

# **“Instead of Flowers, Our Neighbors Plant Mortars and Machine Guns in Their Gardens”: An Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *MaddAddam Trilogy***

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## **Abstract**

*This article examines Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing (1972), The Handmaid’s Tale (1985), and the MaddAddam Trilogy (2003–2013) from an ecofeminist perspective. Created against a backdrop of environmental devastation, Atwood’s speculative ventures, which are entangled with gender issues, appositely lend themselves to such investigations. Taking patriarchal dualisms as the root cause of the historical polarization of humanity from nature, and sundry subsequently established domination/subordination relationships as the point of departure, this study explores the hierarchies of culture/nature, masculinity/femininity, mind/body, sky/earth, and competition/cooperation with a focus on the issues of war, science and religion. Oppressive social relations and anti-ecological lifestyles prove to be inexorably entangled where their expunction is contingent on the eradication of hegemonic centric structures.*

*Keywords: Margaret Atwood, ecofeminism, hegemonic masculinity, heroism, scientism, ecophobia, quest, necrophilic transcendence*

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## 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood, a self-proclaimed environmentalist, spent most of her childhood in the region of Quebec following her father, an enthusiastic forest entomologist, in his pursuits in the midst of the wilderness. Her deeply ingrained sense of ecological awareness – a legacy of her father’s lifestyle – is coupled with her nationalistic and feminist preoccupations, and this combination informs her literary endeavors to a marked extent (Cooke 3). Dana Percec contends that Atwood’s “preoccupation for environmental issues and deep interest in gender discourses have made her one of the best known ambassadors of ecofeminism in North America” (45). Engagement with feminist speculative fictions, such as Atwood’s, can potentially enable “a fundamental exploration and critiquing of complacencies; the devaluing produced by austerity and eroded values which, if taken to a logical end, suggest rejection of difference and a shutting down of what it means to be human” (Wisker 314). The focus of this paper is mainly on Atwood’s speculative ventures which were created against a backdrop of environmental devastation. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), Atwood imagines a future in which the legacy of biosphere-damaging trends and experiments is a totalitarian theocracy in which women’s lives are reduced to their reproductive functions. The *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–2013) tells the story of a science-torn and environmentally devastated world in which a scientist decides to correct the wrongs of his fellow human beings by releasing a pandemic virus. *Surfacing* (1972), which is about a woman who travels back to her hometown in search of her father, is also included in the discussion, as this novel anticipated many of Atwood’s subsequent feminist and environmental concerns.

## 2. Ecofeminism and Literature

Ecofeminism introduces the sciences and philosophies of environmentalism and ecology into feminist discourse, asserting a link between gender and ecology. The basic premise of this coalition is that nature and women share not only a subordinate but also an instrumental relationship to men under global patriarchal practices. Eco-feminists’ central project, as Karen Warren contends, is to unpack “the connections between the twin oppressions of women and nature” (107). Ecofeminists, Russell avers, “have realized that we must question the entire civilization that mankind has contrived—all of its values, its goals, its achievements. It is not merely antifeminine, it is antihuman, antilife” (225). Planetary health and global ecological destruction are indeed feminist issues, because a healthy environment is prerequisite to many of their long-sought transformations: “A commitment to woman’s health—reproductive health (freedom from compulsory motherhood, freedom to choose motherhood and to regulate it), labor health (safe conditions and fair compensation), and general health (in terms of unpolluted and sufficient sources of food, fuel, water, and shelter)—requires a commitment to planetary health” (Gaard and Gruen 247). Therefore, although no one single definition of ecofeminism exists that would satisfy every party involved (as is indeed the case with definitions of feminism itself), there is nevertheless a consensus that ecological and feminist agendas can merge to foster substantial change in the very fabric of society, in which a rapidly accelerating pattern of environmental degradation is most palpable: “It is no longer possible to discuss environmental change without addressing social change; moreover, it is not possible to

address women's oppression without addressing environmental degradation" (Gaard and Gruen 236). The discernable social character of this ecological movement "stems from the fact that it emerged from a variety of areas of activism, such as peace movements, labour movements, healthcare and anti-nuclear movements" (Percec 46).

The official marriage of literary criticism and ecofeminism was established through Patrick D. Murphy's *Literature, Nature, Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (1995), Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy's co-edited volume, *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* (1998), and Glynis Carr's edited volume, *New Essays in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* (2000). However, the role and the position of literature within ecofeminism as a rapidly expanding and highly diverse movement has not been without its challenges. In 1996, Greta Gaard, in a dialogue with Patrick D. Murphy, argues that ecofeminists have mostly sought source materials that look like facts, and literature is not exactly perceived as "factual." She explains that such omission of literary resources, according to Ynestra King, is a sign of "a kind of elitism that may be classist or racist" (Gaard and Murphy, *A Dialogue* 2). However, Gaard contends that on the one hand, literary critics are "justifiably eager to contribute to the development of an ecofeminist movement," as history has shown that "broad social movements have been inspired or catalyzed by music ("We Shall Overcome") or by literature (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*)." On the other hand, she maintains that the tide is changing in favor of the inclusion of literature, as more and more ecofeminists are now "thinking about literature both as data and as an effective rhetorical mode and have been doing so for some time," as "literature can appeal to certain readers who would otherwise not be moved by theory" (2–3).

### 3. Quaint and Curious War Is: Hegemonic Masculinity in Conflict

A variety of feminist theorists in the 1980s focused their attention on how the hierarchical distinction between masculinity and femininity informs the practice and legitimization of war. These feminists, who mostly happened to be peace activists too, considered the social construction of masculinity as the root cause of the widespread appeal of militarism (Hutchings 391). The basic argument is that the tremendous growth of militarism during the twentieth century (continuing well into the twentieth-first century) stands on a masculine conceptualization of power dynamics that is based on competition, control, dominance and violence. Of course, the focal point here is hegemonic masculinity, which stands in contrast to alternative masculinities and an oppositional, feminized Other: "The term 'hegemonic masculinity' refers to a particular idealized image of masculinity in relation to which images of femininity and other masculinities are marginalized and subordinated. The hegemonic ideal of masculinity in current Western culture is a man who is independent, risk-taking, aggressive, heterosexual, and rational" (Barrett 130). Therefore, it seems most apposite that Atwood touches upon the subject of war on the very first page of *Surfacing*, albeit in passing. Surfacer juxtaposes her brother's aggressive sexual behavior and the issue of war: "In one of those restaurants before I was born my brother got under the table and slid his hands up and down the waitress's legs while she was bringing the food; it was during the war and she had on shiny orange rayon stockings, he'd never seen them before" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 3).

What is even more thought-provoking is her brother's fascination with the subject of war, and his imaginative ways of introducing its staggering violence (i.e. the mutilation of soldiers) into their childhood games: "In the car that time we sat with our feet wrapped in blankets, pretending we were wounded. My brother said the Germans shot our feet off" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 4). Evidently, from an early age, his imagination has been captivated by daunting acts of violence and war. His scrapbook is dominated by images of explosions, dismembered soldiers, and weaponry inspired by WWII (Atwood, *Surfacing* 90). Surfacer believes that they are now so immersed in this toxic system of thinking that imagining a world where people are not perpetually in a state of violent conflict is simply beyond the realm of possibility: "But his pictures were more accurate, the weapons, the disintegrating soldiers: he was a realist, that protected him" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 132). However, later on, Surfacer explains the "kill or be killed" logic that her brother had developed only to question its legitimacy: "My brother saw the danger early. To immerse oneself, join in the war, or to be destroyed. Though there ought to be other choices" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 195).

The recipients of man's hostility are not only man's fellow human beings. The root cause of humanity's destructive relationship with nature has been traced back to the fear and contempt they feel for the agency of the natural environment. Estok explains that the term ecophobia in clinical psychology is used to "designate an irrational fear of home;" however, in ecocriticism, this term is defined and used in an entirely different manner. With a similar pattern as other forms of discriminatory treatments, ecophobia, as a recognizable discourse and one of the hallmarks of human progress, is "an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism" (208). In very simple terms, ecophobia, Estok maintains, is about control and power: "Human history is a history of controlling the natural environment, of taking rocks and making them tools or weapons to modify or to kill parts of the natural environment, of building shelters to protect us from weather and predators, of maintaining personal hygiene to protect ourselves from diseases and parasites that can kill us" (210). Therefore, nature is seen as a formidable opponent to be feared, fought and ultimately conquered. Having a hard time sleeping, Snowman feels a threatening presence behind the trees where the proverbial damsels-in-distress are in need of rescue (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 261).

If nature is indeed a hostile force, masculine acts of self-defense – and, in some cases, the protection of others – are interpreted as heroic. Even in civilized settings, "the heroic battle against unruly nature is reenacted as ritual drama in such masculine ventures as sport-hunting, bullfights, and rodeos. A similar mentality can be seen in the ritual degradation of women in pornography and rape" (Kheel 246). In Surfacer's view, this is exactly the mentality that drives the Americans who have come onto Canadian soil to hunt and fish: "My brain recited the stories I'd been told about them: the ones who stuffed the pontoons of their seaplane with illegal fish, the ones who had a false bottom to their car, two hundred lake trout on dry ice, the game warden caught them by accident" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 122). When their bribes were turned down, the Americans got drunk and started chasing the loons in their powerboats, drowning them or chopping them up with their propeller blade. Surfacer views the game of killing the loons as a simulation of war (Atwood, *Surfacing* 123). In contrast, it is among her childhood drawings that

Surfacer finds her vision of Heaven, a place that is devoid of heroes, monsters, and wars (Atwood, *Surfacing* 91). Atwood also establishes a link between the violent heroic battle and the denigration of women in pornography by juxtaposing the two in her description of the kinds of entertainment Jimmy and Glenn enjoy. Besides playing extremely violent war games, and watching live coverage of executions in Asia on hedsoff.com, Jimmy and Glenn spend most of their time watching pornography, especially featuring young children, on their computer (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 82, 85). When Blanco rapes Toby, what he wants is "submission" and a "thank you after every degrading act" (Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* 38).

Heroism is the constant concomitant of masculinity, as the latter must continually be proved. Nancy Hartsock avers that heroism requires four steps: firstly, women are to be excluded from the scene of heroic deeds. Secondly, it should be a zero-sum competition where one's loss is another's gain. Thirdly, a heroic action, separate from daily life and its concerns, must take place. Fourthly, the last step involves a sense of abstraction of the self and the moment from the larger whole (141). Simone de Beauvoir's account of men's pursuit of transcendence pertinently reveals the nature of the appeal of heroic courage to men. Men pursue transcendence because they seek activity and creativity in their lives, being free from the burden of childbearing and menstruation. The celebrated *Homo faber* – the hunter, the gatherer, the warrior – breaks through frontiers and lays down the foundation for the future. The supreme dignity of these activities comes from their element of danger: "The warrior put his life in jeopardy to elevate the prestige of the horde, the clan to which he belonged. And in this he proved dramatically that life is not the supreme value for man, but on the contrary that it should be made to serve ends more important than itself." As a result, men are raised above women in status for "it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal" (88-89). Building upon de Beauvoir's analysis of transcendence, Brown argues that heroic courage becomes the most appealing virtue for men because "the willingness to risk death is the proof that life has been discarded as a fundamental value. To be willing to *die* for something is considered more glorious than to be willing to *live* for something" (182). Man's endeavor to distinguish himself as a human being through valued acts of heroism inevitably alienates him from whatever is associated with life and survival, as "the activity of maintaining and sustaining life has been ideologically and practically divided off from the activity of creating history and meaning" (Brown 192).

This heroic mentality has been blamed for bringing the world to a state of ecological despoliation; however, "it is not until the crisis is of sufficiently epidemic proportions that heroes will respond" (Gaard and Gruen 245). Opposition to this heroic mentality is so fervent among ecofeminists that many of them have declined to take up the role of the patriarchal "hero" hunting for a "savior theory" (i.e. an environmental ethic) that could singlehandedly rescue Mother Nature (i.e. the proverbial "damsel in distress") from the "villains" that have bound and subdued her. Instead, ecofeminists have shown more interest in exposing the underlying mentality of the twin exploitation of women and nature, which they view as a prerequisite to social transformation (Kheel 243-244). That is probably why Surfacer mockingly renounces the prevalent savior mentality: "Saving the world, everyone wants to; men think they can do it with guns, women with their bodies,

love conquers all, conquerors love all, mirages raised by words” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 168).

Furthermore, what Surfacer takes away from the birthday party games of her childhood is a strictly competitive zero-sum ideology: “There were only two things you could be, a winner or a loser.” At first, she refuses to participate; however, once she is coerced to learn how to be “civilized,” she joins the other children in one of the games, being “welcomed with triumph, like a religious convert or a political defector” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 68–69). The assertion of male control over the wild is established by their conquests of food and wood. After catching a fish, Surfacer explains their sense of pride, which is quite similar to that of victorious soldiers: “They are all laughing, joyful with victory and relief, like the newsreels of parades at the end of the war, and that makes me glad” (Atwood, *Surfacing* 62). Later on, David the Conqueror attempts to “immortalize” his moment of victory by filming the innards of the gutted fish with no compunction (Atwood, *Surfacing* 66). A similar pattern is recognizable when David and Joe return from the forest with wood. The notched log seems to have been “attacked” by the two valiant soldiers who immortalize their heroic triumph over their formidable foe by recording footage of them carrying the defeated log (Atwood, *Surfacing* 80). However, later on, Surfacer drowns the images of Joe and David with their defeated enemy in the cleansing water of the lake.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the frontier fantasy of the heroic individual taming the wild world is revealed to be “an unspeakable crime.” After the end of human civilization, “the entire world becomes again free and open land, to be once again molded and ‘tamed’ by heroic individuals” (Canavan 141). This is exactly the situation in which Snowman finds himself at the beginning of the story. As an attempt to preserve his sanity, he tries to recite lines from self-help books, only to reveal to readers later on that the directive was likely written for the European colonials, who were mostly rapists (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 4–5). The affiliation of women and nature in their shared plight is reinforced as these colonials not only came to conquer the land, but also to conquer (i.e. rape) women. Human history cannot offer Snowman a model for navigating his new and hostile terrain, as the exhausted frontier myth – with all its motifs and ideological assumptions – can no longer help man build anew a better society in the wild territory (Canavan 141).

Certainly, it can be argued that human civilization is so much more than its atrocities. Atwood, in the “Blood & Roses” game played by Jimmy and Crake, juxtaposes the good with the bad: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” as Walter Benjamin most aptly puts it (256). The basic logic of the “wicked” game is that you can trade one human accomplishment for one human atrocity: “The exchange rates—one Mona Lisa equalled Bergen-Belsen, one Armenian genocide equalled the Ninth Symphony plus three Great Pyramids—were suggested, but there was room for haggling” (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 79). However, the salient question remains, and presses for an answer: Are these human achievements and triumphs enough to counterbalance human civilization’s most dire failures? Although Atwood is very protective of the human culture and the creative vitality of humanistic thought, she seems to be leaning toward answering *no*, as the number of Roses is absolutely insufficient to defeat the Bloods (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 79–80).

#### 4. The Fault, Dear Brutus, Is Not in Our Stars: Scientism

The role of science in society is a contested issue in ecofeminist discourse. Basing their argument on new developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and reproductive technology, Mies and Shiva, in their introduction to *Ecofeminism* (2014), argue that “science’s whole paradigm is characteristically patriarchal, anti-nature and colonial and aims to dispossess women of their generative capacity as it does the productive capacities of nature” (16). Carolyn Merchant’s distinguished text *The Death of Nature* (1980) questions the dualistic discourses of individual mastery and scientific control that have created systems of domination and exploitation such as sexism and naturism. Merchant attributes the root of the separation of culture from nature, and the inferiority of women in modern society, to seventeenth-century mechanical philosophy and the Scientific Revolution, most notable in the works of Francis Bacon and René Descartes. Her core message is that “nature-culture dualism is a key factor in Western civilization’s advance at the expense of nature” (143), and that “nature and women are both perceived to be on a lower level than culture, which has been associated symbolically and historically with men” (244). She advocates the need to “reexamine the formation of a worldview and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women” (xvii).

Similarly, Easlea focuses on the rise of science and technology, and how sexism was built into the seventeenth century Scientific Revolution. He argues that science is a masculine affair of controlling and dominating nature which rarely leads to a collaborative and cooperative relationship with the natural world: “[M]odern science, as it has developed in the West, has not only been a male-dominated activity thereby conferring a masculine identity on its successful practitioners, but in addition, it has been a ‘masculine philosophy’ which allows its practitioners to claim and indeed to demonstrate an impressive male virility” (61). Easlea believes that the culpability lies with the problems of male identity in a patriarchal society. Seeing exclusively women in a parenting role would lead men to strong feelings of ambivalence and hostility. This would turn men’s relationship to his others into “a relatively mild insecurity to a full-fledged compulsive hardness” (44), the extent of which is determined by wider socio-economic conditions. In other words, triggered by their insecurity about their masculinity, men use their aggressive sexuality and their science as tools to oppress both women and nature.

Christina Bieber Lake contends that human “scientific knowledge and technical skill will ultimately give us complete control over our own evolutionary future. ... Whether the ability to control the destiny of the human species will turn out to be a good thing remains to be seen” (xii). This heightened sense of perturbation and reservation regarding human flourishing – taking the form of scientism, which has increasingly led to environmental degradation endangering more and more species, including *Homo sapiens* – is indeed of a more modern disposition. Stapleton contends that dystopian texts and films are a manifestation of the political and cultural fears of any given era, and a closer look at recent dystopian fiction reveals “how afraid we are of our own ‘progress’—human development that leads to natural disasters, world-ending climate change, and science and technology

run amok” (19). In the postwar years, people started to wonder if we possess the wisdom to use and control our advanced scientific knowledge, which we have turned into power: “The dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seriously called into question humans’ ability to judge the appropriate use of a technology so powerful that it could destroy the world” (Stapleton 21). Atwood herself has a skeptical view of scientism, which has been defined by Tom Sorell as “the belief that science, especially natural science, is much the most valuable part of human learning—much the most valuable part because it is much the most authoritative, or serious, or beneficial” (1). However, to question the hegemony of science, which has led to technoscience’s immense political, social and cultural power, is not synonymous with rebuffing the numerous important “*truths* (lower case t and plural)” with which it has provided us. These types of criticisms, as Patrick Curry explains, are not anti-science but anti-scientism: “[T]he modern cult of science, according to which science is not one way of being among many but the only valid or *true* one” (25).

Atwood gives tangible instances where humans have put a gaping distance between themselves and nature through their techno-scientific practices. Surfacer, at her moment of vulnerability while she is attempting to immerse herself in the natural world, hears four or five Americans, the arch-villains of her story, “hulking out of” their boat. She believes that the Americans are half-way through their metamorphosis from a living organism to a machine (Atwood, *Surfacing* 190). Deep down, she fears that one day, the very technology we use to make our lives more and more convenient – like flush toilets and vacuum cleaners – will wipe us out completely (Atwood, *Surfacing* 119). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, one of Atwood’s strongest critiques is directed toward the technophilic attitude of people. The dysfunctional society of Gilead is a result of people’s “easy reliance on and unthinking acceptance of computer data storage of personal information, genetic modification and a myriad of other scientific interventions (including fertility treatment), or the world’s complacency in the face of environmental shifts” (Macpherson 53). The plight of the Handmaids is a direct result of “a sterility-causing virus that was developed by secret pre-Gilead gene-splicing experiments with mumps, and which was intended for insertion into the supply of caviar used by top officials in Moscow” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 391). Atwood highlights people’s obsession with technology by showing how the Gileadean language is replete with blend words highlighting the technological aspect of their identities: “Computalk” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 177), “Compuphone” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 216), or “Compubank” (Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* 224).

The spliced words of *The Handmaid’s Tale* presage the science-torn world of the compounds of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, in which the public’s attitude is overwhelmingly positive and uncritical toward the untouchable, privileged position of science, and specifically genetic engineering. One of the most significant challenges of the trilogy’s story is directed at unchecked science, uncontested technological practices, and unlimited human ecological manipulation in the name of progress. In the absence of any legal or regulatory frameworks that would govern the scientific endeavors in order to safeguard public health and protect the environment, the scientists are left with only two imperatives: “[T]he technological possibility and the economic significance of their creations” (Sanderson 237). Glenn explains that “technological connections” have replaced the kings

as the “centre of power” in their world (Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* 228). Science also seems to have displaced the authority of religion. Crake, the ultimate scientist, along with Oryx and Snowman, are now the Christian Trinity: “Crake assumes the role of Father, creator of all, triumphant over chaos; Snowman, that of sacrificial Son and immanent Logos (and perhaps also of Gnostic Logos marooned in matter); and Oryx, that of Spirit, omnipresent, ‘feminine’ Paraclete” (Dunning 95). Curry argues that “in a society dominated by financial, commercial and fiscal imperatives, science is no more immune than any other human enterprise to the corruption entailed by selling your services to the highest bidder” (26). The corporations even go as far as to create new kinds of diseases in their laboratories so they can sell the cure for a handsome profit (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 210).

Furthermore, turning a blind eye to the environmental impacts of widely used technologies and unbridled resource consumption proves to be detrimental to the very survival of the human race. In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, even without Crake’s radical intervention, science – freed from restraints due to the removal of virtually every regulatory oversight of scientific experimentation and ethics because of the dissolution of a powerful central state – threatens human survival (Dunning 98). International biotech corporations have taken over the world, and have assumed complete control over people’s lives: “All characters in the MaddAddam series are impacted by the biotech corporations in some way: as employee, as consumer, as dissenter, or, in the case of the Crakers, as invention” (Stapleton 28). The scientific elites in their fortified compounds literally dictate the lives of the pleeblanders. The scientifically and technologically gifted individuals are systematically privileged, whereas people such as Jimmy have to suffer through the degraded Martha Graham Academy with little prospect of satisfying future employment. Obviously, the worst fate awaits those who dare speak out against the biotechnology corporations. These companies easily silence or discredit the opposition by means of political assassinations, strange accidents, unexplained disappearances, and sex scandals (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 254).

Jimmy’s and Crake’s questionable behaviors are partly the product of “the deployment of scientific research and rational practices into the construction of a divided, heavily guarded, valueless, outwardly comfortable, inwardly vacant lifestyle” (Wisker 312). What makes this story all the more poignant is the fact that Crake’s experiments in bioengineering and genetic manipulation, albeit to an extreme, are indeed a true reflection of current scientific endeavors: “Although *MaddAddam* is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies, or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction, or are not possible in theory” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 393). That is probably why Atwood so adamantly argues that her work is speculative fiction rather than science fiction. In an interview with Hoffman, Atwood, building her argument on the issues of overpopulation and the consequent profligate consumption of natural resources, drew a Malthusian conclusion: “People think they will fix the problem with technology, but famine may fix it for us” (35). In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, she changes her tone by rendering technology the very means that engenders the prophesized Malthusian end, catalyzed by the scientific mind of Crake. Science in itself is a masculine affair of control and domination, and Crake asserts his mastery by condemning the entirety of the human population to death as, by his scientific calculations, their existence was no longer making sense. Even Oryx, his

beloved, does not escape this fate. Her murder, unsettlingly close to a suttee rendering it a symbolic act in subjugation, seems to be a tribute to Crake's colossal ego: Crake "refuses the beloved's call to move beyond his objectified scientific self, preferring death—even global death—to the possibility of life shaped in communion with another" (Dunning 98).

Crake is not the only scientist with dangerous experiments and an astonishingly extreme masterplan. The story is riddled with cartoonishly irresponsible experiments conducted both on animals and humans. In OrganInc Farms, Jimmy's father helped engineer the Methuselah Mouse as part of Operation Immortality before becoming "one of the foremost architects of the pigoon project, along with a team of transplant experts and the microbiologists who were splicing against infections" (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 22). The rakunks were the product of "an after-hours hobby on the part of one of the OrganInc biolab hotshots." Many of these create-an-animal experiments were destroyed as "they were too dangerous to have around" (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 51). Crakers themselves are a mishmash of a litany of desirable and environmentally-sound attributes spliced together from other species. The successful appropriation of each trait meant a lot of "botched experiments" at the expense of many human subjects. Snowman recalls how Crake struggled to perfect the "purring" by conducting Mengelian experiments on defenseless children (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 156). Furthermore, another real threat that the misuse of advanced science poses is the development of weapons of mass destruction. People fear that the "biogeeks" are gene-splicing nasty parasites that can "lay thousands of eggs in you or creep through your brain and out your tear ducts, or split themselves into regenerating segments and turn the inside of your body into a festering patty-melt" as part of "a bio-weaponry project" (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 198).

## **5. Pretty Women Wonder Where My Secret Lies: Female Quest and the Lost Patriarchal Past**

Surfacer's journey can be construed as the female counterpart to the more familiar narratives of male initiation in which the hero goes into the wilderness, faces a series of perilous yet enlightening adventures, gains wisdom and courage, and eventually returns to civilization with a renewed sense of self and his milieu. She re-experiences nature on her own terms far from the comfort of home, and attempts to re-evaluate her place in it apart from the influences of a patriarchal society. Her encounter with nature is far from facile assumptions of naïve romanticization. When she sets foot in nature, she does not become a transparent eyeball in an ecstatic moment of revelation. She does not transcend the material world into infinite spaces. She remains bound to the physical world and all its limitations: "My bones ache, hunger is loose in me, belly a balloon, floating shark stomach" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 185). The end of Surfacer's quest is to be awakened from "a male-defined world, to the greater terror and risk, and also the great potential healing and joy, of a world defined by the heroine's own feeling and judgment" (Christ 325). This quest can potentially help her circumvent the vortex of internalized narratives of victimhood. Regression to her past seems imperative if she is to claim a story of *hers*: "This awakening is especially poignant for women who, like Atwood's protagonist, have suppressed their own feelings in order to acquiesce to male value systems. Rejection of a male-defined

world may also open a woman to a full experience of the great powers, as happens to the heroine of *Surfacing*" (Christ 325).

In his 1967 seminal essay entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Lynn White, Jr. brings forth the idea that Christianity, or rather the prevalent interpretation of it, is responsible for the West's exploitative attitude toward nature, which assumes a sharp division between humans and nature, encourages the control of nature, and arrogantly insists that the natural world only exists to serve humanity (197). White contrasts Antiquity and Christianity in figures called *genius loci*, guardian spirits who protected different elements of nature: "Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (197). In other words, the shift from earth-bound religions to metaphysical ones drastically changed humanity's relationship with its habitat. Such ideological maneuvering seems like a feasible plan if the exploitation of the natural world with impunity is to be sanctioned.

What feminists add to this argument is their analysis of men's pursuit of the necrophilic transcendence of nature, and by proxy women who by the virtue of their biology and reproductive labor lead the kind of lives that are highly entangled in physicality and cycles of life and death. As Gimbutas argues, the shift from goddess-worshiping to male deities – which coincides with the start of oppression of nature – goes back to 4500 B.C., way before the Scientific Revolution (9). In *When God Was a Woman* (1976), in an effort to denaturalize the Judeo-Christian conceptions of the relationships between God, man, women and nature, Merlin Stone argues that, in goddess-centered cultures, the earth and women's fertility and reproductive capacity were sacred and revered. The disintegration of goddess religions and their replacement by patriarchal ones resulted in the decline of women's status and the degradation of nature through "falsely founded patriarchal images, stereotypes, customs and laws that were developed as direct reaction to Goddess worship" (xxv). In this way, people started to worship detached male sky gods to whom nature was only one of their creations, one that was put at the service of the apex of their creations – man. Specifically targeting the figure of Jesus Christ as the sky god, and Christianity as a patriarchal religion, Mary Daly maintains that the "Tree of Life has been replaced by the necrophilic symbol of a dead body hanging on dead wood. The Godfather insatiably demands more sacrifices, and the fundamental sacrifices of sadospiritual religion are female" (17–18).

Another point of interest is the instrumental value of women and nature in relation to men in Christian doctrine. In *Green Paradise Lost* (1981), Elizabeth Dodson Gray differentiates between the first and second Genesis ideologies. She argues that the pattern of the first Genesis account suggests a "hierarchical" conception in that it gives domination over all of nature to human beings (male and female) as they are created in God's image, whereas the second account is more "anthropocentric," in that "everything is created around the male, including the female [who is] created from his rib to be his helpmate." Ultimately, she concludes that "the interpretation through the ages has blended the accounts in Gen. I and Gen. 2 into a single Creation Tradition, which has been both hierarchical and anthropocentric" (4). Furthermore, women's connection with Eve's sin

renders them the ones to be blamed for the fall and the loss of the *locus amoenus*. This is a belief best articulated in the words of Tertullian, who adamantly reminds women that they all share Eve's "ignominy ... of original sin and the odium of being the cause of the fall of the human race" (117). In his address to women, he implores them to embrace the guilt and onus of being the gateway for the Devil (118).

Surfacer acknowledges that she had never really connected with the sky god of Christianity. On her journey back home, she notices the landmarks on either sides of the road: "Already it's beginning to gather landmarks, a few advertisement signs, a roadside crucifix with a wooden Christ, ribs sticking out, the alien god, mysterious to me as ever" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 9–10). She finds the picture of Jesus she is given at the church "tired-looking, surely incapable of miracles" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 52). Surfacer first shows her tendency toward an earth-bound matriarchal religion when she compares her belief in the existence of the fish, an element of nature, underwater to that of other people in the existence of God: "The dark torpedo shapes of the fish are seeing it [the worm], sniffing at it, prodding it with their noses. I believe in them the way other people believe in God: I can't see them but I know they are there" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 61). However, she feels that she needs to tap into a different source of power, far from the male-dominated realm, to be able to reach the long-forgotten deities. The maternal gift proves to be where she finds the inspiration and the strength to look beyond the confines of the male-defined religions.

Throughout the novel, Surfacer persistently searches for alternatives. It is through her mother that she ultimately finds an alternative to her father's god. After her encounter with David, she adamantly continues her search for her mother's "gift" and rejects the strict rationality of her father: "More than ever I needed to find it, the thing she had hidden; the power from my father's intercession wasn't enough to protect me, it gave only knowledge and there were more gods than his, his were the gods of the head, antlers rooted in the brain" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 154). She feels that her contempt for humanity is vindicated as they have turned their backs on the gods: "I realized it wasn't the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both. They'd had their chance but they had turned against the gods, and it was time for me to choose sides" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 155). She invokes the idea of earth-bound deities, i.e. *genii loci* who reserve and protect special places for themselves in the natural world, when she is convinced that the Americans do not have permission from the guardians to catch anything in the sacred lands: The Americans "accelerated and headed off towards the cliff where the gods lived. But they wouldn't catch anything, they wouldn't be allowed" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 150). The scrapbook serves as a guide for her spiritual journey. The images are to be re-interpreted through the feminine power of the mother now awakened within of her: "They were my guides, she had saved them for me, pictographs, I had to read their new meaning with the help of the power. The gods, their likenesses: to see them in their true shape is fatal. While you are human; but after the transformation they could be reached" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 159).

Surfacer also reveals her sense of anxiety about the transcendental patriarchal religion which holds that physicality and body reside in the disadvantaged, lower half of the binary oppositions. What she finds annoying about fairy tales is the fact that in those stories nobody talks about bodily functions and needs, probably because we have come to believe that the natural necessities debase us to the status of beasts: "[T]he stories never

revealed the essential things about them, such as what they ate or whether their towers and dungeons had bathrooms, it was as though their bodies were pure air. It wasn't Peter Pan's ability to fly that made him incredible for me, it was the lack of an outhouse near his underground burrow" (Atwood, *Surfacing* 51). On the other hand, the more decidedly eco-friendly God's Gardeners have adopted a much more embracing attitude toward the body and all its functions: "Gardeners said digestion was holy and there was nothing funny or terrible about the smells and noises that were part of the end product of the nutritional process" (Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* 63). Snowman also ponders how the body had been unjustly considered "a mere corrupt vessel or else a puppet acting out their dramas for them [the mind and the soul], or else bad company, leading the other two astray" (Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* 85).

On a similar note, Offred has to grapple with this kind of world-negating attitude that particularly targets the bodies of women. In a world where the survival of the human race is dependent on the viable ovaries and wombs of a declining number of Handmaids, it is quite ironical to see how their fertile bodies are resented, feared, and looked down upon: "Rita scowls at me before slipping in to stand behind me [for the Ceremony]. It's my fault, this waste of her time. Not mine, but my body's, if there is a difference. Even the Commander is subject to its whims" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 104). Offred is even forced to observe modesty in the privacy of her own room by being forced to wear a long-sleeved nightgown that would keep her from the temptation of her own flesh (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 247). Offred reveals the sadomasochistic nature of their prayers when some experience the "ecstasy of debasement" by asking God to obliterate and mortify their flesh so that they can be fulfilled. This is exactly what Aunt Lydia tries to teach them. Corporal mortification can strengthen their will and spirit: "She wanted our heads bowed just right, our toes together and pointed, our elbows at the proper angle. ... she knew too the spiritual value of bodily rigidity, of muscle strain: a little pain cleans out the mind, she'd say" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 251).

## 6. Conclusion

Trepidation over future environmental collapse seems to be compelling enough to spark a massive call for change. For ecofeminists, the eradication of oppressive social structures is a prerequisite to such endeavor, as they detect similar underlying principles governing both such social relations and ecologically damaging human activities. If we get the rearrangement wrong, Atwood contends, "we may be looking down a dark and ever-narrowing tunnel, with human oblivion at the far end" ("Atwoodville" 28). That is probably why Atwood, in her fiction, subverts any utopian assumptions standing on the shoulders of a fatalistic, Malthusian solution. She thus holds onto the conviction that change is feasible; however, the means prove to be as salient as the ends. Furthermore, quite contrary to the postmodern disposition of hopelessness, Canavan contends, "the radical disruption of history offered by eco-apocalypse is, in fact, a dialectical reassertion of both the possibility and the *necessity* of such change" (139). The amalgamation of the sense of impending doom and the sense of impending change renders the aura of the Atwoodian fictional world concomitantly threatening and promising. Atwood is a cautious

optimist in her strident refusal to concede to a vision of a futureless, irremediable humanity that persists in its oppressive social relations and anti-ecological lifestyles. Although her sense of measured hope in the trilogy might not be as compelling as that in the “Historical Notes,” hope still lingers obstinately when the already chimerean race of Crakers begin to hybridize anew – not only biologically but also culturally – with the surviving *Homo sapiens*. What burgeons from the very depth of the darkness of Crake’s human holocaust, regardless of the derailment of its initially planned trajectory, is the hope of a second chance for humanity – a modified, hybrid and polyvocal version that is hopefully capable of creating an ecologically sane and socially just society.

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