

THE FUTURISTIC VISION: A STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S SELECT NOVELS

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Chapter VI

Summation

The people of the world, almost all of them, know that they are in some kind of danger. Still, some do not put through to prevent their home planet from the danger. They fail to understand that it is they who will suffer in turn because of this. The earth may transform itself, as centuries pass, into its earlier form. But man cannot do so.

The state of mankind is at a peril. It is high time that man acts out to prevent worldwide catastrophe. This is a time when he has realized that he cannot fill toxic chemicals and garbage into water or earth, without hurting himself, because all things that are mandatory for his existence such as food and water come from them.

Dystopias are like grim warnings to the people. They focus the dark shadows thrown by the present into the future. Atwood intends to do all these things through her novels. All the four novels selected for the study- *The Handmaids Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* and *Maddaddam*- satisfy the above lines. They are purely warnings to the society about their present misdeeds that may cast an everlasting darkness upon the earth, which is the life source of all the beings.

The concerns of the writers of dystopia are similar to those of the society. They focus very much on the relations between sexes, control of pollution of all kinds, preserving the earth and the society, population control, meting out justice, providing various definitions of language; the duty of artists

and so on. These are the points that determine a dystopia and that which exist in the novels of the present study. It is an agonizing feature of the present society that, the contemporary dystopias are easier to believe while people find it hard to believe in Utopias, as they have experienced dystopias earlier or they are experiencing it currently. When contemplated, it could be discovered that only when man tries to enforce Utopia, does dystopia follows. It seems not appropriate for man to want to lead easy, struggle- free, sophisticated lives, with the use of all the technology.

Man tries to create Utopia, at least a Utopia for himself, with the aid of all the tools that he has on his hand, including technology. As a result, he only destroys his means for living on the earth and also that of the other organisms that co-lives him and who have done no wrong.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the radioactive toxins have made most of the women infertile and those few who are fertile are protected and held captive for reproduction purposes as the population of the country is declining. The Handmaids, in the novel, are changed into creatures that do not think for themselves and are instead taught to think in the place of others. They, anyway, do not have anybody to think for. All the people that a Handmaid had are taken away from them by the totalitarian society with the view of depriving them of everything so that they will selflessly work for the country.

The Handmaids think, but when contemplated, they do not know for whom they think. It is not the fear of death that keeps them from thinking, for it is a torturous life that they live. Although this is the case, they do not live a

satisfied life. They do not understand themselves, which is a state that explains the triumph of a dystopian society.

The rule of Gilead is divided into many hierarchies and the Aunts hold one of the high positions. They are appointed to look after the Handmaids and sanctify or purify them from the offences that they have committed in their previous lives. But those Aunts, who hold a high position, are not even wholly trusted. They are given only electric pods and not guns. The Guards are the other kind of people in Gilead who are given a high rank but are always kept an eye on, as they are considered most prone to help the Handmaids in getting pregnant illegally and to escape. This shows that none of the Gileadeans trusts another. In the current global scenario, this is not an unusual occurrence. None of the people is prepared to believe another person in his own society, not even the government that he is ruled over by.

Endangered species are kept safe. Hunting them or aiding it is a punishable offence in almost all the countries and it is seen as a crime if anybody indulges in such an activity. Many of the animal and bird species of the earth are on the verge of extinction and some of them are listed as endangered, so that people would prevent their extinction. In Gilead, fertile women are the one and only species that are preserved as if they are on the brink of extinction. They are never left to die or to be killed. Mercy killing is legal in some places. Persons, who are ill and suffer a lot, are sometimes killed in order to relieve them from pain. But the Handmaids of Gilead are not allowed even the pleasure of death, as there is no mercy and only faith.

The Gileadeans have a lot of restrictions from the colour of dress a person has to wear to the restriction to talk to one another. None of the Gileadeans live their life according to their choice. The society that rules them has specific laws for each group of people, and neither the men nor the women of the society could get away from it. The people of this society need no rulers to dictate these rules to them. They are their own dictators. They abide by the laws and do not go against any of them, even when there is nobody to guard them over.

Margaret Atwood portrays not only the condition of women in the future but also the future of a country. Whatever Atwood says of the Handmaids is also applicable to America. Gilead is supposed to be future America. Not only America, it could happen to any country.

The Handmaid's Tale has often been called a feminist dystopia, but that term is not strictly accurate. In a feminist dystopia, simply put, each of the men in a society will have greater power and will be strong than the women. It would be two-layered in structure: top layer men, bottom layer women. But Gilead is the usual kind of dictatorship: shaped like a pyramid, with the powerful of both sexes at the apex, the men generally outranking the women at the same level; then descending levels of power and status with men and women in each, all the way down to the bottom.

The third chapter is about the other speculative fiction of Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*. This emphasises the accountabilities of man if genetic engineering and other such technological innovations go out of hand. The novel has

scientists who create beings to replace human beings on earth, who are almost ideal physically and mentally. The third chapter questions whether those creatures can prevent the planet from destruction and fill the earth with ideal people or will turn out to be like their predecessors in this matter.

The predictions of some of the top scientists concur with what Atwood says in her novels. Scientists enunciate that computers with super-intelligence will equal human intelligence in thirty years. When mulled over, a terrifying image comes over. When machines equal human intelligence, they may even gain the ability to produce other machines that can surpass human intelligence which may supposedly plan destroying human beings.

Corruption, as in the current scenario, adds as one of the main reasons for destruction. It could be seen everywhere in the world, with only a few exceptions. People, who are put up to protect animals, get bribe and permit poachers to kill animals, even if they are endangered. Animals, even when they do not give or receive bribe, are also affected as corrupt officers are unconcerned about animals going extinct. Corruption could also be the reason for the catastrophic end of earth and in turn for that of human beings.

Crake destroys every other creature on earth that are manmade and also most of the humanity. But he is so sure that the animals and the plants will never be the reason for the destruction of their planet. But the brutal and selfish mankind is concerned about nothing. He is solely concerned about making his life easier, unmindful of the damage he is causing to the ecosystem.

Technology develops from day to day. Man is the only being on earth that has a sixth sense. He wants to get things done easily in a shortcut method. As years pass man wants to earn more and more money and runs behind it to live a sophisticated life. In this chase, the twenty- four hours that nature has given a man a day is not sufficient for him. He intends to make life easier in all ways, so that he gets more time and tries to make time to make his life easier. All the technological inventions are to aid him in this, to make his life easier and to yield him more time. In this process, he forgets about the world around him in general and the nature in particular.

Everything has its own advantages and disadvantages. As a Tamil saying emphasizes, too much of anything is good for nothing. Whatever the invention maybe, their usage alone determines the effects. The more we use them, the more dangerous they turn out to be. Every invention that man has made has got one adverse effect or the other over the Mother planet. They are to be used with the user's discretion.

The post- apocalyptic futuristic situation presented by Atwood in *Oryx and Crake*, produces a mixed reaction in the readers of the book. They, at times recognize themselves in the book and sometimes not. Sometimes the events in the book create unease in them and sometimes they do not. At times, after reading a few events of the book, he is also made to attain a great relief when he thinks that he has not yet reached the place where the humans of the book have reached.

The prophesied destruction of humanity is blamed on the technological developments, which are aimed to improve the lifestyle of humans but are ultimately turned into things that are commercial. Pigoons that are created originally to aid organ transplant are, with time, used only for cosmetic purposes. There is nothing that could not be bought. Traditionally produced goods are replaced by bioengineered things. Drugs are produced to eradicate diseases and keep the body young. When the drugs become successful in eliminating diseases, diseases are created so as to sustain their place in the market.

The novels of Atwood are the outcome of the agonies she, as a human being, undergoes and are the echoes to the dominating systems of the contemporary society. She, at most of the times, aim at criticizing the capitalist corporations which have become powerful competitors to the government of a country; and which have even started to act more authoritative than the government. She represents the contemporary culture, wherein the corporations have the upper hand and are able to control most of the organisations in a society.

The books taken up for the study discuss about the natural and manmade, reliability and disintegration and physique and the psyche. They help people find out the difference between the decisions made based upon these things. The parts where the survivors of the plague suffer, pricks the reader too.

Concepts of natural and artificial, contamination and purity, reliability and fragmentation and mind and body are discussed. In this respect, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* serves as a cogent medium for exploring these highly contentious practices and ideas as it provides hypothetical narratives of possibility. Every bit of the book, those parts where Snowman struggles all alone in the whole wide world, chills the readers to the marrow. They remind the readers time and again that the results will be disastrous when man goes away from nature.

The Crakers start idolizing Snowman which, according to Crake, is the beginning of the downfall. In the last part of the trilogy, *Maddadam*, one even finds one of the Craker children learning to read and write from Toby. They may even start behaving like human beings in all things. If the Crakers also turn into human beings, will the world turn into one like the present one? Is the beautiful, green and prosperous earth doomed to have such creatures that destroy it anyway?

Is the earth doomed to be destroyed anyway? Even if creatures like the Crakers, who are intended to prevent the earth from destruction are there, will they too change into beings that start destroying earth? By Crakers, the researcher does not mean the destruction of human beings and the creation of non-natural creatures, but the creation of earth-friendly human beings through education. Each and every one must educate their child to preserve everything natural and lead a natural life in all ways. This paves the way for the coming generations to consider the earth as a sacred place.

The Year of the Flood is about a violent future society created by a man-made plague, which has genetically-engineered humans and animals amid a ruined environment. Outside the compounds there is only chaos. All governing bodies have collapsed, so the only law enforcement are corporate security teams, who usually only intervene in cases affecting their employer or local gangs. People's lives are short, violent and full of hardship. Fewer and fewer people are able to get jobs from the mega-corps because they are becoming more and more self-contained breeding their own work-force. Most live in extreme poverty. Without governmental oversight corporations are running rampant, dumping, polluting and destroying both human communities as well as natural reserves with reckless abandon. Environmental collapse is imminent. So is a revolt of downtrodden, increasingly more illiterate masses who grow jealous of the corporate wealth.

The novel attempts to re-tell the story from the perspective of poverty stricken pleeblanders struggling for survival in the lawless wastelands outside the corporate compounds. It introduces a number of interesting characters, and a religious sect of vegetarian environmentalists who takes them in, and provides them with a safe harbor against local gang violence. As the plot progresses Atwood has to bend herself backwards in order to get the stories of these characters to intersect with the events from the former book, *Oryx and Crake*.

The Gardener's believe that humankind has strayed away from how God wanted us to live on the Earth. Especially with the way the world has become.

Corporations now rule everything and are less than moral. They are called the CorpSeCorps. They have used up almost all of the Earth's resources and have erased most of the animal species on the planet. The animal genes that remain are spliced and used to create horrible hybrids that serve human purposes. Food is highly processed and people have stopped asking where it comes from. The most notorious example of this is the burger chain, Secretburger. They will use any protein that they come across to use in their burgers. Even human protein. Hence, the name of the establishment, as one does not ever really know what he's eating. As a result, The God's Gardeners choose to separate themselves and live in the pleeblands, the slums.

The principles of the Gardeners are flexible and changed from time to time according to their convenience. As they themselves say, all of the practices might also be for the good of the Gardeners in general and the world in particular.

The major aim of the Gardeners is to educate the young minds to preserve whatever is natural so as to prevent the earth from the oncoming disaster. This also seems to be the need of the hour in the current scenario as the future generations are in danger and they need to be educated about the catastrophic happenings if the present scenario continues.

Science should only be conceived of as a tool. A tool could either be used for constructive purposes or for destruction. It is in the hands of the user that how he uses it. As mentioned earlier, science and technology as tools, in the hands of man, should be used to make himself and the environment in

which he lives in better. He must focus on the betterment of all the things around himself and not egocentrically believe that he can exploit everything around him to lead a pleasurable life.

It is to be noted that the people of the dystopian/ apocalyptic society are deceived into believing that whatever happened to them and whatever is happening to them is for their good and nothing against it.

Familial disintegration proves to be one of the major reasons for the destructive events of the novels that are taken up for the study. The people who are isolated at the beginning for one reason or the other at the beginning of the books, people like Ren, Amanda and Toby, become friends after they join the Gardeners.

Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story. In it, as in all fiction, there is room enough to keep even Man where he belongs, in his place in the scheme of thing.

The reader of the novel is driven to think that even if Crake had not released the virus into the world, there must have been some other reasons for a similar destruction of the earth. The behavior of man is enough for the earth to attain the state as elucidated by Atwood in her novels. He releases toxic chemicals into all the five elements of the earth resulting in the loss of so many animals associated with them, conducting nuclear tests and using dangerous,

banned chemicals on food crops, unmindful of the harmful effects it will produce over other humans that are not him and other such acts, which are enough for the earth to get destroyed on its own.

There are four laws of ecology. The first states that everything is interconnected; each of the things is connected to everything else. The second law of ecology proposes that all things must go somewhere. The third one suggests that nature is the best of all and it knows everything and the fourth law of ecology puts forward that there is no such thing as a free meal. These laws provide the base for life on earth. Human beings must understand and apprehend them in order to lead a happy and peaceful life.

It is vital for human beings to maintain an unwavering environment in order to survive on the earth. But from the signs one gets it is upsetting to know that the environment they are living in is experiencing a slow death. For human beings to understand the situation he is in, he needs to understand the nature and the environment around himself. Man is created just as a part of the nature. But over time he has come to think of himself as the supreme of creatures. He has conceived of himself as a being designed to make use of his environment so as to beget wealth.

Among primitive people, a person is seen as a dependent part of nature, a simple life on the planet that must obey the rules of nature if he is to survive. Because of this need of his, he is forced to abide by the laws and thereby, acquire a great knowledge of his environment. The African Bushman lives in one of the most tough environments on earth; food and water are scarce, and

the weather is extreme. He stays alive because he has an incredibly close understanding of this environment. The Bushman will be able to find out, even after months of stay away from a place, where he found water during his early visit to the place, which could even be miles away.

Humans who call themselves advanced seem to have escaped from this kind of dependence on the environment. The Bushman must squeeze water from a searched-out tuber; humans get theirs by the turn of a tap. Instead of trackless terrain, one has the grid of city streets. Instead of seeking the sun's heat when one needs it, or shunning it when it is too strong, he warms and cools himself with man-made machines. All this leads people to believe that they have made their own environment and no longer depend on the one provided by nature. In the eager search for the benefits of modern science and technology man has become enticed into a nearly fetal illusion: that through the machines one has at last escaped from dependence on the natural environment. It is disheartening to note that no other species other than man has destroyed its habitat in a very short time.

Grasshoppers whirl away in the beginning pages of *Oryx and Crake*. These are from two different books, although both are from the same time in the novel. In *The Year of the Flood* they are sparrows, which make it even more merrier for the readers as they are one of the bird species that is in the stages of extinction.

Pueblo oral narratives function to explain the world, to help people survive in it, and to transmit culture. Specific features of the landscape help

people remember the stories, and the stories help them to live in the land; traveling through the storied landscape corresponds to an interior journey of awareness and imagination in which the traveler grasps his or her cultural identity.

Regardless of what name it goes by, most ecocritical works share a common motivation: the troubling awareness that one has reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. Either man changes his ways or get ready to face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in his reckless race to apocalypse. Some people's temperaments and talents have deposited them in literature departments, but, as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconsciously frivolous for them. It is said that if one is not a part of the solution, then he becomes a part of the problem.

Everyone must aim at contributing his part to the restoration of the environment, and as a professor of literature this becomes his responsibility to do so. By teaching the students about culture, he can definitely bring about changes in students' behaviours, which in turn will doubtless reflect on his attitude towards his environment. Each and every student, a part of the future generation, is important for the conservation of earth.

The thought that the environmentalists, scientists and the nature enthusiasts alone are responsible for and are capable of bringing about a change in the thoughts of the people of the world is a common misconception. It is also

the duty of the teachers to teach their students of the importance of preserving the environment and the nature. They have to instill in the minds of young students that preventing their source of living, the earth, from ruin is as important for them as they strive hard to earn their bread. A child accepts, after their parents' words, their teachers' words without much effort. The younger the child's mind, the easier it is to introduce ideas, theories and concepts.

The *Maddaddam* trilogy can be regarded as an inspection of extinction. Not just the extinction of Homo sapiens, or the extinction of other biological species, but also the extinction of cultural practices and endeavours in late capitalist society. Whilst the elimination of human civilisation is a significant point of interest in the text – the impetus for the telling of the first two parts of the story, even – the other forms of extinction, the extinction of both nature and culture, are equal parts of the issue that Atwood's narrative highlights as part of its warning about continued environmental degradation. Ultimately, Atwood's trilogy holds consumer capitalism responsible for the extinction and erosion of biological and cultural specimens. And indeed that consumer capitalism is the least ideal social structure in terms of environmental conversation. However, Atwood's texts strive to make a point that not all the output of late capitalism is negative. The gross abuse of genetic splicing technology does eventually lead to the Crakers, and the lack of value placed on the qualitative generates the amusing benevolence of the God's Gardeners. Of course, the desire to create and multiply is in-built in the human genome, and any society that attempts to diminish these traits is attempting to diminish the

essence of human nature. By mirroring the extinction of biology with the extinction of culture in her speculative dystopia, Atwood's trilogy warns of the extinction of the entire planet unless meaningful changes are made soon.

The researcher has tried not only to bring out the physical turmoil of man because of his misbehavior but also the psychological tortures and psychological abnormalities that he goes through because of it. As the chosen author states, man would have to go through a total transformation if he continues leading his life the way he does. The methods that Atwood proposes in her novels may be different but almost all of the ideas that she states are proposed by futurists and scientists.

Scholars who wish to conduct research on Margaret Atwood in the future may consider the areas such as 'The Apocalyptic Vision of Margaret Atwood in the *Maddaddam* trilogy', 'Margaret Atwood's novels as Speculative Fictions', 'Psychoanalytical study of the characters of *Maddaddam* trilogy' and also a 'Comparative study of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, George Orwell's *1984* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*'.

Atwood does not stop with preaching. She practices them too. From reusing envelopes and boxes for shipping, to using hundred percent green electricity and printing her books in ecofriendly papers, Margaret Atwood also contributes a lot to planet earth, to keep her safe. Margaret Atwood hopes to convey a message through her writing so as to bring about a change- if not big at least tiny changes- in the minds of people.

All of the above mentioned books, which are taken up for the research, are about what Atwood intends to inform the public. She intends not only to preach, but also practices what she preaches. The work of an author is an epitome of the author's thoughts. Although the perception of the reader may differ, the work purely reflects the author's mind.

The plentitude of books and works on relationships between literature and ecology are suggestive of the fact that literacy criticism need not be divorced from political issues and contemporary scientific concerns. Actually, literature might have significant facts to reveal in these areas. As sensitivity to environmental problems continues to grow, literary texts and criticism have increasingly come to reflect this sensitivity. Some literature emphasizes the need to look at individuals as part of the ecosystem. They also prove to be a speculation between human and non-human and suggest ways in which this relationship may be interpreted or reformed. Literature has a unique power to fulfill a function which cannot be fulfilled by any other forms of discourse. Literature has a special feature in itself. It prompts rejuvenate the culture and values of life.

Scientists say that aging can be cured and that they have tested it out in mice. They also say that they will be able to transfer human minds to sturdier vessels such as computers and robots. These come very close to Atwood's thoughts, although they seem impossible when read in the novels. When machines equal human intelligence, it cannot be far away when humans

themselves will be equaled and then excelled. Atwood presents this disturbing vision just to create a warning within the minds of the readers.

When Jimmy tells the Crakers their origin story at the beginning of the trilogy, words go only to humans and Crakers. When Toby tells it at the end of the trilogy, all creatures partake of the second egg. This is the challenge, to honor that different kind of word, to expand one's story beyond the human, to respect Children of Crake and Children of Oryx both.

As Cora Jessica Franken in her work says, when a society goes to ruins animals and the marginalized people are the ones who are most affected. The humans, especially the rich, retreat to safer places during such kinds of disasters. It is the animals and the poor and the needy who are made to stand the disasters and face it one on one.

People must commit to doing the hard work on both personal and political scales. They must promise themselves that they will eat vegetables from one's own garden instead of factory farmed meat. One backyard or rooftop garden will not change the world, but it may inspire more backyard gardens. There will be some missteps and one will not always know the right answer. But one can do his best today, then do a little better tomorrow, incorporating new information as one learns it.

One should get inspiration from the Crakers, the God's Gardeners and the animals in the novel and not from the others. They serve to protect the planet from destruction in all aspects of their endeavors. The trilogy as a whole may appear to be tragic for human beings. But it could be found the

environment is renewed and even its people, at least the few who are left behind. It is concluded with a positive note where people along with the Crakers work to restore the green planet to its original form.

Atwood in *The Canadian Green Consumer Guide* suggests that, small things are the beginning of things. Each and every person on the earth should take steps, if not big, at least tiny ones, so as to protect their planet from ruin. It is as important to close a leaking tap properly, minimise garbage- recycle, reuse, and reduce- and switch off electrical and electronic appliances when not necessary, as it is important to reach the places of work on time and attaining perfection in one's profession.

Atwood is pointing towards a massive transformation of lifestyle and culture system, that will make men naturally eco conscious, like the Crakers. The attitudinal change will be so basic and fundamentally so strange that it changes the way humans live forever, and along with it the political, socio-economic factors, so as to ensure an ecologically sustainable life, for both man and nature, human and the non- human world.

It is most vital, at this stage, that each and every human on the earth takes step to preserve the planet and its beings. One must pledge to do his bit for the earth, it can even be buying things from a local store so as to reduce air pollution and the use of fuel in his vehicle. People tend to think that only one person doing things to change the world is futile. But this attitude is utterly erroneous. The problem faced by the people is global. But the solution must be local. Small beginnings can spell great changes. Unless one begins

somewhere, he will never begin at all. It is highly imperative for the whole world to initiate a change for the better so as to safeguard himself, his planet and the future generations.

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