

Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* in the Age of the Anthropocene

Dr. Najmeh Nouri

School of Foreign Languages, İzmir Democracy University, Turkey

Corresponding Author: Dr. Najmeh Nouri, Email: najmeh.nouri@idu.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

The Anthropocene, a phenomenon that is too complex to be entirely grasped and which instead only marks itself through signs like climate change and the other environmental disasters, offers challenges to the treatment of the natural environments by humans. Accordingly, in order to manifest the Anthropocene epoch through literature, writers need to address a variety of the interrelated issues to be able to render the complexity of the phenomenon. In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood places the issue of the Anthropocene in the context of social, political and economic conditions and attempts to narrate the story of the Anthropocene as a part of cultural memory to encourage the readers to take responsibility towards the environmental degradation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The manifestation of the environmental crisis in literary fiction has become a focus of attention for many writers in the twenty-first century. Within this frame, writing about the Anthropocene entails a challenge to writers since it forces them to reshape their understanding of human agency in their narratives. Accordingly, storytelling in the Anthropocene indicates the attempt of authors to narrate the stories of environmental degradation in which humans play a significant role. Climate narratives provoke a deeper apprehension to the question of how to save our planet along with humans and nonhumans entities that live on it. Answering such a complex question requires an understanding of how we perceive the Anthropocene and through what values we generate specific ways of approaching this issue. Margaret Atwood is one of the prominent environmental writers who addresses the concerns of climate change in her famous novel *The Year of the Flood*. The novel engages with the catastrophic events in the time of Anthropocene when people have entered the Anthropocene as a result of the excessive exploitation of natural resources. A significant aspect of Atwood's narrative style is the way she intertwines present, past and future to enhance the possibility of making maximum differences.

2. Human and Nonhuman Encounter in *The Year of the Flood*

In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood reflects on the relationship between the human and the nonhuman and the multiple ways through which human forces destruct the natural world on Earth. Stories of the

Anthropocene usually include three time periods: the pre-Anthropocene, in the Anthropocene, and the post-Anthropocene narratives. *The Year of the Flood* engages with the events after the Anthropocene, when people have passed the Anthropocene and experienced the excessive exploitation of natural resources. The survivors should learn to live in a world with a new harmony of nonhuman forces. In *The Year of the Flood*, the encounter of humans with nonhuman forces can be traced in different ways, such as, the difference between the lives of "Gardeners" as representatives of nature with that of "ordinary people" who represent science or culture in the society. Gardeners who consider themselves as a nation of "nature lovers" choose a lifestyle that is more natural and less scientific. For example, for the healing process, they use herbal medicines instead of a chemical one. Pilar uses "honey" for treatment and considers it as "food of immortality" (179). She also uses "Bees and mushrooms" (184) as special natural treatments. Pilar believes that "you can always tell the bees your troubles" (184). In the novel, Toby's mother is represented as a victim of polluted medicines produced by corporations but she was unaware of getting polluted as Toby narrates: "she couldn't understand it, because she'd always been so careful about her health: she worked out, she ate a lot of vegetables, she took a dose of HelthWyzer Hi-Potency VitalVite supplements daily" (50). Another trace of the nonhuman force in the novel is the introduction of animals as great "helpers." There are references to "vulture," "maggot", and "bees" that are really useful for human beings. Pilar uses maggots to cure Ren's gangrene disease: "In the afternoon she

lifts the maggots from the plastic snap-top, rinses them in tepid water. Then she transfers them to a sheet of gauze from the first-aid kit, applies another sheet over the top, and tapes the maggot-filled envelope over the wound (644). Furthermore, with the advancement of technology and science, scientists could create animals in laboratories. The issue of cyborg animals is controversial in ecocriticism. In this context, Donna Haraway has evoked the cyborg's image to discuss about "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" between the natural and the artificial "and for responsibility in their construction" (150, *original italics*). In *The Year of the Flood* cyborg animals are produced in order to be in the service of authority. They are not beneficial for the environment or ordinary people:

Bees are seized while still in larval form, and micromechanical systems are inserted into them. Tissue grows around the insert, and when the full adult or "imago" emerges, it is a bee cyborg spy controllable by a CorpSeCorps operator, equipped to transmit, and thus to betray. (496)

In Haraway's view, the cyborg is "a thoroughly political animal" (146) designed for special purposes. It is clear from the complexities of the novel as a whole that Atwood's task is not to illustrate some evils inherent to science but to illustrate how science can be used for dishonorable purposes. Another issue regarding the cyborg creatures is the question of being "real" or "artificial." Bees are no longer real bees but they function as a real one, so the boundary between real and artificial or natural and scientific has been blurred by producing cyborg bees. In the novel, there is a debate between gardeners and scientists over the issue of the real "God" who is measurable through scientific method or the God as a "Spirit" who cannot be known through science. Linda Hutcheon suggests that realities in our mind are culturally constructed:

The postmodern's initial concern is to denaturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. (2)

The pervasive confrontation of the human with posthuman is another salient feature of Atwood's writings. The term posthumanism is defined as the "intricate enmeshing between humans and technological artifacts" (Sharon14) that "aims at re-locating humans from their self-assigned position of centrality in the world." (Mosca 45) In Atwood's vision the posthuman has the potential of creating a rival species in the natural life of humans. What makes her worried, is the imagination of a future with posthumans in which a "world of rampant capitalism, of individualistic consumer societies, leading to a global ecological catastrophe" (Schemeink 73) will be established. In *The Year of the Flood*, pigeons are perhaps the most relevant example. They are genetically modified pigs that have the same DNA with humans. According to Warkentin, "the practice of mixing human and pig genetic material for numerous generations has endowed pigeons with a certain amount of human similarity" (93). This similarity becomes a source of fear for Toby. She kills a pigeon, when she realizes that three big pigs try to enter her garden by digging the ground.

3. Capitalism, Nature, and Gender in *The Year of the Flood*

The age of the Anthropocene has its root in industrialization and capitalist policies of the nineteenth century. The interaction between humans and nature is a necessary fact of life on Earth. In this sense, humans resort to nature to meet their needs. In other words, the lack of natural resources makes production impossible. According to Moore, the duality of nature/ humans is the source of the problem in the twentieth century. He argues that this dualism

has brought the the biosphere to its present transition toward a less habitable world. It is still only dimly realized that the categories of "Society" and "Nature"—Society without nature, Nature without humans—are part of the problem, intellectually and politically. No less than the binaries of Eurocentrism, racism, and sexism, Nature/Society is directly implicated in the modern world's colossal violence, inequality, and oppression. (2)

Moore further argues that in order to better perceive the Anthropocene epoch, it needs to be reconceptualized not as a "geological" phenomenon but rather as a "historical" product. Within this context, the Anthropocene should be investigated in terms of power, race, class, and gender. Haraway

utilized the word “Capitalocene” to discuss the relationship between capitalism and the Anthropocene in 2012. According to Moore, Capitalocene “does not stand for capitalism as an economic and social system. [...] Rather, the Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology.” (6)

In *The Year of the Flood*, the concept of the Anthropocene is not only illustrated through the references to the natural environment, but also with the reference to the system of sociopolitical hierarchies. Most people live in the urban sprawl known as the ‘pleeblands’ and there are also “CorpSeCorpsMen” who represent the corrupted political system. As Linda Hutcheon points out, postmodern writings are extremely “political.” Atwood deploys a postmodern approach in dialogue with ecocriticism theory to decentralize the established hierarchies of the society in order to depict the political corruptions that will lead into the environmental corruption too.

Similarly, the apocalypse of “Waterless flood” is depicted to criticize the current policies of the political system towards nature. Examining the novel within the framework of Marxist ecology, one can trace the aggressive capitalism, globalisation and the self-seeking interests of the private corporations that are the main sources of the environmental abuse. Atwood depicts how social institutions like “CorpSeCorpsMen” privilege money and their own benefits over people and environment: “It was a CorpSeCorps operation, naturally. The HelthWyzer labs had developed the splice, the CorpSeCorpsMen were the wholesalers. They ran it the way they ran everything illegal” (315). She warns against the possible consequences of the Anthropocene on humanity and ethical values. In this sense, Atwood argues that at the time of disaster altruism loses its meaning. For instance, in the novel gardeners always emphasize the members to avoid mutual help at the time of flood and try to save their own lives: “When the Waterless Waters rise, Adam One used to say, the people will try to save themselves from drowning. They will clutch at any straw. Be sure you are not that straw, my Friends, for if you are clutched or even touched, you too will drown” (44).

As a female author, it is clear that Atwood will address the issues of gender and race in her novels. Ecofeminist critics draw a link between nature and women, they utilize symbols like “mother nature” to depict the affinity of female body and nature. Those

who believe that women are closer to nature argue that those men who are cruel to nature can be cruel to women too. Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* has been a leading text in this regard. She argues that the development of our abuse of nature began during the Renaissance with “the formation of a world view and science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women” (xvii). Some radical feminists argue that women have a natural ability to save the world from ecological crisis. Greta Gaard states that ecofeminism’s “basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (1).

In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood demonstrates the relationship between Toby and her boss, as a patriarchal binary of oppressed and oppressor, Atwood writes: “He didn’t want her to feel pleasure, though: only submission” (74). Blanco considers Toby as being a “part of his harem”, only as a sexual object. He even deprives Toby of her primitive right of eating lunch: “Nor did he give her any time off from her Secret Burgers duties. He demanded her services during her lunch break — the whole half — hour—which meant she got no lunch” (74). Interestingly, the character of Blanco depicted as a person who is against nature and the environment. He had a quarrel with Adam One when he has been asked to stop eating animal’s meat: “Blanco came out from behind the booth and lunged, but Adam One seemed used to being attacked: he stepped to the side, and Blanco rocketed forward into the group of singing children, knocking some of them down and falling down himself” (80).

4. CONCLUSION

Novels like *The Year of the Flood* through their self-reflexive capacity have the ability to change the dream of a utopian world to an anthropogenic nightmare of a dystopia. Atwood depicts a society characterized by hierarchical power structures, gender prejudice, cruelty to animals that all lead to progressive damage to nature. The novel demonstrates how the boundaries between human and posthuman are blurred in the Anthropocene epoch. Therefore, the concept of humans as a center and nonhuman as a periphery is no longer valid. In this sense, Atwood demands a collective awareness of all human beings around the world about environmental issues and criticizes those ignorant groups who unknowingly or on purpose pave the way for the impending natural disasters. Needless to mention, Atwood views the possibility of a change

in human beings. As written in the novel there is always a new post-apocalyptic life beyond every disaster.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Najmeh Nouri is a lecturer in Izmir Democracy University. She received her Ph.D. in English Language and Literature from Ege University in Turkey. Her major areas of interest are trauma studies, postmodern British fictions, ecocriticism and cli-fi literature.

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