The Mastery over Nature:

An Eco-feminist study of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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Abstract:
The word ‘eco-feminism’ coined by the French Feminist Francoise D’Eaubonne (in 1974) has gained currency in academia. Although Eaubonne used the term to delineate the violence inflicted by men on women and nature for the past few decades, eco-feminism cannot be treated as a subset of feminism and ecology. An offshoot of ecocriticism, it has its own distinct methodology for understanding the world as it makes both men and women conscious not only of the ecological disasters but also intertwines the violence against Mother Earth with the patriarchal urge to subdue and control women. Margaret Atwood explores some of the main features of eco-feminism within the historical content of Canada as well as the large feminist movement. She continues to examine ecofeminist issues in her poetry and fiction. Her texts critique the parallel oppression of both women and nature as well as foster an ethic of caring without resorting to essentialism of both feminity and nature. As ecofeminists argue that it is imperative that women recognise the parallels between their oppression and that of the natural world, Atwood’s female protagonists undergo a transformative stage in which they acknowledge their power as well as their connection to nature.

This paper attempts to show how The Handmaids Tale centres on the oppression of women under a fundamentalist regime where both nature and women are treated as objects to be manipulated, subjugated and exploited by man and technology. Atwood seeks to address the closeness women enjoy with nature which empowers them to fight the overwhelming patriarchal and dualistic ideas.
Key words: eco-feminism, nature, power, patriarchy, dualism.

Eco-feminism is premised upon the social critique that the domination of women through patriarchy and domination of nature through the western model of development are intrinsically linked. It developed as a theory and an activist position in response to the feminist, ecological and peace movements. Like feminism, it is an umbrella term entailing positions and standpoints as diverse as Goddess worship, socialist, Judeo-Christian eco-feminism. This diversity is not a contradiction but comprises the very heart of theory and praxis of eco-feminism. It speaks of reality being like a patchwork quilt, in which there are no boundaries. It comprises of a mosaic of pieces, each varied and diverse.

Eco-feminism begins with the premise that in trans-cultural, global patriarchal practices, women and nature share a subordinate and instrumental relationship with men, both are subject to patterns, attitudes and institutions of male domination and control. Both are gendered feminine as one of the means of that control. It is a contextual ethic and involves a shift from a conception of ethic as primarily a matter of rights, rules or principles pre-determined and applied in specific cases to entities viewed as competitors in the concept of moral standing to a conception of ethics as growing out of what Jim Cheney calls ‘defining relationships’, relationships conceived in some sense as defining who one is.... Eco-feminism makes a central place for value of care, love, friendship, trust and appropriate reciprocity-values that presume our relationship to others is central to our understanding of who we are.’(Warren,1990:141)

To read Atwood’s novels like ecological treatises and represent a perfect resource for the study of interconnectedness between nature/culture and human/non-human. As a Canadian, she is witness to the horrifying outcome of the exhaustion of natural resources, as well as the despoilation of the environment. She willingly/unwillingly grants nature a central place in her fictional world.

Eco-feminism which postulates that there exists a tendency to isolate and confine both women and nature in society and as such ‘eco-feminist criticism relates these problems to the
basic dualism between nature/culture or woman / man that lies at the root of western civilization. (King;1990:106-107)

There binary dualities pervade The Handmaid’s Tale and highlight Atwood’s eco-feminist concerns. The domination by male leaders and cities (Fred and his ilk) represent the cultural institutions that hold power over female subjects who are associated with nature that must be controlled. This forms the basic principle for the organisation of the Republic. Though Atwood associates the female with the natural world, she actually avoids falling into a ‘dualism ’that oversimplifies the connection between the human and the non-human. (Ortner,1974:67) Rather them depending on nature to explain universal truths, she establishes parallels between the plight of women and nature in Gilead without overcome simplifying the essential difference between her characters and the natural environment.

Atwood’s dystopia is set in the Republic of Gilead, a futuristic America ruled by a totalitarian theocracy enslaving women for childbearing. Offred and the other handmaids are confined to a compound in their respective master’s house and are sent to counselling sessions with the Aunts at the gymnasium where their enslavement is perfected. These handmaids are required to go through a monthly ritual like session with their masters and his wife. Offred questions these distorted sexual ceremonies as well as the oppressive regime of the Republic. She also questions the role she has to assume and often reflects on her previous life. As these flashbacks and reflections become frequent, Offred rebels against the regime. She becomes intimate with the commander’s chauffeur, Nick and joins the commander to play scrabble (an activity banned for women in the regime) and even accompanies him to Jezebels, a brothel where the elite meet prostitutes. Atwood through her portrayal highlights the oppressive Gilead regime where women are reduced to mere carriers and subject to unmanageable kinds of oppression. Atwood true to her Medusaic self has kept the reader guessing as to what happens to Offred as the story ends abruptly .The narrator conveys her perspective on female experience within Gilead and exposes the physical oppression of both women and nature. She becomes a votary for nature and thus exposes its desacralization. The physical oppression of the handmaids is explicitly stated in the beginning of the novel. Offred, while describing her condition states-
‘We slept in what had once been the gymnasium, we learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness, we could stretch out our arms, when the aunts weren’t looking and touch each other’s hands across space. We learnt to lip-read. (HT: 4)

This symbolised their oppression and the control of the female body by the regime. Gilead also enforced a strict dress code. Wives wore blue dresses, the household servants green and the handmaids were designated to wear red habits and a white veil over their faces. David Coad aptly labels this veil which ‘aids their effacement’ and actively disempowers them and stands for a ‘metaphor or trope of colonical, gendered oppression’. (Coad:2001:57)

Offred’s narrative records that women are oppressed to such an extent that they aren’t allowed to communicate among themselves and can only utter a set of precise expressions. Hence all the women remain isolated, mute or ever ready to accomplish whatever task they are assigned. Offred in her narrative testifies to Gilead’s hegemonic control of its female subjects as well as nature.

This is further corroborated by Adrienne Rich in Of Women Born which describes how the men in Gilead keep women in oppressed conditions as they feel that by doing so their society will remain intact. She states:

‘Patriarchy would seem to require then, not only that women shall assume the major burden of pain and self denial for the furtherance of the species but that a majority of that species women shall remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened’. (Rich,1976:43)

There are numerous parallels between the imprisonment of women and the confinement of nature in the novel. The regime applies its tyrannical practices even on the grass, flowers and plants which are fenced and organized according to strict regulations. Offred draws parallels between her imprisonment and the confinement of nature. While describing Serena Joy’s garden, she remarks:

‘There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point to say: whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard’. (HT:143)
Atwood evokes the falsity of the natural nation through a parody that depicts extreme degradation of the natural environment of erstwhile U.S. where the landscape is barren and unfertile. Offred describes the interaction of man and nature into terms of infectious pollution of the female body. She explains:

‘The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiations, the water swarmed with toxic molecules...meanwhile they creep into your body’. (HT:10)

This is further reiterated by Verena Buhlar Roth, an ecofeminist critic who states in *Wilderness and the Natural Environment* that in *The Handmaid's Tale* ‘the idealization of the natural is practiced in a world in which actual natural spaces have been destroyed or are present. The ideology of the natural is a kind of substitute for this absence, and is primarily used to define gender roles’. (Roth, 1998:154)

Offerd's narrative highlights the abusive, masculinist practices which devalue her feminity and nature’s fertility. Her concerns with the regime’s control of her feminity are explained in herself explanatory role of a breeder: ‘We are two legged wombs, that all; sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices’. (HT: 128)

Thus through her texts, Atwood demonstrates that by reconfiguring notions of nature and raising ecological and ethical concerns, feminist concerns can be raised.

**Works Cited:**


