

**UPROOTING THE ROOTS: A STUDY OF THE ANDROCENTRISM AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM IN THE SELECTED DYSTOPIAN NOVELS OF MARGARET ATWOOD**

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**Abstract**

The problem of ‘androcentrism’ and ‘anthropocentrism’ has been receiving abundant attention in gender and environmental studies. Androcentrism denotes the biased masculine belief of the superiority of ‘man’ and justifies his control over woman. Feminist thinkers consider this attitude responsible for the problem of unequal gender roles in society. Anthropocentrism is a broader concept that advocates a hubristic cultural attitude that humans are the more significant and privileged creatures on earth. This attitude is responsible for the age long clash between culture and nature which has given rise to many ecological problems. The present paper is focused on some outstanding dystopian novels of Margaret Atwood to reflect the devastating functions of the forces of androcentrism and anthropocentrism in society and eco-system.

**Keywords:** Androcentrism, Anthropocentrism, Cultural hubris, Dystopian Novels, Eco-system.

The impacts of social, cultural, political, and even psychological inclinations of a time are inevitable to the literature produced in it; that is why it is said that literature is a mirror to society. ‘Utopias’ and ‘Dystopias’ are also the products of different times. In its most basic sense, utopia presents a pleasant and ideal setting for imaginary fiction that convinces the ethics of its author. At the same time, dystopias are always replete with unpleasant images of the future to protect the author's fears. The term ‘utopia’ was coined by Thomas More in his book *Utopia* in 1516, in which, according to Dr. Madhusudana, "he described an imaginary and solitary island where everything seems to be running smoothly. It's like looking at blue skies, warm and bright sunlight, working in clean, spacious buildings, living with friendly individuals, going to work happily, and harmoniously coexisting with everyone." (88) The credit for coining the term dystopia goes to John Stuart Mill in 1868. In essence, the social, cultural, and political structures that seem ethical and encouraging in utopias become immoral and discouraging in dystopias.(Madhusudana 88)

In English literary history, the period after the advent of industrialization is recorded as the most fruitful period for utopias, when many socialists and humanitarian writers expressed their political notions, using it as a tool for voicing human rights and celebrating democratic ideas. But the optimism of utopian writers got eclipsed by the writers of dystopia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, the dystopian writers got impetus from the uprising horrors after the emergence of technology, high capitalism, ecological crisis, and the two world wars. Portraying the impending disasters, dystopian fiction also solves a didactic purpose by cautioning people against their present inappropriate ways of living. The decadence of humanity, consequences of capitalism, survival threats, anarchy, perpetual technological surveillance, and ecological imbalance are some commonly addressed dystopian problems.

The present paper explores the underlying roots of androcentric and anthropocentric social patterns in some selected dystopian novels by Margaret Atwood that bring about all the above-mentioned problems in the future of humanity. The consequences of androcentrism and anthropocentrism have been meticulously discussed in many feminist, eco-feminist, ecocritic, and profound ecological studies. The thinkers of these discourses unanimously believe that all social and ecological problems are instigated by the cultural binaries, deliberately created by man out of his masculine attitude of otherization and domination towards women and nature, which is identified as ‘androcentrism’ and ‘anthropocentrism’ respectively. Therefore, one of the common core concepts of all these theories is to deconstruct the biased aspects of ‘male-centeredness’, described as androcentrism, and ‘human-centeredness, identified as anthropocentrism. In their opinion, both approaches originate in Western Patriarchy, which has a long history of domination and marginalization of the weak. They believe that the masculine habit of otherizing gives birth to a never-ending chain of ‘isms’. The problem of androcentrism is predominantly addressed in various feminist and LGBTQ studies. The critics of these discourses allege androcentric (male-centric) manners for reducing women and other genders' position as objects of male whim. The problem of anthropocentrism received significant attention from environmentalists, deep ecologists, eco-feminists, and ecocritics, who find anthropocentric (human-centric) cultural patterns responsible for invoking various environmental threats like increment in the greenhouse gases, penetration of ultra-violet rays on earth's surface, pollution, depletion of ozone, diversity loss, a growing number of endangered and extinct species, etc. In an androcentric society women suffer from the hostile and humiliating attitude of patriarchy while in an anthropocentric society, nature and its creatures are objectified due to the same longing for domination and disrupting the harmony of all interconnected systems. All centric patterns like sexism, heterosexism, and patriarchy are generated by androcentrism.

On the other hand, speciesism, exceptionalism, ethnocentrism, and eurocentrism are, more or less, associated with anthropocentrism. Thinkers analyze all cultural institutions, like health, education, religion, media, economy, etc., as propagators of these binaries. Eco-feminists and deep ecologists figure out an association between all centric patterns that are

different forms of oppression, containing the seeds of domination and otherization within them. In all such dualistic ways, the rise of the privileged lies in the fall of the unprivileged.

“The centric structure provides a form of rationality, a framework for beliefs, which naturalizes and justifies a certain sort of self-imposition and disposition, which is what Eurocentric and ethnocentric colonization frameworks, as well as androcentric frameworks, involve. The centric structure accomplishes this justification by promoting insensitivity to the Other's needs, agency, and prior claims, as well as a belief in the colonizer's apartness, superiority, and right to conquer or master the Other. Thus it provides a distorted framework for the perception of the Other, and the project of mastery it gives rise to involves dangerous forms of denial, perception, and belief, which can put the centric perceiver out of touch with reality about the Other. The framework of mastery does not provide a basis for sensitive, sympathetic, or reliable understanding and observation of either the Other or of the self; mastery is (it would be nice to say “was”) a framework of moral and cultural blindness.” (Plumwood 344)

Such cultural binaries are not natural but imposed, and not only do they bring about glaring conflicts between sexes and different social groups, but they deplete the environment. The dystopian societies displayed in these selected novels of Atwood refuse to achieve social and environmental justice ideals, which shows the oppressive functioning of androcentrism and anthropocentrism. The unequal reach of resources and unsustainable development paradigms give birth to class conflicts and ecological crises. The coercion of women and non-human nature is justified and encouraged in all social institutions.

Came out in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* is an outstanding feminist dystopian novel by Atwood that showcases the disgraceful and dehumanized condition of women in a futuristic state, known as the Republic of Gilead. The dystopic situations shown in the novel are instigated by both androcentric and anthropocentric patterns of society. It shows how the anthropocentric hubris of man exerts its corrupting influence on nature and spoils its balance with the use of detrimental technology. The excessive use of radioactive technology in wars causes thermal pollution and turns the air and soil toxic. Moreover, pesticides, nuclear explosions, and the unregulated use of reproductive technologies aggravate the environmental conditions that drastically affect the human reproductive system.

To cope with the declining birth rate of the state, the patriarchal government suspends the democratic rights of women, makes them financially crippled, and forcefully prepares them for new humiliating gender roles. The guards captured the women with a healthy reproductive system and given the title of “spoiled girls.” (95) The declined birth rate of the state was a consequence of the scientific and technological hubris of man, which was an anthropological problem and to settle down it, the totalitarian government introduced a hierarchal system of

society, which was androcentric. The state divides men as per their masculinity and political positions, while women are divided according to their reproductive potential. The rich barren wives are confined to managing their households and supporting their men to implement their patriarchal practices. The lesbians, aged and infertile women, are assigned to house chores. The captured women with the healthy reproductive system are called handmaids who are forced to play the most critical gender role of breeding children for the infertile couples of the state. The plight of these women is revealed through the narration of Offred, the narrator-protagonist of the novel who feels her dehumanized existence akin to a commodity and breeding machine; "I wait.

Before getting appointed to the infertile couples, the handmaids are dragged to a training school called the Red Center, where they are introduced to all the humiliating roles imposed by the state. They are addressed as "worthy vessels" (71) and "valuable pearls" (120) so that they can internalize the fact that the only purpose of their lives is to breed children for the infertile couples; "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut." (103) This is how the patriarchs also manipulate not only the administration but the language system of Gilead to prepare breeding women. Their prayers are also decided by them, which are dominated by repeated phrases asking children for their empty ovaries;

"We prayed for emptiness, so we would be worthy of being filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen, and babies.

Oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man.

Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled...

Some of them would get carried away with this. The ecstasy of abasement. Some of them would moan and cry." (200)

The state treats the handmaids as lifeless breeders; they are raped, exchanged, and then transferred to another couple. If they fail in conceiving or attempt to retaliate, they are declared 'unwoman' and sent to unknown places to clear toxic hazards and burn corpses. As soon as they give birth to a healthy child, it is snatched from them because it becomes the state's property. The handmaids are expected to feel pride for this sacrifice and leave the household silently; "she'll be allowed to nurse the baby for a few months; they believe in mother's milk. After that she'll be transferred, to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward."(133) However, over time, the poor handmaids desire to conceive, either in the hope that they would receive better treatment or mitigate the possibility of getting the title of being an unwoman.

Contrary to the deplorable condition of women, men are placed at the top of the hierarchy. They have the privilege to stuff the fashion magazines and visit clubs to enjoy sexual freedom there. The man of the house is the most powerful, and the pivot and the women of all categories are supposed to please him in all respects. The man to whom Offred was appointed is mentioned as the Commander in the novel. The Commanders are the leaders of the state. They are the lawmakers and administrators who are supposed to adhere to their created patriarchal rules, but in secret, they harbor the notions of independence and power. They are privileged as they have everything that women are deprived of. Offred observes the gaze of the Commander and feels; “as if we are something he inherited, like a Victorian pump organ, and he hasn’t figured out what to do with us. What we are worth.” (93)

*Oryx and Crake* is another significant dystopian novel by Atwood that got published in 2003 as the first installment of the *MaddAddam Trilogy*. The three plots of the trilogy are yoked with two contrasting settings, one recounts the events of the pre- catastrophic time, and the other depicts the struggles of some human survivors in the post-catastrophic period. The depiction of the devastating pre-period of the novel shows the systematic collapse of an anthropocentric civilization woven with multiple forms of oppression.

"Margaret Atwood's dystopian, speculative novel, 'Oryx and Crake' (2003) shows the devastating effects of the unbridled, scientific power or hubris of humans as they play God in attempting to contravene against the devastation of the environment according to their lights, whether reengineering humanity according to their design or taking drastic action to ensure the survival of the ecosystem, both of these in a desperate attempt to counteract the results of corporate greed which has virtually destroyed ecosystem. " (Alban 1)

The novel demonstrates similar functions of society's oppressive anthropocentric and androcentric patterns. The story begins with its narrator-protagonist Snowman alias Jimmy, on a post-catastrophic morning. The entitled Crake is described as an insane scientist in the pre-apocalyptic time who finds a problem with the manners of humans who, according to him, were not only responsible for the social injustice but also invoked ecological crisis. He stands for the unbridled scientific and technological hysteria that brings about a human-infused catastrophe on the planet that devours almost the entire human population. Crake found the human race beyond redemption so he devised a dire plan of annihilating the whole of the human population and replacing it with a sane and eco-friendly race of humans that he manufactured in his laboratory with the help of genetic engineering. For the fatal experiment of his dire plan, he selected his objects from the weaker section of society. It shows a capitalistic outlook of elites toward the oppressed, who are seen as buyable objects.

The novel presents life-threatening environmental conditions, glaring class conflicts, subjugation of women, frequent autocratic military operations, and horrible oppression of

animals and the weak. It is revealed from the recollections of Jimmy the Snowman that the futuristic generation was doomed. The scientists were up to insane projects of transcending human capacities with the help of bio-engineering. Many experiments, like transplanting wrinkled epidermis with a new one, transplanting hair with bio-technologically manufactured animal hair, cultivating human organs in animal bodies, and sustaining sexual potential, were directed towards transcending the natural boundaries of life. Such experiments were famous and sold at high prices in the market. Seeing the advances of biotechnology in a science institute, Jimmy wonders but at the same time fears about the one-dimensional progress of technology; The pre- catastrophic world was technologically advanced and economically prosperous, but the bliss of civilization was denied to women, children, the poor and animals. The delicate sentiments of the elite women of the society were humiliated by their rational husbands and the poor women were seen as ready commodities to sell or purchase. Jimmy's mother was persistently mocked by her scientist husband for expressing her feminist and ethical ideas. The entitled Oryx, introduced as a sensuous heroine with a tragic past, struggled to make her position in a male-oriented society. Born to poor parents, she was sold to a man called Uncle En, at a very young age, who initially sent her for selling flowers in the city streets, and then used her as a trap to blackmail the wealthy pedophiles who, with an intention of raping her would tempt her in many ways. Once, when Uncle En was found dead in mysterious conditions, Oryx was brought to the porn industry where little girls were forced to work. She used her body as a tool to emancipate herself from the shackles of patriarchy. She traded the camera operators to get herself literate, uplifted her social position, and became an essential part of Crake's laboratory. However, Crake manipulated her for her devastating plan of collapsing the human civilization.

The dystopian society of this novel was not androcentric but anthropocentric as well. It was a human-centric culture where the animals were considered "steaks and sausages" (20). The bodies of animals were legally exploited in labs for farming human organs inside them and the endangered animals were illegally smuggled into slaughterhouses to be skinned and then served to different restaurants in the cities. The thinkers of Animal Rights believe that a phallogocentric system of language justifies and promotes the exploitation of animals, framing them as consumable entities.

"The prevailing ideology ontologizes animals as consumable, as mass terms. This ontology is socially constructed: nothing is inherent in a cow's existence that necessitates her future fate as a hamburger or her current fate as a milk machine. However, a major way we circumvent responsibility for terminal animals' fate at the hands of humans is to believe that they have no other fate than to be food, that this is their "natural" existence. As a result, certain positions regarding animals' ontology- that is, the normativeness of "meat" eating- are embraced by people across the division of race, class, and sex." (Adams 202)



It's revealed from Jimmy's sorrowful retrospections of the past that the anthropocentric social system was also blemished with glaring class conflicts where the rich were living in well-fortified and luxurious apartments. At the same time, the poor had to live in dirty and unsafe areas of the town. Atwood, in the novel, has also addressed the problem of the indoor generation through the gloomy and dismal childhood of the two main characters, Jimmy and Crake. The youth of Jimmy and Crake was steeped in porn and violent videos in which brutal rapes of women, horrible exploitation of animals, and live suicides were provided as entertainment.

The second novel of the trilogy *The Year of the Flood* came out in 2009, which revises the description of the biological attack of the pandemic followed by the terrible dance of death that led humanity to its catastrophic end. The entitled flood refers to the devastation of the pandemic or the waterless flood. In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy feels himself to be the last residue of humans, but in this novel, a group of eco-activists is revealed to have floated over the massive flood. This group is mentioned as the 'Gods' Gardeners,' headed by a wise man named Adam One, who could sense the impending disaster and cautioned his followers against it. Toby and Ren are the narrator protagonists of this novel who introduce themselves as the women members of this group. Adam One established this group to warn people against the consequences of such an unethical and prejudiced society and offered them an alternative culture to live harmoniously in society and the environment. In this novel, Toby has been delineated as an unromantic but sensitive woman. She had to leave her studies because of the impoverished condition of her family, with a bedridden mother and jobless father. Her father mortgaged his belongings one by one but it couldn't save her mother's life. Under a condition of severe depression, he committed suicide, leaving Toby alone to manage her survival in a male dominant world. Like Oryx, Toby also allowed the commercialization of her body by selling her hair first and eggs later. The knowledge that the frequent extraction of eggs had turned her sterile saddened her and made her feel "all the light leaking out of her" (39). She had to live in a very deplorable condition until she found a job. Before that, she had been living in a left-out building infamous for the illegal smuggling of extinct animals. The exploitation of animals has long been seen as a pristine demonstration of anthropocentrism, which shows how nature and its creatures are left to the will of humans. "As man proceeds towards his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction, directed not only against the earth he inhibits but against the life that shares it with him." (Carson 88) Toby couldn't sleep there peacefully because of the heart-wrenching squeaks of innocent animals. She left the building as soon as she got a job in a burger manufacturing company that was headed by a psychopath Blanco. Blanco was notorious for molesting women and using animal proteins illegally in his burgers. His company's anti-woman and anti-nature manners reflect the ugliest face of androcentrism and anthropocentrism, where women were brought to his whims

and animals were exploited as lifeless objects. Toby also became a victim of his lust, who used to call her every day at his office and raped her until Adam came to rescue her.

"She'd been Blanco's one-and-only for less than two weeks, but it felt like years. His view was that a woman with an ass as skinny as Toby's should consider herself in luck if any man wanted to stick his hole- hammer into her. She'd be even luckier if he didn't sell her to Scales as a temporary, which meant temporarily alive. She should thank her lucky stars. Better she should thank him: he demanded a thank you after every degrading act. He didn't want her to feel pleasure, only submission.

Nor did he give her any time off from her Secret Burgers duties. He demanded her services during her half-hour lunch break, which meant she got no lunch." (47)

Then, Toby was brought to the God's Gardeners' community, living in some abandoned buildings in the city. The Gardeners had turned the rooftops of these buildings into beautiful gardens. Their culture was rooted in the beliefs of love, mutuality, and uniformity which was proving an alternative society to the victims of the biased civilization. All their rituals were centered on nature, and their manners epitomized gender equality and social justice. They insisted on elevating the human soul's spiritual powers, which is possible after the abandonment of all kinds of malice and ambition. Adams was the men's leader, and the women leaders of this community were called Eves. The Gardeners were vegetarians and prone to save the victimized people and the animals. The Gardeners survived the pandemic, which manifests the victory of an anti- anthropocentric and anti- androcentric culture.

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