Gilead. Each of these narrators' present decline and fall of Gilead. It offers all heroic action to its readers. The novel can be read in several ways, each relate to themes which run throughout Atwood's work. As a satire, it contains humor, and through that perhaps some vision, some hope, when wondering about how likely this dystopia is to become a reality. Atwood stands out amongst the most talented, versatile powerful and intelligent scholar in the west today. Throwing her vision of life in broad frame her strategies and a theme knows no restriction. Her accounts seek to the silence and sexual discrimination in female characters. Her heroines as a social being having a balance between nature and her. Her women are incomplete, glorious and insufficient. According to her own chronicles within her curious pursuits: Occasional Writing, fiction is the space where *“Individual memory and experience and collective memory and experience come together, in greater and lesser proportion”*. In Atwood's novel her women are every woman. She tries to remind us ladies' occupation and victimization through silence they must perceive as of political circumstances. As the novels elucidate the heroines go through introversion self-analysis and self-knowledge. At last, they appear to be more imagined, and increasingly helpful. The body in female characters isn't disconnected from their psyche and Atwood has laid weight on it all. As Dorothy Jones contends, Atwood account are constantly identified with ladies who are-

*“Powerless individuals got in devices conceived by the powerful here power associate the individual who traps either at large scale level as in the novel The Handmaids Tale, or at the miniaturized scale level as in the novel Cat's Eye and The Blind Assassin”*

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Edible Woman*, *The Blind Assassin* and *Cat's Eye* women activist perspective can be identified with politics and sexuality. Women have been abused in many ways by alleged supernatural man. It has always been the past rule followed that men are given more importance than women may be the reason that they are earning and providing social and physical security to family. But the role of women in society cannot be denied as they are the force which drives men to be what they are. And the present scenario demands the change in the way the man treats and regard woman. Atwood most works show this social imbalance between men and women. She shows through her novels how everyday life step by step were laid out.

### **Conclusion:**

Atwood's works clearly relate the coalition of power that applies physical, political, financial and social control over women to fragment her. In her works she affirms the thing that what man do woman can improve and her works concentrate on woman's acknowledgement of power control and mindfulness. The way that her victimized protagonist experiences the ill effects of explicitly female issues must be recognized too.

Her contribution for Canadian literature was recognized when she received Britain's highest literary award Booker prize in 2000 for "*The Blind Assassin*" and donated the prize money to environmental and literary cause. This shows Atwood is not only confined to writing but has dealt with climatic condition actively time and again, whether it be the reason of infertility among wives in "*The Handmaid's Tale*" or the biological catastrophe of "*Oryx and Crake*". Her concern has not only limited to her works but also in reality.

She has recently joined her hand for the project named Future Library. Where she is the first writer to contribute her work, which is being read after 100 years that is in 2114. Atwood has always raised her voice on environmental issues and also influenced people to care for Mother Nature. She recently through her tweet urged people to sign a petition, to make the planet a better place. She is also concerned about the global warming and warmth of ocean which is declining of oxygen we breathe. Atwood is also a part of "bird life international" which is recognized as world leader in bird conservation. Her trilogy "*MaddAddam*" won best environmental book of

the year by Orion magazine in 2014. Atwood is also an inventor of The Long Pen which is a remote signing device.

After receiving numerous honors and awards Atwood is just unstoppable even at her 80s. She has proved herself not only as the biggest name in contemporary literature but also as Canada's finest living writer, a famous environmentalist, inventor, teacher, literary critic, and many more is yet to come. Her critics, reader and fans are always desperate to know what is new she is up to. Being such an influential personality Atwood has left a mark not only in Canada but all over the world.

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