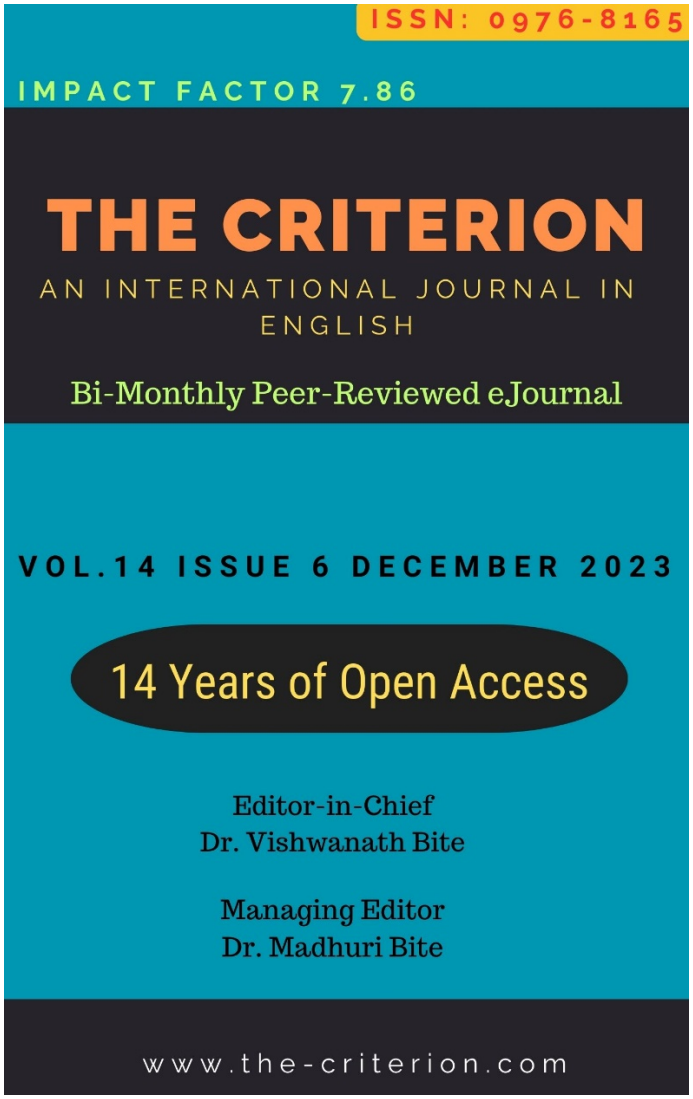

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Ecological Consciousness in Climate Fiction: A Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*

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Abstract:

This paper studies Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* under the rubric of Climate Fiction. It analyzes the implications of climate change and environmental concerns embedded in the literary text. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section considers the climate change phenomenon and its impact on the literary discourse in recent decades. The second section reads Atwood's text as Climate Fiction. Through textual illustrations, it seeks to substantiate how ecological concerns and climate change have pervaded writers' imaginations in recent times. The final section establishes the urgency of textual representations of climate change and the possible impact on altering human consciousness from ego-centrism to eco-centrism.

Keywords: Climate fiction, eco-centrism, sustainability, eco-consciousness.

Ursula K. Heise, while delineating the challenges faced by the ecocritical theory, concedes that ecocriticism, which began as a study of American nature writers like Thoreau, Fuller, Emerson, and of the British Romantics, has remained parochial in scope. As such it is yet not congruent with globalization and multiculturalism and needs to move from "subnational to the supranational" (386). For Greg Garrard, ecocriticism must maneuver two significant challenges—its relationship with globalization and the development of "constructive relations between the green humanities and the environmental sciences" (178). Thus, the nature-writing of the British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists has often been charged with anthropocentrism and localism. For Wordsworthian critic, Alan Liu, the goal of nineteenth century Romantic poetry has been to "carve the self" (506) through portrayal of nature.

As a literary theory that interprets the representation of nature in a text, that uncovers the unconscious anthropocentric ideology behind such representation, and that points to the

inadvertent anthropomorphizing of nature, Ecocriticism, the term itself been inaugurated as late as 1978, is a newly emerging area of study, and is seen as evolving from what Timothy Clark refers to as "old world Romanticism" (15) towards what Andrew H. Wallis calls a "global eco-consciousness" (852). In this transition from local to global, ecocriticism has to traverse a broad trajectory and embrace myriad concerns in its spectrum to truly address the pressing environmental concerns.

One such step links Ecocriticism to the genre of Science Fiction, in which efforts are made to locate environmental issues embedded in the Science Fiction narrative. While there are debates on the origins of Science Fiction, with Brian Stableford seeing Science Fiction as having its roots in the nineteenth-century writings of Edgar Allen Poe, Brian Atterbery in Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* (1926), and Adam Roberts in the Copernican Revolution of the sixteenth century, the genre itself has been subject to a unanimous charge of technophilia. However, a new wave of Science Fiction writing emerged in the 1960s, deeply informed by environmental concerns. Stableford sees the first strains of "ecological mysticism" (131) in the works of Clifford Simak and Hal Clement, calling them the pioneers of ecological science fiction writing. Beginning in the 1960s, a renewed environmental concern permeated the science fiction writing, leading "the renaissance of pastoral nostalgia" (Stableford 133). Leading examples include Richard Cowper's *The Road to Corlay* (1978), John Crowley's *Engine Summer* (1979), Kate Wilhelm's *Juniper Time* (1979), Norman Spinrad's *Songs from the Stars* (1980), Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1986), and Judith Moffett's *Pennterra* (1987). Stableford sees these works as marked by a "technological retreat" (133). However, he is also quick to point out the limitations of such anachronistic primitivism:

> The heavy emphasis placed by modern ecological mystics on the injurious effects of the Industrial Revolution and the growth of "megacities" deflects attention away from the fact that the whole history and prehistory of humankind have been very largely a matter of ecological management and control. Even before the development of agriculture and animal husbandry, hunter/gatherer societies had a very considerable impact on their environments, although we have only recently become aware of the extent to which supposed "wildernesses" like the Amazon basin were shaped and altered by human activity over long periods of time. (134)

Stableford is weary of such environmental mysticism that undermines the role of technology in society. A regression to a nostalgic past grossly devalues the role of technology in controlling or, in many cases, combating the environmental damage caused by unchecked consumerism and high capitalism.

While Science Fiction saw itself diverging towards an ecological consciousness, a new acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of technology permeated the genre, and as such, later ecological Science Fiction works like Ernest Callenbach's Ecotopia (1975) and Lois Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) coalesce environmental concerns with urban consciousness. Such works have been inextricable from what Philip E. Wegner calls the "utopian impulse," "the deeply human desire for an utterly transformed, radically other, and/or redeemed existence, a desire that manifests itself in a wide range of cultural documents" (79). This utopian impulse becomes manifest in Science Fiction through the depiction of either an ideally functional (utopian) or a dysfunctional (dystopian) society wherein conscious and sustained human efforts or reckless and mindless human actions intensely impact the individual human, the society, and the environment.

However, within the rubric of ecological Science Fiction, climate as a central concern remained conspicuously absent till the late 1960s, and it was even later that it was included in the sphere of literary theory. As Timothy Clark points out, Lawrence Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2004) does not mention climate change in its index. Climate Fiction, as a subgenre of Science Fiction, was not inaugurated formally until 2007, when Danny Bloom, commonly understood as having come up with the neologism, used the term concerning works that foreground the trope of climate change. Issues of global warming, melting of glaciers, and depletion of the ozone layer, with a stark decline in the availability of natural resources, comprise the central concerns of Climate Fiction, or Cli-Fi as it is more popularly called. Cli-fi bridges the gap between academic ecocriticism and environmental activism. For Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra, "when authors represent climate change as a global, networked, and controversial phenomenon, they move beyond simply employing the environment as a setting and begin to explore its impact on plot and character, producing unconventional narrative trajectories and innovations in characterization" (185). When Kate Soper exasperatedly pointed out in 1995 that it is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer, she not only sought to criticize the poststructuralist/postmodernist dictum of there being nothing outside of the text. Even nature is a mere linguistic construct but also anticipated a fresh wave of literature that foregrounds the eco-apocalyptic nature of contemporary reality as

it weaves its plot and characters in an inextricable pattern of actions, emotions and the physical environment.

Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!*, published in 1966, is set in an imagined 1999, when the world population has soared to a whopping seven billion, and the climate has been altered drastically such that the average temperature has risen, the exploding population leading to overconsumption of natural and manmade resources; Ian McEwan's *Solar*, published in 2010, focusing on the life of a Nobel-Award winning physicist, Michael Beard, who becomes a reluctant environmentalist when after having accidentally killed his assistant, he stumbles upon the assistant's research on generation and consumption of solar power; are some of the seminal texts that issue a warning against climate change induced by reckless consumption on the part of the humans. Another text that tackles the issue of climate change is Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood.*

Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* is the second text of the MaddAdam Trilogy, with Oryx and Crake being the first and final yet to be published. The two published texts that, according to Nazry Bahrawi, "are premised on the idea that unbridled human agency has indeed led to ecological abuse" (251), are set in a dystopic future. Critics have variously interpreted the narrative, with Paul Khillier categorizing the work as "critical dystopia," a term that he borrows from Tom Moylan, while Valeria Mosca acknowledges the "multiple genre affiliation" (38) of Atwood's text, and as such refuses to classify it into a water-tight category. Essentially dystopian, Atwood's text has evaded categorization, and as such, this paper, while acknowledging the problem in constructing categories, studies The Year of the Flood under the rubric of Climate Fiction and highlights those aspects of the novel that overtly address ecological concerns, and more specifically, anthropogenic climate change.

Revolving around a similar set of characters and set in a contemporary period, *The Year of the Flood*, instead of being a sequel of a prequel to *Oryx and Crake*, is, in Atwood's words, a "*simultaneouel*" (qtd. in Labudova, 185) as it shifts the focal point from Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake* to Toby and Ren, the two female protagonists who lend the narrative perspective to the text. The novel is set in the year twenty-five; after a pandemic, the "Waterless Flood" hits the planet, resulting in death and destruction and leaving the world "derelict" (3). The Waterless Flood is a human-induced viral infection that has caused a hoard of the population to melt into a pool of blood and guile. Featuring excessive consumption, capitalistic monopoly, sterilization of emotions, and loss of moral grounding, the text can be understood as T. S. Eliot's

"Wasteland" transported in time and space. Verena Bar enumerates the following aspects of climate change in the text – much higher radiation leading to skin cancer, warming of seas and oceans, and risk of extreme weather events like afternoon thunderstorms and noontime steambaths (5-11).

CorpSeCorps, short for Corporation System Corps, is a capitalist organization turned into a militant one that has taken over the affairs of society and controls not only the means of production, often treating its employees as guinea pigs for their bizarre scientific experiments, including DNA infusion, skin-color change, fingerprints implants, and genetic mutation. The story begins in the twenty-fifth year after the pandemic. Through the reminiscences of Toby, manager of the high-end AnooYoo spa, and Ren, a trapeze dancer at Scales and Tails, one gets a glimpse of the pre-flood world.

Before the flood, the society was roughly divided into the HelthWyzer compound, the CorpseCorps station where the experiments were undertaken, and Pleebland. In this ghetto, the experimentally produced goods are black-marketed. Surviving on the margins of Pleebland is the fringe cult, the God's Gardeners, a group of radical environmentalists that integrates Darwinian evolution with Biblical Genesis. Toby calls them "twisted fanatics who combine food extremism with bad fashion sense and a puritanical attitude towards shopping" (58). In this dystopian scenario, the animals are experimented upon. As such, there are scientifically modified pigs that are "too large and bulbous to be normal" (21), liobams—a genetically engineered cross between a lion and a lamb, and rakunks—a mix of skunks and raccoons. The excessive human intervention into what is natural and evolutionary has led to the Waterless Flood. Referring to David E. Klemm and William Schweiker, Bahrawi calls this "overhumanisation" (252) of culture and society, premised on the belief that humans are the center of creation and master of their own destiny.

Although the text refrains from overtly referencing climate change, the eco-apocalyptic concern is implicit. At the very outset, Atwood points out rising temperatures with the sun being "smaller, hotter" (17). Afternoons are marked by mist caused by excessive heat. Atwood refers to this as "noontime steambath" (114), and Toby naps during the heat of the day, as "trying to stay awake through the noontime steambath is a waste of energy" (114). Debra A. Miller points out that although climate can change due to natural causes and that planetary temperatures have varied by more than 20 degrees Fahrenheit (11.2 degrees Celsius) during the last 3,50,000 years (11), however, the nineteenth-century inception of the Industrial

Revolution accelerated the process. Referring to Al Gore's 2006 documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, she writes that "global warming may already be producing frightening weather, including stronger hurricanes, flooding, and torrential rains for some parts of the world, and record heat and drought in other areas" (6). This erratic change in climate precipitated due to global warming has been alluded to in the text through the depiction of afternoon thunderstorms and noontime steambaths.

A related effect of climate change and alteration in the physical environment can be seen in the water shortage and the drought conditions interspersed within the text. Toby uses the soiled laundry water to flush the toilet (20), while large parts of the planet are drought-ridden, "Wisconsin's covered with cow bones, ever since the big drought ten years ago" (67). This drought and change in geographical conditions is not only limited to what were once deserts, but even fertile lands like the Mediterranean basin have been laid waste, "Mediterranean - once fruitful farmland, now a desert" (109). Climate change has had a direct impact on the characters. Ren's friend, Amanda, suffers when drought hits her home state, Texas, and she, along with her family, is forced to lead the life of a refugee, leaving her house and property behind. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its 2014 "Summary for Policymakers," lists floods and droughts as two significant impacts of climate change on an ecosystem (5). And Atwood has skilfully woven this concern into the narrative.

Once again, referring to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*; Miller points out that climate change can result in numerous problems, including "new mosquito-borne disease pandemics to the loss of animal species, such as the polar bear, that cannot adapt quickly enough to the rapid temperature increases"(7). Literary texts have sought to address these concerns creatively. T.C. Boyle's *A Friend of the Earth* focuses on the loss of habitat resulting in the extinction of major animal species. *The Year of the Flood* also constantly references animal and plant species becoming endangered and extinct. Species like lions, tigers, and wolverines are fast becoming endangered. The luxury couture operation, Slink, which sold Halloween costumes over the counter and cured the animal skins in the backroom, provided its customers with luxury endangered species couture, including dyed wolverine and tiger-bone wine, "worth a neck full of diamonds" (37). Also, Toby's first job after she lost her parents and left the Martha Graham Academy was as a "fuzrooter" (37), putting on fake-fur endangered species animal costumes, and serving as advertisement posts, walking the high-end malls and designer boutiques. Atwood also draws attention to the depleting population of bees. Pilar, the beekeeper at the Edencliff Rooftop Garden, tells Toby that "the bees all over the world had been in trouble

for decades. It was the pesticides, or the hot weather, or a disease, or maybe all of these" (119). Related reference is made to Happicuppa coffee, which is sprayed with poisons, killing birds and peasants.

In this situation of excessive scientific intervention into nature, even humans are treated as mere subjects for gross experimentation. Toby discovers, to her horror, that her mother, who died of a mysterious disease, was, in fact, treated as a mere "guinea pig" (125) by the HelthWyzer, her mother's former employees, who work with the principal that illness is a very "design fault" (176). The pre-flood Atwoodian world is roughly dichotomized between the God's Gardeners on one side and the HelthWyzer personnel and the CorpsSeCorps on the other. While the former embrace radical green cult ideologies, the latter thrives on science and technology, especially bioengineering and gene mutation.

But Atwood also systematically points out the limitations of both. She exposes the internal conflicts within the radical environmentalist cults and thereby emphasizes the practical restraints that make it necessary to move from radicalism to liberalism. Although, as a group, the God's Gardeners are avowedly vegetarian in eating habits, individually, they often transgress and indulge in meat-loaded SecretBurgers. And even though the cult is essentially pacifist, the men folk, including Shackie, Croze, and Zeb, often get into street fights with the Pleebland residents. The God's Gardeners are opposed to scientific medication and treat all illnesses through alternative, herbal therapies; even open wounds are treated by introducing maggots to the dead skin and keeping a close watch on them. When Pilar is diagnosed with cancer, she ends up taking her life, as Adam One, the head of God's Gardeners, is strictly against hospitalization and conventional treatment.

Likewise, while HelthWyzer has successfully managed to intervene in biological processes and create genetically modified animals, and even cyborgs, like the one Ren has, a "robodog" (238), it has not been able to eradicate sickness. Atwood even suggests that the change in climate and increase in sun's radiation has caused a widespread infliction of skin cancer. When Shackie and Croze visit the beach, they try to catch the attention of bikini-clad women on the beach by merely saying the term "skin cancer" (179), such as its fear.

In this world of contrasting ideologies, the Waterless Flood is imminent, as God's Gardeners constantly remind Toby and Ren. It can perhaps be understood as a metaphor for the self-sustaining Gaia, the Lovelockian hypothesis of Earth as a living organism, adjusting itself and making an attempt to re-establish its equilibrium. Although the Waterless Flood is a

viral epidemic, it has been brought about by human activities, especially human intervention in nature, causing a state of disequilibrium. And Atwood, through her narrative, paints a dismal picture of the possible fate of Earth under human oppression.

While Atwood prefers to categorize her text as speculative fiction, Katherine Snyder writes, "Dystopian speculative fiction takes what already exists and makes an imaginative leap into the future, following current socio-cultural, political, or scientific developments to their potentially devastating conclusion" (470). Though set in a dystopic future, the text deals with issues relevant to contemporary times. Global warming and change in climate are topmost environmental concerns, and Literary Utopias, especially the ones that explicitly address these environmental concerns, have become ubiquitous in the twenty-first century. Even as they seek to question the anthropocentric and materialistic mindset of modern urban humanity and bridge the gap between theory and praxis, the question arises as to how far these literary works are successful in bringing about tangible changes. As David Holmes pertinently asked in a conversation with Dan Bloom, "Could a literary genre help save the planet?" For Lisa Garforth, "modernity's ambiguous conceptualization of the natural world" (394) is problematic and puts the utopian apocalyptic narratives in a position of suspicion. When Northrop Frye refers to a utopia as a "social contract," he wishes the romantic literature to the forefront of the "end at which social life aim[s]" (323). Thus, engagement with praxis and definite change has been the subject matter of critical voices appraising the genre. Although this paper stays clear of all statistical data about concrete steps taken towards restoration of the environment in the wake of such literary works, and even as such data linking literature to definite laws remains unquantifiable, one cannot undermine the potential of a literary utopia in defining and identifying the ecological problems. It is worth remembering that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, whose first chapter is written as a fable, led to the establishment of the Environment Protection Agency by the then US government. Efforts are needed in the current ecological crisis, and ecofiction and climate fiction have become powerful agents of information, knowledge, and subsequent change.

Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen popularized the term "Anthropocene" to refer to the impact that human activities have had on the environment, such that now we live in a world that has been grossly altered due to human intervention, technological developments, more specifically the Industrial Revolution for Crutzen, and excessive consumerism. In this situation, a fundamental shift from ego-centrism to eco-centrism is called for such that anthropocentrism gives way to a more holistic approach to the

environment, which takes into account not only the human but also "more-than-human" (Abram 8). While concrete steps need to be taken to check the aggravation of global warming and climate change, this paper focuses on the need to change the primary consciousness and concedes that literary texts that address ecological problems make a significant contribution to educating their readers. For Kenton De Kirby et al., the narratives on global warming and climate change often fail to cause the required alarm because, as the writers, quoting Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert, point out:

> We are the progeny of people who hunted and gathered, whose lives were brief, and whose greatest threat was a man with a stick. When terrorists attack, we respond with crushing force and firm resolve, just as our ancestors would have. Global warming is deadly because it fails to trip the brain's alarm, leaving us soundly asleep in a burning bed. (qtd in Kenton De Kirby et al., 63)

Thus, immediacy needs to be established that affirms that "if we do this, we will reach here, or if we do that, we will reach there" (Robinson 9). Science Fiction, and more specifically ecological Science Fiction (Ecofiction) and climate fiction, have been working at establishing this urgency, and these framing strategies, as popularized by Berkley cognitive scientist George Lakoff, present reality and possible futures in such a manner that they ignite a response from the readers. The importance of these narratives cannot be undermined. These are individual efforts towards envisaging (in case of utopia) or predicting (in case of dystopia) possible futures, and these efforts gain further urgency when one considers that these possible futures, especially in the case of dystopia, may not be so far away.

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