

**ECOCRITICAL NARRATIVES OF HOPE: READING
SELECTED TEXTS BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

**SYNOPSIS SUBMITTED FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (ARTS)
AT JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
2023**

**BY
PRITHA BANERJEE**

**SUPERVISOR
DR. NILANJANA DEB**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
FACULTY OF ARTS
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
KOLKATA 700032
INDIA
2023**

Synopsis

Dissertation Title: **ECOCRITICAL NARRATIVES OF HOPE: READING
SELECTED TEXTS BY MARGARET ATWOOD**

Name of Doctoral Fellow: Pritha Banerjee

Department of English, Faculty of Arts,
Jadavpur University

Supervisor: Dr. Nilanjana Deb

Associate Professor, Department of English,
Faculty of Arts, Jadavpur University

Nilanjana Deb
26.7.2023
Associate Professor
DEPT. OF ENGLISH, JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

Area of Research:

Given the reality of climate change and ecological degradation plaguing our planet today, environmental story telling becomes a crucial means through which people can be mobilized effectively into bringing about lifestyle changes, by engaging people emotionally and intellectually, “providing them a greater personal stake in the text itself, and making them care.”¹ This thesis takes up a study of the narratives spun by one such influential narrator of environmental crisis, Margaret Atwood. Her texts straddle a wide variety of environmental discourses, exploring the possibilities of communication and critique offered by writing ecofiction, green fiction and speculative fiction, the nuances of which I have discussed in detail in the course of my thesis while seeing the ways in which these genres overlap and enrich each other.

¹ Jim Dwyer, *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2010), 7.

In this thesis, I have attempted to underscore the importance of creative narratives of ecological imbalance in the larger environmentalist discourse. Recent research by scientists are ascribing great value to the art of narration grounded in facts in creating any form of impact, as seen vividly in Rachel Carson's renowned work of environmental activism *Silent Spring*² that created such a flutter in scientific, literary and political circles, because of the way she employed narrative strategy in the process of highlighting the details of the harmful effect of pesticides, specially DDT on all life forms and cycles of nature. It is significant that Carson highlighted the possibility for retrieval of our natural balance, as she said that the town she described did not yet exist. No community had yet experienced all the misfortunes described by her in the span of one page, yet every one of those changes have happened somewhere or the other. Thus hope remained, if changes were brought about. Just as Carson successfully utilized an amalgamation of scientific research and fictional narrative to create alarm and a possibility of hope, Atwood forty six years later used a similar model in *Payback: Debt as Metaphor and the Shadow Side of Wealth*,³ keeping hope alive in the possibility of a different future depending on our ability to act now. With futures, it's all probability, says the Spirit of Earth Day Future: "Futures are infinite in number, as many science fiction writers have told us."⁴ The balance between despair and hope in environmental narratives appears critical, for as Daniel deB. Richter highlights, multiple popular narratives of "extinction, degradation, contamination, deforestation, and climate change,"⁵ promote the idea of human beings as agents of destruction and creates a skewed perspective instead of triggering any real change. This thesis is an attempt

² Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962; repr. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1964).

³ Margaret Atwood, *Payback: Debt as Metaphor and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (Toronto: O.W. Toad, 2008).

⁴ Atwood, *Payback*, 145.

⁵ Daniel deB Richter, "The Crisis of Environmental Narrative in the Anthropocene," *Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Four Theses'*, eds. Robert Emmett and Thomas Lekan, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2 (2016):97. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26241364>.

to trace the way Atwood's texts therefore redefine the possibilities of ecocritical writing, as her writings respond to urgent and critical environmental debates right from the beginning of her career as a writer.

I have termed Atwood's writings "ecocritical narratives of hope," as through the course of this thesis, I have analysed how Atwood keeps 'hope' alive through her narratives—hope for change and greater ecological awareness, in the midst of fear and uncertainty⁶ regarding human survival on an increasingly inhospitable planet. Christof Mauch explains the need for "hopeful narratives that help us think creatively and act unflinchingly," combining awareness of the crisis facing all humans and animals on the planet today alongside "starting points and signposts," that can help direct our attention towards an "alternative future."⁷ Atwood's narratives become such important 'signposts' on the way of navigating stories about extinction, climate change, biodiversity loss, migration and violence against animals and humans, in the battle for resources, as she showcases multiple possibilities based on choices made in the present. Mauch explains that "unadulterated optimism," and downplaying ecological changes and "potential catastrophe," was not the function of such hopeful narratives.⁸ Instead he advocates for "slow hope,"⁹ in this overpopulated, vulnerable and "increasingly self-destructive world,"¹⁰ identifying the central role of arts and humanities in tilting the scale, reminding people of both past narratives of change and "positive visions for our environment."¹¹ Atwood's non-fictional

⁶ Christof Mauch, "Slow Hope: Rethinking Ecologies of Crisis and Fear," *RCC Perspectives Transformations in Environment and Society*, no.1 (2019): 21, doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8556.

⁷ Mauch, "Slow Hope: Rethinking Ecologies of Crisis and Fear," 5.

⁸ Mauch, 5.

⁹ Mauch, 5.

¹⁰ Mauch, 8.

¹¹ Mauch, 21.

essays reflecting on achievements by environmental activists¹² and fiction incorporating characters modelled on such activists and individuals celebrating activist action¹³ ensure that readers are always aware of the dangers unleashed by human action in the Anthropocene¹⁴ and yet remain jubilant about change that can still be effected by individuals choosing to embrace setbacks and challenges from a world not yet converted to the ideals of ecological hope. The responsibility of present ecological problems lies squarely on our shoulders and Atwood makes sure there is no ambiguity on that front.¹⁵ As often re-iterated by her, science and technology are tools that can be used by humanity for bettering or worsening the condition of their habitat.¹⁶ As seen through the course of this thesis, the urgency and uncertainty of the present is palpable in Atwood's writing, as she explores the power of our choices in the present and their possible effect on the future of this planet and its inhabitants.

The Scope of this Dissertation: A Brief Exposition

Atwood's words have an impact that few can equal in the diversity of her readership.¹⁷ Her growing popularity and 'environmentalist capital'¹⁸ also increases the importance of her

¹² Atwood collates specific articles on Rachel Carson, Barry Lopez, Bill McKibben and Ursula Le Guin among others in her latest collection of essays, *Burning Questions*.

¹³ Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* utilises the narrative framework of a green cult –the God's Gardeners that deifies environmental activists as saints, with their leader spending much time sermonizing on the life stories of these ecological 'saints,' the challenges they faced and the courage with which they held on to hope of a better tomorrow.

¹⁴ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, 'The "Anthropocene",' *Global Change Newsletter* 41(2000): 17-18. <http://www.igbp.net/download/18.316f18321323470177580001401/1376383088452/NL41.pdf>.

¹⁵ Fiona Tolan, " 'I could say that, too': An Interview with Margaret Atwood," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 11, no. 3 (November 2017):459, *Oxford University Press*, doi:10.1093/cwwrit/vpx020.

¹⁶ Tolan, " 'I could say that, too': An Interview with Margaret Atwood," 459.

¹⁷ Atwood, "Interview by Trisha Gupta," *The Caravan*, February 4, 2016, <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/interview-with-margaret-atwood>

¹⁸ Marinette Grimbeek, *Margaret Atwood's Environmentalism: Apocalypse and Satire in the MaddAddam Trilogy*, (PhD diss., Karlstad University Studies, 2017:15), 39. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1089622/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

articulations in the public sphere. In Atwood's writing and utterances, whether through her novels, interviews or social media posts, we find a unique awareness of this potential that words hold in shaping our realities and at the same time, hopefully in changing our realities as well. One of the greatest difficulties of communicating the reality of climate change therefore lies in getting individuals to perceive themselves as belonging to a larger collective of human and non-human existence across the planet. Timothy Morton coined the term 'hyperobjects' to refer to all those things that outlive and outscale a perceiver, by being "massively distributed in time and space," climate change being one of them.¹⁹ Thus "we are obliged to care about them, even if we didn't manufacture them."²⁰ However ecofiction or environmental storytelling, becomes a salient means by which statistics are translated into experiences more comprehensible and relatable for readers.

Through the length of Atwood's career, and even today as she continues to write avidly, we see her experimenting with multiple styles and genres, pushing the boundaries of those genres. As seen in detail in the literary overview of Atwood's works attempted in the Introduction to this thesis, environmental concerns have been predominant through the course of her writing, but they take on different layers and forms over time. All the frameworks of ecofiction and speculative fiction and climate fiction co-exist in Atwood's works and intensify impact.²¹ Therefore I have chosen to use the term 'ecocritical narratives' for referring to Atwood's writing, instead of 'nature oriented' or 'environmental' or 'green fiction,' or only using the term 'ecofiction,' as I see her writing performing a more crucial function of self-

¹⁹ Timothy Morton, "A Quake in Being," *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.

²⁰ Timothy Morton, "Introducing the Idea of Hyperobjects," Climate Change, *High Country News*, Jan 19, 2015, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/47.1/introducing-the-idea-of-hyperobjects>

²¹ All the three categories of ecofiction hailed by Patricia D. Netzley as significant can be seen co-existing in Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy. Patricia Netzley, *Environmental Literature: An Encyclopedia of Works, Authors, and Themes* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 1999), 78.

reflexively and critically evaluating the field of ecofiction and ecocriticism itself. In this coinage, I include the association of the term ecocriticism, which I see as an evolutionary entity in close alliance with ecofiction, growing in impact and possibilities since its coinage by William Rueckert in 1978 as a paradigm to explore the intricate relationship between texts as cultural products and nature as an intrinsic subject of those texts. Rueckert explained the importance of his adopting this project: “I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to literature, because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and the future of the world we live in.”²² This thesis takes up a study of selected works by Atwood, embodying environmental themes and ecological awareness, between the period 1961 and 2022.

One of the most important contributions that humanities and social sciences make on the debate surrounding climate change and environmentalism lies in “re-defining and re-evaluating the dialectical relationship between nature and humans.”²³ My thesis attempts to evaluate how Atwood’s ecocritical narratives therefore provide new ways of perceiving human and non-human natures and play an important role in representing different forms of environmentalisms as well as apathy to the environment, in corporate and consumerist matrices of living and working. Gerry Canavan in “Hope, But Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*,” argues for the ‘science fictional imagination of the apocalypse’ as the only avenue for shaking the foundations of the existing capitalist system and “jump starting” a new history.²⁴ He also

²² William Rueckert, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” *Iowa Review* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 72–73.

²³ Annika Arnold, *Climate Change and Storytelling: Narratives and Cultural Meaning in Environmental Communication* (E-book, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 23, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69383-5>.

²⁴ Gerry Canavan, “Hope, But Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*,” *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 23, no.2 (2012): 139, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2012.676914>.

notes that ‘eco-apocalypse’ thus becomes the frame of choice for most novelists seeking to depict the end of capitalism, as the end of the world and the end of capitalism seems to be the same thing as the latter creates the former, as per the warnings given by scientists and ecologists across the world. Despite there being many supporters of the efficacy of the eco-apocalyptic imagination, there still remains what Canavan calls a “fatal internal contradiction of the politics of apocalypse,”²⁵ which is clearly identified by Greg Garrard—who wonders why humans will take responsibility for a world that is doomed to end in the near future.²⁶ Hence, imagining the end might be counter-productive, in Garrard’s words, “Only if we imagine the planet *has* a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it.”²⁷ My thesis attempts to locate Atwood’s ecocritical works in this lacunae, as her writing strives to continually revive hope in the possibility of a future that we can still change, based on how we conduct the present.

Marinette Grimbeek in her thesis, *Margaret Atwood's Environmentalism: Apocalypse and Satire in the MaddAddam Trilogy*,²⁸ strives to describe how Atwood keeps her activism separate from her fiction and poetry. According to Grimbeek, Atwood is at “pains to avoid the environmentalist label,”²⁹ and works at ‘maintaining complexity’³⁰ through the ironic stance she takes towards her own creations, never becoming too serious about them, but always remaining serious about the causes she espouses.³¹ However, my thesis observes the way

²⁵ Canavan, “Hope, But Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*,” 155.

²⁶ Greg Garrard, “Apocalypse,” *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2012), 93-116.

²⁷ Garrard, “Apocalypse,” 116.

²⁸ Marinette Grimbeek, *Margaret Atwood's Environmentalism: Apocalypse and Satire in the MaddAddam Trilogy*, (PhD diss., Karlstad University Studies, 2017:15), 39.
<https://www.divaportal.org/smash/get/diva2:1089622/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

²⁹ Grimbeek, *Margaret Atwood's Environmentalism: Apocalypse and Satire in the MaddAddam Trilogy*, 37.

³⁰ Grimbeek, 38.

³¹ Grimbeek, 41.

Atwood consciously participates in environmentalist debates, through her fiction, non-fiction, poetry and online posts, creating awareness regarding multiple approaches to common concerns regarding the ecosystem, particularly with the passage of time and acquired celebrity and fame. While Atwood may resist labelling at interviews, wanting to be seen as a novelist and an observer of society,³² her writings show intense environmental awareness and self-reflexivity in presenting crucial environmental issues, with all their nuances. My thesis goes on establish Atwood as a foundational author of the environmental humanities because of the clarity of her writing, lifestyle and persona, providing readers and viewers with multiple handles on environmental concerns, leaving the final choice of story in readers' hands, regarding which narrative they would believe and then act upon.

Research Questions:

The chief research questions informing my analysis of texts through the course of this thesis are:

- How do Atwood's ecocritical narratives hold on to hope in the midst of every available statistic warning us of catastrophic climatic and environmental changes in the near future? Why is it so important to create ecocritical narratives of 'hope'? What purpose does it serve in the larger environmental narrative?
- How does Atwood's speculative fiction use the format of the critical dystopia, to create enclaves of hope, amidst despair?
- What narrative strategies does Atwood employ to represent human and non-human interfaces and redefine the way readers see themselves vis-à-vis 'nature'? How is such

³² Sudhakar Jamkhandi, "An Interview with Margaret Atwood," *Commonwealth Novel in English* 2.1 (Jan 1983): 5.

re-visioning related to the impact that environmental storytelling can have on human actions, choices and therefore the planet we inhabit as well?

- How does Atwood represent varying kinds of environmentalist action and activist writing through her fiction and poetry? Why is such representation crucial?
- How does Atwood in particular showcase deep ecology in philosophy and practice and its nuanced relationship with radical environmentalism?
- How are ecotheological discourses and their challenges woven into Atwood's narratives as a form of environmental activism?
- How do Atwood's narratives pre-empt or exemplify ecofeminist concerns, envisaging the possible backlash of biological essentialism? How does she negotiate the necessity of addressing the common root of exploitative structures and yet challenge any ideas of automatic alignment between women and nature?
- How do Atwood's poetry, fiction and graphic novels blur defined lines between human and non-human experience, creating space for assemblages that hold together entities redefining the concept of 'nature' and the 'self.'
- How do all of the above become means towards holding on to hope for survival or a new means of comprehending such survival in a future where the planet may not resemble the earth we know today? How do her narratives therefore also reconceptualise hope, as not just a means of survival but a means of reclaiming life and identity in altered circumstances of living?

Research Methodology:

I have read Atwood's fiction and poetry alongside her non-fiction to completely view the tapestry of forms she creates through her different personas. I see her non-fiction finding animation in her fiction and poetry and simultaneously, her fiction finding critical appraisal

through her non-fiction and public utterances, the two being in a constant dialogue with each other. I present this as Atwood's particular method of narrative play, as she not only blurs the distinctions between genres in her writing, but also the association of truth with certain genres in this inter-animating dialogue within her own fiction and non-fiction. Atwood in a conversation with Marilyn Berlin Snell in *Mother Jones*, expresses the way she now views 'reality' as compared to when she was young: "Reality simply consists of different points of view. When I was young, I believed that non-fiction meant 'true.'"³³ Thus in her fiction and non-fiction, we keep seeing her playing with the possibilities of the genres³⁴ she explores, eking out every possible point of view, to reach a more diverse presentation of events as described in both her fiction and non-fiction. In my viewpoint one cannot be read without the other. For working purposes, I have seen Atwood's interviews and essays and public social media utterances in her persona as Atwood as non-fiction and all her novels, poetry, short-stories and graphic novels involving avowedly 'fictional' characters as fiction, even though it is apparent these categories clearly disintegrate in Atwood's use of them. Even the line between poetry and fiction is nebulous when reading Atwood, as her impatience with the dividing lines in our imaginative and comprehensive spheres is clear as she tests these limits in her writings. Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson recognizes how Atwood welcomes the "challenges of genre writing but always infuses those genres with a political slant that offsets the conventions and boundaries that the genres initially suggest."³⁵ When plumbing ecological themes, this 'narrative play' therefore becomes the means of destabilizing the way in which characters in her texts and

³³ Marilyn Berlin Snell, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," *Mother Jones*, July/August 1997, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://www.motherjones.com/media/1997/07/margaret-atwood/>.

³⁴ See Linda Wagner-Martin who discusses Atwood's "impatience with genres" and the way she tests the "nebulous line between poem and story". "'Giving Way to Bedrock': Atwood's Later Poems," *Various Atwoods: Essays on the Later Poems, Short Fiction, and Novels*, ed. Lorraine M. York (Toronto: Anansi, 1995), 71-88.

³⁵ Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 25.

readers of her texts perceive the planet, the ecosystem and themselves within it, at a time of grave ecological crisis faced by the planet today. While all of Atwood's writing may be projected as 'play' by her, the seriousness of her environmental concerns are reflected in her interviews and non-fiction as well as her lifestyle choices.³⁶

In this thesis I closely examine the ecocritical praxis adopted by Atwood in many of her texts, through her unique narrative strategies. In this process, I shall also be referring to some interviews of Atwood as they create new spaces of enquiry for her texts, adding to our critical lens in reading her work. In being an "artform" in themselves, "fictional and arranged,"³⁷ Atwood's articulations at the interviews provide significant clues for reading her texts, even when they set out to negate certain overt readings and definitions of her creative work. Interviews are fictions, in Atwood's own declaration—"Let's just state at the beginning that interviews as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth are suspect. They're fictions."³⁸ However, by projecting the illusory nature of all narratives and discourses, crafted with certain politics, Atwood is also able to highlight the narratives of corporate and state controlled enterprise as well as those spun by a consumerist culture, both leading to escalation of environmental crises. In Camille Peri's words, Atwood needs to be seen as a novelist who writes from the "ground up" and not "from some theory down,"³⁹ and is a master at exposing hypocrisy amongst the powerful.⁴⁰ My thesis thus attempts to engage with the many ways in

³⁶ Margaret Atwood invented the LongPen as far back as 2006 for signing autographs on her books remotely to reduce her carbon footprint as far as possible. Margaret Atwood, "The Ballad of the LongPen," September 30, 2006, *Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/30/margaretatwood>.

³⁷ Atwood, "Tightrope Walking Over Niagara Falls," Interview by Geoff Hancock, 1986, *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1990), 191.

³⁸ Atwood, "Tightrope Walking Over Niagara Falls," 191.

³⁹ Camille Peri, "Witch Craft," *Mother Jones* (Apr 1989): 30.

⁴⁰ Peri, "Witch Craft," 30.

which Atwood disrupts existing narratives promoting profit based enterprise and material success, to make readers and audiences think about the future of the planet and the human race.

Analytical Framework:

Ecofiction using the hermeneutic of an apocalyptic dystopian narrative might strive to trigger change, but it can also have the opposite effect of paralyzing action altogether in a state of fear. The first chapter of my thesis investigates how Atwood walks the tightrope of the apocalyptic narrative and the contradictions inherent in its use as a framework for stimulating change. As part of this analysis, I have referred to Lisa Garforth, Richard Hamblyn, Kari Norgaard and Stefan Skrimshire's works on the problematic of using the apocalypse as a shock tactic in ecofiction. Gerry Canavan has iterated that Atwood's fiction manages the super-feat of imagining a future that is 'frightening', but not 'final', creating space for hope and the 'reopening of possibility.'⁴¹ In the process of investigating Atwood's engagement with ecological hope, I have focused on Atwood's use of the format of the 'ustopia'⁴² for creating hope amidst doom in the apocalypse. Atwood coined the term by combining the 'dystopia' and 'utopia', as in her view each contains a latent version of the other."⁴³ Tom Moylan's concept of the "critical dystopia,"⁴⁴ is in many ways similar to the term "ustopia" coined by Atwood. My first chapter delves into the details of these narrative formats, to understand the way Atwood uses them in her speculative fiction, to highlight the possibility of resistance in the form of

⁴¹ Canavan, "Hope, But Not for Us: Ecological Science Fiction and the End of the World in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*," 155.

⁴² Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (London: Virago, 2011), 66.

⁴³ Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 66.

⁴⁴ See Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1986).

“eutopian enclaves”⁴⁵ within the dystopias created by her, becoming the pathway towards possible transformation and change. For this purpose, I have referred to Ruth Levitas, Lisa Garforth, Lyman Sargent and Fatima Viera for their multiple perspectives on the form of the utopia/dystopia, attempting to understand its critical significance in speculative ecofiction, through a close study of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*⁴⁶ and *The Testaments*⁴⁷ and the *Oryx and Crake* trilogy,⁴⁸ with special focus on the first book of the trilogy, *Oryx and Crake*.

Some of the most crucial debates between environmentalist approaches lie in the way this transformation is perceived, with mainstream environmentalists pitching for ameliorating the present ecological crisis with technological fixes and radical environmentalists⁴⁹ seeking greater and more long-lasting transformation in the way human life itself is perceived. The way out would be what Aldo Leopold calls “a little healthy contempt for a plethora of material blessings.”⁵⁰ This is a change that deep ecologists and ecotheologians as well as revolutionary environmentalists call for—a revision in the way human fulfillment is perceived. The utopian attributes of environmentalist visions,⁵¹ represented through the God’s Gardeners⁵² and the

⁴⁵ Lyman Tower Sargent, “In Defence of Utopia,” *Diogenes* 53, no.1(2006): 15.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192106062432>.

⁴⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985; repr. London: Virago, 1992).

⁴⁷ Atwood, *The Testaments* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2019).

⁴⁸ The trilogy by Atwood consisting of--- *Oryx and Crake* (2003; repr. London: Virago, 2013); *The Year of the Flood* (2009; repr. London: Virago, 2013); *MaddAddam*, (2013; repr. London: Virago, 2014).

⁴⁹ Including within its ambit the Deep Ecologists and the Revolutionary Environmentalists, which can be seen as variant shades of green, with different choices in the realm of actions undertaken.

⁵⁰ Aldo Leopold, “Foreword,” *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (1949; repr. New York: Oxford UP, 1989), viii-ix.

⁵¹ Lisa Garforth, *Green Utopias: Environmental Hope Before and After Nature* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018).

⁵² The God’s Gardeners in the *Oryx and Crake* trilogy are one of the ‘green’ groups depicted by Atwood, who adopt lifestyle choices and interpret religion to propagate an ecologically conscious mode of living.

MaddAddamites⁵³ in *The Year of the Flood*, while heavily criticized by mainstream environmentalists as ineffective and impractical, are rather seen as increasingly valuable in imagining change. I have referred to Arne Naess, Bill Devall, George Sessions and David Abram in reading deep ecology principles and their impact on Atwood's narrative, specially seeing how they closely align with ecotheological ideas expressed by the Gardeners in this trilogy, particularly in *The Year of the Flood*, in the second chapter of my thesis. I have also referred to Joanna Macy and Molly Brown's *The Work That Reconnects*, which highlights different narratives told by the state, corporate capitalist ventures, scientists and environmentalists, alerting us to the power of these stories and our choice in acting upon the ones we believe in.

Arne Naess describes the 'most ambitious goal' of ecosophy as the elimination of the "thought and feeling of a fundamental cleavage between man/environment and spiritual/physical."⁵⁴ From Naess' concept of the widening of the self to include all of non-human life, which he calls the 'Ecological Self,'⁵⁵ to St. Francis of Assisi's "enfraternization" of "the entire created order,"⁵⁶ for such an experience of expanded awareness; to Warwick Fox's description of the extension of self through the power of 'love,' which he describes as the 'Christ principle,'⁵⁷ I have analysed how Atwood's narrative in *The Year of the Flood* amplifies and collates a wide variety of ideas through Adam One's words, to explore the

⁵³ The MaddAddamites are scientists and other individuals who oppose the unsustainable and profiteering activities of the Bio-tech corporations and collaborate in many underground activities to counter the establishment, reminiscent of revolutionary ecoterrorism.

⁵⁴ Arne Naess, "From Ecology to Ecosophy, From Science to Wisdom," *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research* 27, no. 2-4(1989): 189. doi: 10.1080/02604027.1989.9972135.

⁵⁵ Naess, "From Ecology to Ecosophy, From Science to Wisdom," 189.

⁵⁶ Paul Lachance, "St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes Toward the Environment by Roger D. Sorrell," Review, *Church History* 59, no. 3 (1990), 395.

⁵⁷ Warwick Fox, "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of Our Time?" *The Ecologist* 14, no.5-6 (1984): 196.

possibilities and challenges of the ‘seemingly’ utopian imagination of deep ecology ideas. In pursuit of green theological concepts explored by Atwood, I have engaged with Lynn White Jr., Van Dyke, Nicola H. Creegan, David Jobling, Nathan Loewen, Matthew Fox, Warwick Fox, Jennifer Welchman, Arnold Toynbee and the Earth Bible Project, to understand the wide range of perspectives grappling with injunctions in the Bible as seen reflected in the sermons and conversations of Adam One and the Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*. While Lynn White Jr’s historical critique⁵⁸ sees the foundational perspective of Judeo-Christian traditions being the root cause behind present environmental crises by informing our worldview, ecotheologians like Wendell Berry try to keep hope alive through a positive re-interpretation of the Bible that can be seen in Adam One’s continuous struggle to create a functional and ‘green’ cosmology. Through a reading of Loren Wilkinson and Matthew Fox alongside *The Year of the Flood*, my second chapter therefore observes how Atwood utilises concepts of Christian Environmental Stewardship⁵⁹ and Original Blessing,⁶⁰ reflecting on the possibilities offered by such perspectives for increasing ecological awareness and responsible action. My chapter also refers to Gaia⁶¹ philosophy and planetary consciousness that functions through feedback loops⁶² maintaining homeostasis in Gaia, which the Gardeners attempt to revive through their ideology. In many ways, Atwood’s fiction and poetry shock us back into participating in the feedback loops of the Earth by beginning to experience and process ecological grief as the only means towards working for change.

⁵⁸ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.

⁵⁹ Loren Wilkinson, Peter De Vos, Vernon Ehlers, Calvin De Witt, Derk Pereboom, Eugene Dykema and Aileen Van Beilen, “Humanity and the Planet Earth: Two Futures,” *Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources* ed. Loren Wilkinson (Grand Rapids, MI : Eerdmans, 1980), 3. Archive.org.

⁶⁰ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1983), 15-16. Archive.org

⁶¹ James E Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look on Life on Earth*, 1979 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶² Jules Cashford, “Gaia and the Anima Mundi,” *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth* (California: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 131.

According to Kerry Whiteside, the ‘environmental crisis’ is not as much “a crisis about the condition of ‘nature’” as it is a “crisis of representation.”⁶³ Chapter three of my thesis has engaged with Atwood’s exploration of the possibilities of representing and reconceptualising ‘nature’ and human engagement with the non-human universe. In the process of reading Atwood’s *Surfacing*,⁶⁴ *The Edible Woman*,⁶⁵ and early poetry,⁶⁶ particularly *The Animals in That Country*,⁶⁷ *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*,⁶⁸ *Procedures for Underground*⁶⁹ and *The Circle Game*,⁷⁰ concerns regarding the limitations of language in describing the experience of characters desirous of seeing themselves as a part of one organic but heterogeneous whole became an important subject of enquiry. While Helene Cixous sees language as a distraction, and an obstacle between ourselves and the objects of perception,⁷¹ Gary Snyder sees great potential in language in the way in which we approach the universe and its “Unsayable Truths.”⁷² Hence in this chapter, I have also traced the way ecocritical thought has considered the possibilities of language describing nature and the problematic of collapsing all boundaries between the human and non-human. As seen in the course of my thesis, the complex workings

⁶³ Kerry Whiteside, “A Representative Politics of Nature? Pursuing Bruno Latour’s ‘Collective’,” *Western Political Science Association 2011 Annual Meeting Paper*, 1, accessed February 10, 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1800767> pp1.

⁶⁴ Atwood, *Surfacing*, (1972; repr. New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

⁶⁵ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (1969; repr. Canada: Seal Books, 1998).

⁶⁶ Referring to Atwood’s poetry written between 1964-1980.

⁶⁷ Atwood, *The Animals in That Country* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968).

⁶⁸ Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁶⁹ Atwood, *Procedures for Underground* (Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁷⁰ Atwood, *The Circle Game* (Toronto: Contact Press, 1964).

⁷¹ Helene Cixous, *Illa* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1980), 135-7 quoted in Verena Andermatt Conley, “Helene Cixous: The Language of Flowers,” *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2000), 150.

⁷² Gary Snyder, “Language Goes Two Ways,” *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2000), 127-28.

of power in the world are communicated by the complex workings of language in Atwood's texts, as the text and the world in which it is embedded are inextricable from each other. I have referred to Jhan Hochman, Bruno Latour, Terry Gifford, Alan Liu, Kate Soper and Jonathan Bate's ideas amongst others, to interrogate the term "nature" and its implications in the course of analysing Atwood's ecocritical writing in the third chapter of my thesis.

Atwood's ecocritical narratives, particularly *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *The Testaments* also explore the shared roots of oppression characterizing domination of nature and the non-human which is reinforced by the domination of women and the feminine and vice-versa, opening up her texts to multiple ecofeminist readings. Ecofeminism as an ecocritical praxis has undergone much self-critique over the years to reach a point where it enacts a unique balancing act between the essentialism of the 1970s that uncritically aligned women and the environment and the extreme opposite tendency of disavowing any continuity between the experience of 'women' and 'nature' as victims of exploitation by a patriarchal anthropocentric society. The third chapter of my thesis engages with the way the theoretical discourse of ecofeminism has changed over time, to evaluate its possibilities in ecocritical writing. Much of Atwood's texts predate the upheavals within the domain of ecofeminism, but astutely reflect the ways in which the concerns of ecofeminism would play out over the decades, which I have closely examined in this chapter of my thesis. When engaging with the way Atwood negotiates the power inflected dualisms of 'nature' and 'culture' in the third chapter, I have referred to Val Plumwood, Greta Gaard, Susan Griffin, Karla Armbruster, Judith Plant, Ynestra King, Helene Cixous, Charlene Spretnak, Carolyn Merchant and Dorothy Nielson to comprehend Atwood's representation and critique of the variant shades of ecofeminist thought in *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* and selected poetry written by Atwood over the decades. The backlash to biological essentialism in ecofeminism in academia has been critical of the notion of women

being biologically more attuned to nature. Ynestra King explains that “Since all life is interconnected...one group of persons cannot be closer to nature.”⁷³ Referring to King, John Griscom and Victoria Davion’s critique of biological essentialism in this chapter, I have seen how Atwood disrupts the assumption of a deep connection between women and nature, describing it more as something acquired by her woman characters experiencing the dualisms inherent in culture. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman also emphasize the significance of not moving from ‘one side of the dichotomy to the other’⁷⁴ as it is important to remember that the dichotomy itself needs to be deconstructed, to move to an understanding that does not rest on oppositions. The way out therefore seems to be a reconceptualization of nature as “agentic”--- whose “actions have consequences for both the human and non-human world,”⁷⁵ rather than perpetuating the nature/culture dualism or rejecting it altogether.

The third chapter of this thesis has therefore attempted to see Atwood redefining ecofeminist politics, much before the debates emerged and were countered by theorists in the field, particularly by her acute awareness and representation of stories embedded in all material entities within which the human perceiving self is located. In this pursuit, I have brought together a wide variety of apparently disparate theoretical tools, to read Atwood’s ecocritical narratives, ranging from ecofeminist spirituality and cognition of an ‘unitive dimension of being,’⁷⁶ closely allied to deep ecology discussed in chapter two of this thesis, to an analysis of Latour’s concept of the Collective,⁷⁷ that becomes a forum of ‘propositions’, giving voice to

⁷³ Ynestra King, “Feminism and the Revolt of Nature,” *Heresies* 13, no. 4 (1981): 14.

⁷⁴ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, “Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory,” *Material Feminisms*, ed. Alaimo and Hekman (United States: Indiana University Press, 2008), 2.

⁷⁵ Alaimo and Hekman, “Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory,” 5.

⁷⁶ Charlene Spretnak, “Radical Nonduality in Ecofeminist Philosophy,” *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, eds. Karen J. Warren and Nisvan Erkal (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 425.

⁷⁷ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1991), 61.

both humans and non-humans, forming the ‘raw material’ of this collective, characterised by a “condition of continual process sustained by the exchange of properties,” between the participants --the humans and non-humans.

The third chapter has also explored an alternative ‘ethics of care’⁷⁸ for a world peopled by multiple other ‘selves,’ reading Atwood’s writing alongside Deane Curtin, Lori Gruen and Gretchen T. Legler, considering how far literary narratives can work as emancipatory vehicles, reconceptualising the human and non-human relationship as a relational ontology, based on ‘attentive listening,’⁷⁹ compassion and intuitive response, enabling a shift from ‘bios’⁸⁰ to ‘zoe.’⁸¹ In the course of this chapter I have explored the possibility of a degree of non-comprehension as one of the means of evolving an environmental ethic that accepts the human and non-human relationship to be utterly complex and a space of limitless “interactionism”⁸² that always leaves much unknown, this unknowability itself demarcating an ethic of care, respect and co-existence, as the impulse to fully ‘know’ or comprehend can often become the basis of exploitative and oppressive practices. This is borne out by Atwood’s poetry, *Surfacing* and selected short stories discussed in this chapter, where inconclusivity and unknowability becomes the basis of richer experience.

⁷⁸ Karen J. Warren, “A Feminist Philosophical Perspective on Ecofeminist Spiritualities,” *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 137.

⁷⁹ Greta Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism* (United States: Lexington Books, 2017), xv-xvi.

⁸⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 92. This term is used by Braidotti as referring to an anthropocentric approach to life focused on human interest.

⁸¹ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 41. ‘Zoe’ is a term used by Braidotti to refer to the concept of endless “becoming” that characterizes life, which is an “endless vitality.”

⁸² Nancy Tuana, “Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina,” *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Bloomington University Press, 2008).

Chapter Summaries:

Chapter 1

In the first chapter of my thesis, I have explored how Margaret Atwood locates herself in the science fiction and speculative fiction matrix and how that impacts the way she fashions her ecocritical narratives. In tracing this, I have referred to Ursula K. Heise, Ursula Le Guin and Atwood's own premises in her book of essays, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*⁸³ as well as *Burning Questions*.⁸⁴ Frederick Jameson describes "the function of science fictional futures," as that of making "readers see the present anew as the past of societies yet to come."⁸⁵ Therefore science fiction creates multiple futures for readers, alerting them regarding the powerful present which becomes the "determinate past of something yet to come."⁸⁶ By their very structure they therefore become suggestive of how the utopias of the future may be achieved or their disasters and dystopias prevented. Atwood however terms her work—*The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*—"speculative fiction."⁸⁷ While playing defender of all kinds of fantastic tales in the way "they can explore the consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways by showing them as fully operational,"⁸⁸ she locates a clear difference between speculative fiction and science fiction, identifying her writing as being closer to the latter. The first chapter of my thesis analyses the demarcation of these genres and the politics employed by Atwood in

⁸³ Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (London: Virago, 2011).

⁸⁴ Atwood, *Burning Questions* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2022).

⁸⁵ Frederick Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: the Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 288.

⁸⁶ Frederick Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 2 (1982):152. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239476>.

⁸⁷ Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 6.

⁸⁸ Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 62.

choosing to tag hers as “speculative fiction,” as a possible means of intensifying the impact of her work, by referring constantly to present reality and future possibilities. This chapter therefore sees Atwood’s choice of narrative style and genre as critical to her environmentalist stance of hope, becoming vehicles through which we may examine “own drives and desires,” where the crux of all environmental problems are located.⁸⁹

The first chapter also dwells on characters in these ‘ustopias’ who act as storytellers, narrating their experiences to other characters or even into the void of the unknown future, seeing such storytelling as their means of survival and hope in circumstances that do not offer any. Storytelling also remains an intrinsically human trait that even Crake the scientist cannot weed out of the quasi humans he biotechnologically creates in the *Oryx and Crake* trilogy. According to Annika Arnold, the pattern of hearing stories and telling them are reinforced in us since childhood,⁹⁰ therefore returning us to the importance of stories shaping the way we think about ourselves and our lived environments as well as our use of technology. The last part of the first chapter discusses how Atwood considers questions of what constitutes the human, through her speculative fiction that tests the limits of how far humans can go, “in the alteration department before those altered cease to be human? Which of our features are at the core of our being?”⁹¹ Jane Bone sees the posthuman vision as instrumental in destabilizing the hierarchies and exclusionary practices of the humanist project.⁹² Referring to Jane Bone, Andy Miah and Rosi Braidotti’s discussions on posthumanism and its decentering of human exceptionalism through technology, I have analysed how Atwood’s presentation of the posthuman complicates

⁸⁹ Tolan, “ ‘I could say that, too’: An Interview with Margaret Atwood, ” 459.

⁹⁰ Arnold, *Climate Change and Storytelling*, 1

⁹¹ Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 91.

⁹² Jane Bone, “Environmental dystopias: Margaret Atwood and the monstrous child,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* (2015):3 , doi: 10.1080/01596306.2015.1075701

its description as a field of positive alternative possibilities by Braidotti and Miah, making us reflect on the fallout of such experimentation and “fooling around”⁹³ with genetic code.

Chapter 2

Chapter two of my thesis has continued the discussion on dystopias created by Atwood, but turned the lens on specific forms of environmentalism highlighted by Atwood in the *Oryx and Crake* trilogy, with particular focus on the second and third books of the trilogy---*The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*. This chapter has looked at the evolution of deep ecology and radical environmentalism as a response to global environmental politics and closely reads the representation and critique of these philosophies through the characters in the *MaddAddam* trilogy. This chapter analyses the representation of each of these narrative strains within the trilogy as well as the struggle of the resistance groups to create alternative stories of positive transformation that may still be effected by human will and action for the sake of planet Earth.

My second chapter studies Adam One’s sermons and hymns in detail to identify the range of references and ideas contributing to the environmentalist and ecotheological discourse used by Adam One and the Gardeners as well as the ecotheological hurdles faced by them in creating a narrative that individuals joining the cult would find both believable, inspiring and relatable in their present circumstances, helping them shift from the “technozoic” to the “ecozoic”⁹⁴ or life-affirming era. Llewellyn Vaughan Lee identifies that the ‘deepest part’ of the separateness we feel from the world lies in the “forgetfulness of its sacred nature, which is concomitant with our own sacred nature.”⁹⁵ The Gardeners work hard at rendering the world

⁹³ Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 57.

⁹⁴ Wendell Berry, "Life is a Miracle," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 27, no.1 (2000): 83-97.

⁹⁵ Llewellyn Vaughan Lee, "Introduction," *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth* (California: The Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 13.

sacred and worth saving and living for. However community support remains crucial for transforming lifestyle and holding on to hope for change in the long term. Deep ecology considers new forms of ecological consciousness best grown in small self-reliant and autonomous communities. My second chapter therefore also delves into the lived practices of the Gardeners and observes similarities with existent ‘green’ religious communities like the Green Sisters,⁹⁶ sustaining hope through ecologically guided spiritual practices of conservation and meditation on the earth’s rhythms and natural cycles.

Facing environmental grief⁹⁷ also leads to asking significant questions regarding our ‘selves’ in the larger ecological self and facilitating self-discovery or self-realization,⁹⁸ in Naess’s terms. Thus ‘positive disintegration’ or “the loss of previously valid norms,” while “painful and confusing,” is essential for “more adaptive understandings of self and world to arise.”⁹⁹ In Chapter two of this thesis, I have also examined the way Adam One in his sermons and meditations strives to create such a transformative redefinition of the self, by constantly drawing his listeners’ attention to the pain of loss of ecological balance and species diversity. I have engaged with the way extinction of species is viewed by the children and scientists in the trilogy and compared it with the approach taken by the Gardeners and Adam One, to analyse Atwood’s representation of the possibilities offered by ecotheology, steeped in deep ecology principles.

⁹⁶ Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁹⁷ Kriss Kevorkian and Jordan Rosenfield, “Facing Down ‘Environmental Grief,’” *Scientific American*, July 21, 2016, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/facing-down-environmental-grief/>.

⁹⁸ Arne Naess, “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” *The Trumpeter* 4, no. 3(1987): 36.

⁹⁹ Kazimierz Dabrowski, *Positive Disintegration* (np: Little Brown, 1964), quoted in Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life: The Updated Guide to the Work that Reconnects* (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2014), 77. Also see Bill Tillier, *The Theory of Positive Disintegration by Kazimierz Dąbrowski*, <https://positivedisintegration.com/>

In the last section of my second chapter, I have delved into the way in which Atwood has confronted debates around ecoterrorism and revolutionary environmentalism and its connection with deep ecology philosophy, through her nuanced depiction of the MaddAddamites and their relationship with the God's Gardeners. I have examined the history of radical environmentalism in detail through the course of this chapter, to understand its representation in the *Oryx and Crake* trilogy. By presenting the difference of opinion regarding modes of action amongst the Gardeners Adam One and Zeb, Atwood provides a very close and detailed study of the schism within green groups that is usually overlooked in homogenizing the radical environmentalist movement, depicting the subtle difference between non-revolutionary deep ecology practitioners and radical environmentalist actions.

Chapter 3

In the third chapter of my thesis, I have interrogated the dualisms of 'culture' and 'nature' and the way they re-inforce other hierarchized patriarchal dualisms,¹⁰⁰ translating into exploitative structures affecting the way gender, race and class are imagined, lived and represented as well. In this chapter of my thesis, I have analysed the ways in which Atwood's *Surfacing*,¹⁰¹ *The Edible Woman*,¹⁰² and early poetry,¹⁰³ particularly *The Animals in That Country*,¹⁰⁴ *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*,¹⁰⁵ *Procedures for Underground*¹⁰⁶ and *The Circle Game*¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 42.

¹⁰¹ Atwood, *Surfacing* (1972; repr. New York: Anchor Books, 1998).

¹⁰² Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (1969; repr. Canada: Seal Books, 1998).

¹⁰³ Referring to Atwood's poetry written between 1964-1980.

¹⁰⁴ Atwood, *The Animals in That Country* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968).

¹⁰⁵ Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

¹⁰⁶ Atwood, *Procedures for Underground* (Oxford University Press, 1970).

¹⁰⁷ Atwood, *The Circle Game* (Toronto: Contact Press, 1964).

explore the possibilities of dismantling dualisms and borders separating the ‘human’ and ‘non-human,’ ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ as well as the problematics of the same. Hochman reflects on the dangerous anthropocentric assumptions of the word ‘environment’ that does not include all plants, animals and elements in its ambit, focusing more on the utility of the non-human universe for human survival. Atwood’s texts analysed in this chapter become important in this realm, as they keep ‘hope’ afloat, by providing a different experience of ‘nature’ that is, “important in itself, for itself, outside human considerations,”¹⁰⁸ revitalizing the possibility of a biocentric approach to the non-human universe within which her characters become increasingly conscious of their desire for accessing the unknown dimensions of such ‘nature’ and their inability to do so, being as they are, limited by the confines of culture and its structures of imagination and perception.

Karen E. Macfarlane, calls Atwood “messy,” analyzing this ‘mess’ to be an integral part of the subjects she chooses to write about in the medium of words.¹⁰⁹ Atwood herself describes language as slippery and recognizes ambiguity as an intrinsic feature of attempting to grapple with the human condition.¹¹⁰ Through the poetry and novels analysed in this chapter, I see how Atwood’s writing attempts to become a “vehicle of self-transcending insight,”¹¹¹ into ourselves and our relation to the world we inhabit, constantly striving to provide the “unmediated direct experience,”¹¹² of the non-human universe that Snyder sees as possible by creative utilisation of language. In my reading, Atwood’s presentation of human characters teetering between the

¹⁰⁸ Jhan Hochman, “Green Cultural Studies,” *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2000), 188.

¹⁰⁹ Karen E. Macfarlane, “Messing with Atwood: Power, Reception and Writing Politics,” *Atlantis* 30, no.3 (2006): 63-64.

¹¹⁰ Macfarlane, “Messing with Atwood: Power, Reception and Writing Politics,” 63.

¹¹¹ Snyder, “Language Goes Two Ways,” 128.

¹¹² Snyder, 128.

boundaries of human and non-human experience attempts to embody a position that strives to acknowledge dualisms and yet dismantle them, retaining at the same time the sense of danger and terror of doing so.

The third chapter of my thesis also engages with the way in which Atwood's writing shows an acute self-reflexive awareness of the ecofeminist mode of enquiry, by tracing the turbulent journey of ecofeminism in academia and its reflection in Atwood's writing many years prior to the concerns being so clearly articulated in theoretical literature. As a way out of the conundrums thrown up by ecofeminist theoretical frameworks of biological essentialism or its complete negation, Atwood embraces a very different form of ecofeminist spirituality in her ecocritical writings, which require an attitudinal shift in the reader, making room for the unexplained and the unknown as an important pathway towards experiencing nature and the non-human. The third chapter has therefore also explored the way Atwood's writing highlights the importance of an alternative epistemology that is polyvalent in perception, and comfortable with acknowledging the limitations of 'knowing' and 'defining' the non-human universe. Along with a transformative shift into experiencing and narrating one's embeddedness in an interconnected and dynamic, agentic 'nature' encompassing the self, comes a heightened awareness of inseparability and entanglement with the non-human universe both informing our perception of ourselves and all others, as well as a realization of the infinite and unknown dimensions of 'nature.'

Conclusion—Research Outcome:

The eco-activist writer is redefined by Greta Gaard as one writing in the hope of a world which is "more intimately attuned to life: to our interbeing with humans of diverse races, genders, nations and with all species and elements of this one precious earth."¹¹³ Through the course of

¹¹³ Greta Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism* (United States: Lexington Books, 2017), x.

this thesis I have seen Atwood as such an eco-activist writer, whose texts embody this deep understanding of connections between social, trans-species and ecological justice. Atwood's environmentalist stance is particularly visible with the publication of *Burning Questions* in 2022, where she collates essays and reflections between 2004-2021, returning to critically analyse her own texts as well as other environmental activist writing that has impacted the way we see the planet and ourselves in this ecosystem. While earlier documentaries on Atwood discussed in the Introduction to the thesis, showcases her resistance to autobiographical readings of her texts, Ronn Mann's *In the Wake of the Flood*,¹¹⁴ chooses to portray Atwood's public persona and as much of her home and memories of childhood as Atwood decides to include, with the conscious intention of projecting her environmentalist persona. *In the Wake of the Flood* shows some of Atwood's pictures as a child, living in the wilderness, learning from nature and her parents, suggesting the importance of a childhood connected to the natural world in imbibing sensitivity to the non-human universe and its role in our continued existence on this planet. Hence, I have also analysed Atwood's picture books for children, *Up in the Tree* and *Anna's Pet*, for the way images and text are used to create new ways of relating to the natural world and understanding the interconnected web of life, inclusive of humans, animals, insects and plants, so crucial for developing an ecological consciousness. In the conclusion of my thesis, I have also engaged with the *Angel Catbird* series¹¹⁵ of graphic novels by Atwood alongside selected poems from her *Dearly*¹¹⁶ collection, analyzing the way she visually assembles these multiple natures, confusing easy boundaries between the human and non-human. *Angel Catbird* makes us visually aware of a multispecies city, by depicting characters

¹¹⁴ Ron Mann, dir., *In the Wake of the Flood* (Canada: Sphinx Productions, 2010), 47 min, Vimeo.

¹¹⁵ Atwood, *Angel Catbird Vol.1-3*, illustr. Johnnie Christmas, colours Tamra Bonvillain (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2016-17).

¹¹⁶ Atwood, *Dearly: Poems* (United Kingdom: Penguin Random House, 2020).

espousing both human and non-human selves as well as many non-humans participating in the larger narrative of the text. The graphic novel series also provides directions on ways in which other species can be cared for, by expanding our awareness of the world we inhabit. By re-imagining inter-relationships between species in this fantastic tale, Atwood performs the important function of making the reader reconsider climate change and extinction from the point of view of other species, however problematic that may be in actuality,¹¹⁷ refocusing the lens from human need for biodiversity to the valuation of multiple species as ends unto themselves, rekindling hope in the possibilities engendered by the use of such ecologically aware narratives.

In the 2012 Nexus Conference on “How to Change the World?”¹¹⁸ Atwood discusses the importance of raising the alarm and addressing environmental issues instead of skirting them, thinking there is no way out. She speaks, because speaking and writing for change holds onto hope for change as well as a future for species still existent on the planet today. Atwood indicates that we have the technological tools necessary for saving the environment that is fast degrading. However, the challenge lies in raising funds for conservation of birds, animals, wildlife and the environment, to apply these techniques and tools as most people living in artificial environments cannot see the connection “between human beings and the rest of the world.”¹¹⁹ This thesis establishes how Atwood, through her writing enables the reader to perceive such interconnectedness as the basis of ecological care. Atwood’s narratives function as vehicles of hope by altering perspectives and questioning existing discourses of the self and

¹¹⁷ While anthropocentric traits in animal representations may be problematic, suppression of animal subjectivity and agency are also identified as dangerous, leading to increased aggression against non-humans who might be imagined as “devoid of experiences worthy of human consideration.” Marion Scholtmeijer, *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction: From Sanctity to Sacrifice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 229.

¹¹⁸ Atwood, “How to Change the World?” *2012 Nexus Conference*, accessed January 22, 2021, <http://opentranscripts.org/sources/nexus-institute/nexus-conference-2012/>

¹¹⁹ Atwood, *Burning Questions* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2022), 62.

non-human others. Her lifestyle and choices also embody such hope, from participation in the Future Library Project,¹²⁰ which foresees a book printed a hundred years hence, on paper from trees planted in the present, for human readers still existing on planet earth; to donating her Booker prize money to *Indspire*, which funds scholarships for indigenous students. She emphasizes that she wants to fund students from indigenous communities who would be working in the realm of the environmental humanities as she feels that such students, connected to the land, would know most about it and needed to be placed in positions, where their perspective could alter environmental research and decisions. According to Libby Robin and Deborah Rose, the practitioners of the environmental humanities are “more than observers and critics,” with an interest in wanting to be a participant to effecting change on this planet by “shaping the values and narratives that guide decision making.”¹²¹ My thesis has explored and established Atwood as a valuable practitioner of the environmental humanities, whose very act of writing holds on to hope for change, which while difficult is still possible.

Pritha Banerjee
26/7/2023

Nityananda Deb
Associate Professor
DEPT. OF ENGLISH, JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY
26.7.2023

¹²⁰ Atwood, “Scribbler Moon,” *Future Library*, accessed January 23, 2022, <https://www.futurelibrary.no/#/years/2014>.

¹²¹ Libby Robin and Deborah Rose, “A Manifesto for the Ecological Humanities,” *Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU*, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://fennerschool-associated.anu.edu.au/ecologicalhumanities/manifesto.php>