
**Contesting Subjectivity: A Posthuman Perspective in Margaret
Atwood's *The Year of The Flood***

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Abstract:

Identity can pursue direct political rule over people to hegemonize them. In the West, the idea of identity with political affiliation developed with the emergence of liberal Humanism. The feminist school of criticism identifies the political implications of subjectivity as the determinant of patriarchal structure to dehumanize other life forms based on what Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw calls Intersectionality. Based on this premise, the paper demystifies the idea of identity politics by using Donna Haraway's concept of 'cyborg' to investigate the line of identity that decodes the politics of dualism. Further, the paper locates Margaret Atwood's representation of gender, politicized through subjectivity in the contemporary age of science and technology. In order to establish the line of equality or to demolish the line of supremacy, Haraway, in her theoretical concept, builds a roadmap to unsettle male-centric politics. The paper aims to demonstrate how Margaret Atwood situates female subjectivity in her dystopian work *The Year of the Flood* and illustrates how the line of identity can be challenged in the age of science and technology.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Feminism, Subjectivity, Gender, Culture and Cybernetics.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's speculative vision in *The Year of the Flood* deals with post-apocalyptic conditions and the repercussions of anthropocentric politics. The *Flood*, symbolic of the present pandemic COVID-19, is known as a "waterless flood," which wipes out the entire human civilization from the planet, leaving few in number. The novel begins with one of the survivors of the pandemic, Toby, who recounts life before and after the apocalypse. Margaret Atwood's representation of human beings in a technologically mediated society reflects how humans have positioned themselves at the center and marginalized the other living organisms on the planet. This idea portrayed in the novel helps to mirror the contemporary situation, mainly

caused by the coronavirus, as it touches upon the diverse issues that influence human conditions like gender, environment, theology, technology, and science.

Nevertheless, the main thrust of the narrative is gender-oriented, as Atwood herself claims, "What fabrications they are, mothers: scarecrows, wax dolls for us to stick pins into, crude diagrams. We deny them an existence of their own; we make them up to suit ourselves -- our own hunger, our wishes, our deficiencies" (Atwood 2000: 93-94). Margaret Atwood has touched upon a number of themes like gender, environment, poetry, and speculative fiction in order to predict the improbable nature of human invasion. The patriarchal structure highlighted in the novel is analyzed through a technologically mediated approach toward life in order to resolve human conflicts. Having realized the urgency of science in the age of COVID-19, it is essential to focus on how human life can be curved into the safe zone. Human beings, with time, have suffered from the politics of dualism- human and animal, whites and non-whites, colonizer and colonized; as posthuman critic Rosi Braidotti puts it, "Europe announces itself as the site of origin of critical reason and self-reflexivity, both qualities resting on the Humanistic norm" (Braidotti 2013: 15). In similar context, subjectivity is endorsed to men, as a feature of supremacy, by the patriarchal system. Like an ornament, "Subjectivity," according to Braidotti, "is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behavior, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart" (Braidotti 2013: 15). This consciousness by the male dominant society, as a mark of rationality, has kept reserved for males only.

In order to blur the line of subjectivity, this paper situates the science and technological age as a significant medium to contest the politics of identity. It is evident that, during the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, humans have forgotten all the lines and differences and have urged science to come up with an antidote to fight against this disease. In order to provide an alternative, the science paper uses posthuman theorist Donna Haraway's 'cyborg myth' used in her famous essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," to decode the politics of identity. Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* is a part of her dystopian work *MaddAddam* trilogy, in which she provides a glimpse of a dystopian world in which human beings suffer from artificial conflicts. In this novel, she alarms human beings from different conflicts, one of which appears to be the projection of male dominance over females, and she, through science, provides a solution to resolve these subjectivity-led identity conflicts. She highlights how women are treated as objects, and the interaction between humans and humanoids, called Crakers, indicates how humanistic practices are full of conflicts where Crakers appear to be making cohesion with humans. Therefore, this paper investigates how oppressed women in a scientifically mediated society, as depicted in *The Year of the Flood*, define their identity to disrupt socio-cultural politics.

Literature Review

The research on gender and subjective identity has been done widely, and in order to give shape to this paper, a few articles and books have been reviewed. An

insight from Adrienne Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" gives an account of 'hetero-normative subjectivity' and highlights how subjective identity is inscribed as a cultural construct (Rich 1980: 4). The study of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is carried out to understand the politics of subjective norms where woman is situated as an object of performance. The identity given to the body "as the product of normative effects" by posthuman feminist Rosi Braidotti, in her *Pattern of Dissonance: A Study of Women Contemporary Philosophy* (1991), highlights how subjective identity is inscribed to males. This paper is relevant in the present context since it unsettles the normative construction of the body and contests the body as a mere programmed application that can be commanded according to the prompt commands.

The present age, mainly the 21st century, is primarily dominated by rapid strides in bioengineering and technology, which problematize human subjectivity as opined by posthuman critic Cary Wolfe, who, on the 'normative notion of subjectivity' argues, "this has serious consequences for how we think about subjectivity, because "technology, in these terms, is the extemporization" (Wolfe 2009: 36). It is an age where human being has shown inevitable dependency on machine and bioengineered products, be it prosthetics, mobile phones or any mode of digital arena, human has shown close connection with it. It is an age where life enhancement through "phosphatization of the animate or the human" is common practice (Wolf 2009: 36). The 'subjects' determined by liberal Humanism intermingle with 'machines,' and as a result, witness mixed, hybrid or dispersed identities. In this race of dispersed identities, where humans have shown life extension through machines and another digital mode, the word 'identity' becomes a question mark. Either humans have moved away from the patterns of what posthuman theorist N. Katherine Hayles calls "information" or have deciphered the very 'fabric of identity' within the social structure (Hayles 1999: 1).

The idea to define *subjectivity* is "male-centered," and it is a campaign against what Adrienne Rich calls "unassimilated women" ("Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" 19). To elucidate it further, she argues that it[subjectivity] is a "male pursuit as more valuable than female within any culture so that cultural values become the embodiment of male subjectivity" (Rich19). It is a classic philosophical dictum Protagoras advocates, claiming, "Man as the measure of all things" (Plato 2014: 31). Theoretically, this paper, through the lenses of posthuman theory and scientific romanticization of *subjectivity*, employs Donna Haraways 'cyborg myth.'

Though the capacity of the humans within the environment is physical, however, the embodiment is strictly socio-culturally constructed. As a mark of continuous progress, the evolving nature of human beings refers back to *Homo Sapiens*, as historian Yuval Noah Harari says it:

Humans result from blind evolutionary processes that operate without a goal or purpose. Our actions are not part of some divine cosmic plan, and if planet Earth

were to blow up tomorrow morning, the universe would probably keep going about its business as usual. Human subjectivity would not be missed. Hence, any meaning people inscribe in their lives is a delusion. (Harari 2014: 348)

The anthropocentric idea of situating humans, man in particular, at the center of all, based on their biological origin, is possibly unsettled through scientific intrudes in the contemporary age. Science, having refused the metaphysical origin of human beings, takes a close look at the biological form of the human body, which can be illustrated as opposite to John Milton's idea of giving subjective form to the human body. As he states:

I now see

“Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, myself

“Before me: Woman is her name; of Man

“Extracted: for this cause, he shall forego

“Father and mother, and to his wife adhere;

“And they shall be one flesh, heart, soul’. (Milton 2015: 240)

As a posthuman theorist, Donna Haraway has taken the positive impact of science and appears to be a radical critic of disrupting the normative construction of subjectivity. Having countered the patriarchal structure she states, “Western rationalist philosophy as a flawed system based on dichotomies -a paired set of opposite concepts such as White/Black, male/female, and human/machine - that are presented as natural truths but that are fictional oppositions that serve to heighten the status of one term over the other" (Haraway 1985: 157). She refuted the political idea that demeaned the female with its binary implication and came up with a new perspective through her *Cyborg Manifesto*. The 'cyborg' represents a hybrid, or mixed, state of being- a more complex, ambiguous, and fluid identity that can free us from the tyranny of binary oppositions in our political and personal relationships (Haraway 1991: 178).

The main idea of this argument is to highlight male dominance over the female, as Margaret Atwood in *The Year of the Flood* reveals. The study of “A Cyborg Manifesto” reveals that science has a clear answer for countering the idea that privileges man as supreme of all. It destabilizes the idea that women are considered objects and products of cultural practice. In order to break from this politics, Haraway proposes a well-reasoned critique.

Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* is a dystopian text that advocates scientific practices and addresses gender issues in the novel. The significant scientific practices in the novel by Gardeners suggest the potential that technology, bioscience, and the human genome hold the capacity to free human beings (women in particular) from the 'subjective identity' and move beyond the normative structure. It is evident in the novel that Atwood's portrayal of gender and sexual identities focuses on the inscribed form, which is 'produced in the laboratory and constructed by cultural practices.

The text reveals that Crake, a bioengineering scientist, invented humanoids called Crakers at his lab, known as the 'paradise compound', to replace human beings. He believes humans are stuck in the chaos of polluted minds; therefore, it is his duty to produce an alternative to replace humans. The bodies produced here are assembled and trained to perform their social mechanism. As a physiological structure, the body reveals its identity through biological genetics (DNA and RNA). Having validated the biological origin of the body, American Biologist Richard Dawkins, like Darwin, takes Charles Darwin's idea of the 'origin of species' one step ahead where he, unlike Darwin rediscovers the 'selfish' nature of 'genes' (Dawkins 2016: 6). The emphasis on 'gender,' as cultural construct, exercising 'identity politics' on females-Toby and Ren, highlights how they are continuously chased, harassed and mentally tortured in the novel. For instance, the dialog between Zeb and Toby illustrates how she has been evaluated based on her gender:

"We are in deep cover," said Zeb. "You have to act the part!" He winked at her, then reached across her and opened the truck door. "Cut yourself some slack. I bet you used to be a babe until the Gardeners got to you." Used to be, thinks Toby. That about sums up everything. Nevertheless, she was pleased: she had not had a gender-weighted compliment for some time. (Atwood 2009: 185)

Blanco, as an evil creature, shamelessly and rightfully invaded the personal space of women employed in his SecretBurger. As Rebecca Eckler warns Toby, "Stay off his radar." "Maybe you will be okay... "Praise the Lord and spit," said Rebecca. "I am too black and ugly for him, plus he just likes the kittens, not the old cats. Maybe you should wrinkle yourself up, sweetheart. Knock out a few of your teeth" (Atwood 2009: 35). Two things here spring: one is the space of women, and the other is identity-based on race. Having escaped from his cage, Toby enters a completely opposite rhythm of life with Gardeners. The notion based on the identity of 'gender,' which privileges men and demeans women, in the novel *The Year of the Flood*, has been analyzed within the theoretical premises of posthuman conditions. Upon freedom of women, Donna Haraway argues, "Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension of oppression, and so of possibility" (Haraway 1991: 150). She says that to free the body from the politics of subjectivity, "The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century" (Haraway 1991: 150).

The main idea in this paper, through polemic "Manifesto," is to contest the 'body' which is biologically formed, navigated, constructed, and reconstructed; as Margaret Atwood shows, "HelthWyzer had been sticking a slow-acting but incurable gene-spliced disease germ inside their supplements so they could make much money on the treatments" (Atwood 2009: 125). The Cyborg, having understood cybernetic organism, a *hybrid* of machine and organism, eventually exposes the line of demarcation (Haraway 1991: 147). She radically disrupts the idea of 'identity,' claiming, "We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" (Haraway 1991: 150).

In contrast, the novel presents women as capable of defining their existence. When Toby and Ren realize there is less possibility of defining their place, the structure allows them to accommodate the situation. Toby recounts a similar incident that forbids her freedom and closes the door to look the way outside the Gardeners:

Once, I found a beautiful camera phone lying on the sidewalk. It was muddy, and the signal was dead, but I took it home anyway, and the Eves caught me with it. "Don't you know any better?" they said. "Such a thing" can hurt you! It can burn your brain! Do not even look at it: if you can see it, it can see you. (Atwood 2009: 67).

The use of theological narrative explains how religion acts as an adaptation without choice. Atwood, here, intends to reflect how the social structure restricts women's freedom.

The continuous construction and reconstruction of the body in the age of science, as the text indicates that nothing is fixed since the body is biologically assembled out of different components. In the age of technology, where the components of the body are enhanced through prosthetics and other technological mediums, to dwell upon the socio-cultural construction of subjectivity requires an investigation. Donna Haraway, having given a solution to deal with this 'identity politics', argues, "Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the Cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate" (Haraway 1991: 151).

The incidents in the novel recount several aspects limiting the identity of women. Even after choosing space in *The God's Gardeners*, Toby and Ren are forbidden to follow what identifies them as women. Toby's freedom in the *Gardeners* is evident when Nuala asks her:

"You will want to grow your hair," said Nuala. "Get rid of that scalped look. We Gardener women all wear our hair long." When Toby asked why, she was given the understanding that the aesthetic preference was God's. This kind of smiling, bossy, sanctimoniousness was too pervasive for Toby, especially among the female members of the sect. (Atwood 2009: 46)

As a reaction to liberal Humanism's normative structure and metaphysics, Haraway states, "The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (Haraway 1991: 151).

The scientific practices followed by Gardeners to meet holy secular ends were central to their philosophy:

Our teachers were Nuala for the little kids and the Buds and Blooms Choir and Fabric Recycling, and Rebecca for Culinary Arts, which meant cooking, and Surya for Sewing and Mugi for Mental Arithmetic and Pilar for Bees and Mycology, and Toby for Holistic Healing and Plant Remedies, and Burt for Wild and Garden

Botanicals, and Philo for Meditation, and Zeb for Predator-Prey Relationships and Animal Camouflage. (Atwood 2009: 61)

The narrative, the looming "Waterless Flood," visualizes Atwood's additional layers of meaning, impelling the EdenCliff Rooftop habitants to resist compromise with the external world as they believe their practice falls above practices. Haraway argues, "Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we frighteningly inert" (Haraway 1991: 152). The study reveals that with the advent of science and the birth of Cyborg, "the transcendent authorization of interpretation is lost" (Haraway 1991: 153). The line of gender with the birth of Cyborg is broken down:

Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism...These are the couplings that make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of "Western" identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, enslaved person and master, body, and mind. (Haraway 1991: 470)

Atwood's idea of defining women's situation in the age of technologically advanced society thus fulfills the line of argument Haraway wants to communicate. The cybernetic organism demystifies the idea of subjectivity in the age of scientific development.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Margaret Atwood's speculative vision focuses on exploring an alternate version of the world and resolves to liberate human beings from identity politics. Thus, the paper highlights that *subjectivity* proposed to males by the patriarchal system appears to be a fragile notion in the age of science and technology. It is an age where 'science appears to be a new religion, and the identity awarded by human beings to the body rests upon false implications. It is an age where the human body behaves like a machine; it is a time when the life span of a heart patient is enhanced through stents; it is necessary for the existence to answer human conflicts through alternative means of science. When Donna Haraway says that she would prefer to be a 'cyborg than a goddess,' she surpasses all lines created by human beings to succumb to human identity. Having defined human conditions and their close alliance with the internet and mobile phones, it is evident that 'the internet appears to be the modern opium. When human beings have to be more dependent on medicinal antidotes rather than praying and following practices in religious places, then one has to believe that human beings have been witnessing posthuman conditions. In the posthuman age, humans have already become machines, and therefore, to define a body as a temple appears to be the constructed self to which science provides an alternative meaning. Since the 'body' of both 'male and female' is constructed and reconstructed through scientific and technological components. It is evident that in the age of science like Haraway's Cyborg, humans (male and female) have no such identity of their own; rather, it is an *assembled* self. The giant leap towards a

technologically mediated society resolves the complication of subjectivity, patriarchy, and normative structure.

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