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## **GARDEN POLITICS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SELECTED SPECULATIVE FICTION NOVELS**

**Abstract:** Following Shelley Saguaro's belief that the incorporation of a garden in a text is reflective of ideological aesthetic premises, this paper intends to study the representation of gardens in two speculative fiction novels by the prominent Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). In her books Atwood presents the readers with an apocalyptic vision of an environmental crisis resulting from profit maximisation in capitalist societies. The patriarchal domination over nature in the novels is intrinsically connected to the domination over women. The female protagonists' bodies are represented in terms of marketable value, as every part of their body can be described as a resource for extraction. Referring to ecofeminist critics including Carolyn Merchant and Karen J. Warren, as well as the works of ecocritical scholars such as Lawrence Buell, the paper examines the way Atwood's literary gardens reflect on the complex issues of environmentalism, religion, technology and gender politics. Special attention is paid to flower imagery as well as to the animals living in Atwood's literary gardens and their connection to the female protagonists. Since the paper discusses novels that were published over 20 years apart, it reveals the way Atwood's perspective on the above-mentioned issues has evolved over time.

**Key words:** garden, environmental crisis, Margaret Atwood, ecofeminism, technology

### **Introduction**

"Why must people insist that the garden is a place of rest and repose, a place to forget the cares of the world, a place in which to distance yourself from the painful responsibility with being a human being?" Writer-gardener Jamaica Kincaid (2001:41) poses the above-mentioned question in her article "Sowers and Reapers". Kincaid, along with other writers, such as Martin Hoyles and Paul

Gough, refers to a garden as a place that actually addresses and confronts the cares of the world. In his book *Nowtopia*, Chris Carlsson (2008:82) asserts that “in a shared garden [especially], time opens up for conversation, debate and a wider view than that provided by the univocal, self-referential spectacle promoted by the mass media”. Subsequently, the garden can be described as a local patch touching all kinds of global concerns, such as climate change, food policy and genetic modification. Shelley Saguaro employs Kincaid’s argument that the incorporation of gardens is reflective of other ideological aesthetic premises in her analysis of the depiction of gardens in selected literary texts in her 2006 book *Garden Plots: The Politics and Poetics of Gardens*. The author adds that the treatment of gardens, gardening and plants in the texts chosen has a deliberate purpose within the text (Saguaro 2006:11).

Following Jamaica Kincaid’s and Shelley Saguaro’s beliefs that gardens and gardening are infused with miscellaneous ideological and aesthetic significances, this paper intends to examine the representation of gardens in Margaret Atwood’s selected speculative novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). The article focuses on the literary garden as a space of various symbolic meanings and the way it is planted. The paper examines the potential way the gardens may illuminate complex issues of environmentalism, religion, technology and gender politics. Since the connection between women and the garden is discussed as well, the analysis draws from the theories of ecofeminist critics including Carolyn Merchant and Karen Warren as well as the works of ecocritical scholars such as Lawrence Buell. Donna Haraway’s landmark essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” is addressed while discussing the impact of technology on the human and non-human worlds.

In *The Tent* (2006), the title story to her collection, Atwood elaborates on the role of a contemporary writer, which involves recognising and representing the suffering of others so as to help the readers see the importance of issues ranging from environmental degradation to gender relations (Atwood 2006:143). As Theodore Sheckels (2012:7) points out, her views and concerns over the future of humanity are especially apparent in her speculative fiction, which the novelist describes as “an extrapolation of life... a slight twist on the society we have now”, distinguishing it from science fiction, which the Canadian author associates with “Martians and space travel to other planets, and things like that” (Atwood 2003).

Atwood sets the speculative novels *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Year of the Flood* in the United States so as to depict the destructive impact of Western culture on human and non-human nature. In the above-mentioned books the writer presents the readers with an apocalyptic vision of an ecological crisis. The capitalist economic system premised on competition and economic growth has contributed to the pollution and degradation of non-human nature. The characters in the novels intend to restore non-human nature by the act of gardening. Consequently, nature can be described as socially constructed in the novels

discussed. As Salman Rushdie (2015:101) mentions in one of his novels, the gardener “adds his own small sense of beauty to the natural beauty of the earth,” therefore, the garden can be considered to be a liminal space, since it constitutes a hybrid between nature and civilization or civilized nature.

### **Flower gardens in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985)**

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* ecological catastrophe leads to a revolution launched by an extremist Christian movement and the rise of the Republic of Gilead, which replaces the United States of America. The new dictatorship suspends the United States Constitution and limits human rights. Women are denied education, jobs and the right to hold property. Technology is represented as a means of depriving women of freedom. That is, women are denied access to their bank accounts with the use of computerised banking system. Moreover, it is explained in the epilogue that the ecological contamination affects people’s fertility, consequently, the birth rate declines. Since the regime intends to solve the problem of the decreased birth rate, they force fertile women into childbearing. The fertile females are indoctrinated in the Re-Education Centre in order to become *handmaids*, whose task is to bear children for the elites. If a handmaid fails to get pregnant, she is sent to a radioactive territory, known as the Colonies, where infertile women (Unwomen), abortionists and non-Christians are doomed to die. The novel is narrated by Offred, a handmaid serving the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy. The narrator is made to endure pseudo-religious *Ceremonies*, which involve Bible reading followed by impersonal sexual intercourse with the Commander. During the ritual Serena sits behind the handmaid holding her hands.

It is noticeable that the oppression of women is paralleled with the exploitation of nature, which reflects ecofeminist aesthetics. Karen Warren (2000:105) considers the Western world’s beliefs to have been shaped by oppressive conceptual frameworks, which value hierarchical dualisms. They can be defined as oppositional disjuncts that place higher value on what is thought to be “male”, “mind”, “reason”, rather than “female”, “body”, “emotion”. These conceptual frameworks justify the relationships of domination; and in particular men’s domination over females.

The subjugation of women and nature are also linked through the symbolic act of naming. In her article “The historical roots of our ecological crisis” Lynn White (1967:12) considers Adam’s act of naming to be the first performance of dominion over nature, which foregrounded the modern technological exploitation of nature: “Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man’s purposes”. The Christian extremists in the Republic of Gilead imposed names on all the women, depriving them of their

singularity and at the same time objectifying them. It is important to note that “Offred” is not the narrator’s real name. A handmaid’s name consists of the syllable “of” and the name of the man she is assigned to; in this particular case it is Fred. Her identity is determined by a man. Offred’s family photo album as well as any documents naming her were destroyed by the Gileadean male leaders. In this way, the handmaid is completely separated from her past. It is worth noting that all the other women in the Republic of Gilead are also named and classified according to their class and status of relationship with a male. Thus, we can distinguish an Unwoman, a Jezebel (a prostitute), a housekeeping fertile Martha, an Econowife (a wife of a man not belonging to the elite), as well as a Wife and a Daughter of the male elite. It can be concluded that women’s bodies are colonized through the act of naming.

The only way for Wives to obtain inner autonomy under the oppressive regime is to do the gardening: “This garden is the domain of the commander’s Wife... many Wives have such gardens, it’s something for them to order and maintain and care for” (Atwood 1985:14). It is worth noting that only socially privileged Wives have the right to tend gardens. Therefore, it can be inferred that women’s relationships with garden are also influenced by class. Serena’s garden reminds Offred of the fact that she used to have control over her own body and sexuality. The handmaid reminisces about a garden she once possessed: “I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers” (Atwood 1985:6). When she was deprived of the right to cultivate her own garden, she lost her freedom and individuality.

In this context the garden and gardening symbolise independence. Wendy Gan (2009:30) explains that a garden has always been “an adjunct domestic space occupying a liminal position; it was both part of the domestic world and yet not quite of it. This ambivalence allowed women the chance to appropriate the garden for themselves as a site of independence and emancipation”. Catherine Alexander (2002:31) adds that the house has been seen as essentially masculine and connected with oppression. Consequently, a woman’s relationship with a garden has often been much closer than the one existing between a woman and a house.

When Offred approaches the Commander’s house for the very first time, she notices his wife tending her garden. With time the observation of Serena Joy cultivating her garden becomes Offred’s pastime. The handmaid gives an account of Serena cutting off the seed pods with the aim of making the bulbs store more energy:

The tulips have had their moment and are done, shedding their petals one by one, like teeth. [...] She was aiming, positioning the blades of the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it the arthritis, creeping up? Or some blitzkrieg, some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? (Atwood 1985:77).

Offred clearly points in the above-mentioned passage to Serena's sterility. The woman has reached a stage of life when she can no longer reproduce. The withered tulips illustrate in this context the menopause, while the bulbs and seeds symbolise fertility. Generally speaking, female sexuality and genitalia are often compared to flowers. Following Thieme's (2016:38) belief that "gardens are places that are created and nurtured according to the needs or desires of their individual cultivators", the irises, which Serena plants, can be connected to the Wives' hope to receive a child from a handmaid. Offred clearly implies that Serena is trapped in her predicament of infertility and cannot come to terms with the fact that she is not able to become pregnant anymore.

Atwood's ecofeminist aesthetics is apparent in the way the author explores metaphors binding women, nature and animals in order to display their subjugation. The narrator refers to the handmaids as chalices, since the uniforms they are made to wear are red: "We are two-legged wombs, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 1985:70). What is more, the narrator also implies that handmaids are treated like pigs reared for breeding purposes: "I wait, washed brushed, fed like a prize pig [...] we are for breeding purposes" (Atwood 1985:146). These comparisons indicate that females in Gilead are reduced to the level of reproductive beings.

Atwood constructs the garden as a location of Offred's memories of her family and happier times before the revolution. Humans maintain a relationship with the environment through their personal associations of place rooted in memory and time, which draws us to the idea of place-attachment described by Lawrence Buell in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. The scholar acknowledges that place carries meaning as it reflects the emotional, cultural and historical attachment of people to an existing space (2005:62). The handmaid was married to Lucas; the couple had a five-year-old daughter. At the time of the takeover, they attempted to flee to Canada, but were caught and separated. When the narrator notices a clean lawn, she is reminded of dandelions denoting the life and love that she provided her daughter with. Flowers ignite memories and summon past individual experiences. The woman additionally associates her child with daisies, symbolising her purity and innocence: "Rings, we would make from them, and crowns and necklaces [...] I can see her, running across the lawn, that lawn there just in front of me, at two, three years old, waving one like a sparkler, a small wand of white fire [...] It was daisies for love though, and we did that too" (Atwood 1985:77).

Carnations re-invoke the memories of Offred's daughter as well. These flowers represent the unconditional love of the mother, who makes sacrifices to find her child in a postapocalyptic world. The eternal love for her husband is linked to the bleeding hearts. What is more, lilies can be found in Serena Joy's garden. Since these flowers are considered to stand for innocence, they can be

linked to the subjugation of innocent women as well as the persecution of innocent people protesting against the dictatorship in the Republic of Gilead.

Serena's garden is also described as subversive. Offred adds that there seems to be "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, though silently" (Atwood 1985:77). Therefore, it can be deduced that the garden stands for the struggle of women to be heard. In the Republic of Gilead females' voices are suppressed. The only voices that can be heard belong to those in power. For instance, potential handmaids are prohibited from talking to each other in the Red Centres. They communicate non-verbally, using gestures: "We slept in what had once been the gymnasium, we learned to whisper almost without sound [...] we learned to lip-read" (Atwood 1985:4).

### **Rooftop gardens in *The Year of the Flood***

As far as *The Year of the Flood* is concerned, the book details the events of the first book of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), but is told from the perspective of two women, Toby and Ren, who are former members of God's Gardeners, an eco-religious group, whose members grow vegetables in rooftop gardens. The novel begins with one of the Gardeners' hymns entitled "The Garden," in which the earth is portrayed as a garden destroyed by "greedy spoilers" (Atwood 2009:xi). The novel illustrates the environmental degradation resulting from corporate capitalism and biotechnology. The scientists violate species boundaries by creating transgenic life forms, as a result numerous species die out.

The Gardeners condemn the degradation of the natural environment by corporate capitalists, who believe in human superiority. They set an example of environmental sustainability, rejecting consumerism and scavenging materials for clothes. The leader of the group, Adam One, draws attention to the man-made ecological crisis and questions the reason for man's superiority over nature: "Why do we think that everything on Earth belongs to us, while in reality we belong to Everything?" He believes that human beings should not perceive themselves as "exceptional [or] set above all other Life" (Atwood 2009:53). In this way, the Gardeners mirror the ontological shift in environmental studies which has removed the human being from the position of supremacy characteristic of Christianity. The Gardeners see the roots of nature destruction in the dualistic hierarchy privileging man over nature, reason/technology over instinct.

What is more, the Gardeners seem to reinterpret the Bible in order to present an ecocentric human/nature relationship. The members of the eco-religious group accept the theory of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin, which asserts that human beings evolved from primates; therefore, humans are ascribed no features that allow them to act as if they are superior to nature. It seems that *The*

*Handmaid's Tale* as well as *The Year of the Flood* echo Lynn White's (1967:9) observations that Christianity is "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" and her critique of God's alleged blessings for human dominion over the earth, which led to the degradation of ecosystems.

Through the production of their own food in their rooftop garden, the Gardeners communicate that the food system is unsustainable. Wendell Berry (2009:161) explains that "gardens are a protest of the conventional food system because they signal a symbolic independence from it." In other words, the members of the eco-religious group deplore industrial agriculture and the current methods of growing crops, which are dependent on fertilizers and chemical herbicides depleting the soil and causing damage to biodiversity. The Gardeners' ideology concerning food production in the rural setting reflects the beliefs of a political and social movement, which Michael Pollan named the "Food Movement" (Bouvier 2013:425). While gardens may have been treated as personal retreats, they are recognised symbols of the above-mentioned movement.

Women appear to be as much the victims of exploitative capitalism as are animals and the natural environment. Toby, one of the main female characters in *The Year of the Flood*, was orphaned when her mother died as a result of taking intentionally contaminated supplements produced by the HelthWyzer company. Her father committed suicide soon after her death, since he was ruined financially by the costs of his wife's treatment. Left without financial resources, Toby resolves to sell her hair, and then her eggs on the black market. The woman is accidentally sterilised by an infected needle during egg removal. What is more, Toby suffers male sexual violence, which remains unpunished by any civil authority. The woman is repeatedly raped by her employer, Blanco, who sexually harasses all his female workers and eventually murders his victims. There exist no institutions that protect women from such an act of predation. The CorpSeCorps, police hired by the companies, "turn a blind eye" to it (Atwood 2009:26). The novel reveals the violation and sexual commodification of women in the climate-ravaged United States.

The protagonist is saved from this oppression by Adam One, who takes her to the Edencliff Rooftop Garden. Toby cries with gratitude and relief. The garden is represented as a space that provides an escape from male violence. Toby's reaction to the garden is described in the following passage: "[...] it was so beautiful, with plants and flowers of many kinds she'd never seen before. There were vivid butterflies; from nearby came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different" (Atwood 2009:52). It is noticeable that the garden constitutes a contrast with *the External World*, where Toby endured tortures (Atwood 2009:38).

The woman becomes a specialist in horticulture and expands her knowledge of the healing properties of flowers. Attention should be paid to what Toby tends in the garden, i.e. red poppies and mushrooms, which she uses for the treatment of

certain ailments. Vivian Rich (2009:116) points out in her book *Cursing Basil: And Other Folklore of the Garden* that the red poppy held a special place in Greek thought. It symbolised fertility because of its many seeds. It can be deduced that poppies symbolise Toby's desire to be fertile. After accidental sterilisation Toby pretended not to be concerned, but "it seemed that she'd wanted a child after all, because when she was told she'd been accidentally sterilized she could feel all of the light leaking out of her" (Atwood 2009:33). Special attention is given in the novel to the mushrooms, which are described as "the roses in the garden of that unseen world, because the real mushroom plant is underground. The part you could see – what most people called a mushroom – [is] just a brief apparition. A cloud flower" (Atwood 2009:120). The mushrooms symbolise the silenced voices of sexually exploited women living on the margins of patriarchal capitalism.

It is noteworthy that women in both novels tend flowers and herbs, while men are responsible for the production of food. Eleanor Perenyi (1994:260), who describes the history of horticulture in her book *Green Thoughts*, notices that women were actually the first gardeners, while men were devoted to hunting. However, as Carolyn Merchant states in her work *Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory* (1990), women's traditional roles as gardeners and producers of clothing and food become appropriated by men due to the mechanisation of agriculture in capitalist societies. In this way, females become responsible only for biological reproduction and the performance of the unpaid labour. As Eleanor Perenyi (1994:261) asserts, "the inventor of agriculture became the goddess of agriculture." The tending of flowers by women indicates that Atwood considers capitalist patriarchy to constitute an important factor in the oppression of women.

After some time, Toby comes to the conclusion that equality does not actually exist in the Gardeners' hierarchy: "Figuring out the Gardener hierarchy took her some time. Adam One insisted that all Gardeners were equal on the spiritual level, but the same did not hold true of the material one: the Adams and the Eves ranked higher" (Atwood 2009:45). Yet, women can hold the positions of leaders in the Gardeners' hierarchy. Toby becomes the holder of the title of Eve and subsequently becomes much more respected and is provided with the possibility to teach horticulture to other women in the Edencliff Garden. Nonetheless, she observes that the number of female leaders expresses "their area of expertise rather than their order of importance" (Atwood 2009:45).

The titles of Adam and Eve within the Gardeners' hierarchy appropriate the Biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden, which indicates the superiority of Adam to Eve. The account emphasises that nature and women are supposed to serve men, since animals were created by God in order to be Adam's helpers, and then Eve was created to fulfil the role of his companion as well. The Gardeners undoubtedly fall victim to patriarchy. Despite the fact that Toby is considered to be a leader, she is not treated seriously by male Gardeners, in particular Zeb, who refers to her as *babe* (Atwood 2009:399). The author of the



novel implies that Christianity is not only an anthropocentric religion, but also a misogynistic one. It reflects the beliefs of such ecofeminists as Charlene Spretnak and Susan Griffin. These critics assert that patriarchal religions such as Christianity and Judaism ought to abolish the concept of an omnipotent male spirit (see Tong 2014:260).

Attention should be paid to the protagonists' relationships with animals, in particular with bees. Pilar, one of the Gardeners, encourages Toby to treat bees as a source of support, claiming that she can always tell them her troubles. Although Toby seems to be sceptical at first, she finds comfort talking to these flying insects: "*Stand by me*, she said to the bees. *Be my messengers*. As if they could hear" (Atwood 2009:254). The bees protect Toby when her former oppressor attacks her in the garden. As the protagonist runs away hitting beehives, the bees form a line of defence. Afterwards she realises that "they'd sacrificed many of their own in the battle" (Atwood 2009:255). The animals and the garden nurture the protagonist, equipping her with the strength to survive and resist the oppression.

The garden ceases to be a space providing safety. After Blanco's attack on Toby in the garden, the woman resolves to undergo body transformation in order to disguise herself. Her hair, skin tone and voice are technologically modified, and her name is changed to Tobiatha: "She'd gone in as Toby and had come out as Tobiatha. Less angla, more latina. More alto" (Atwood 2009:350). Toby transforms herself into a cyborg, which constitutes a hybrid of nature and technology. The relationship between women and technology is represented as a liberating one. The woman's metamorphosis is compared to the life cycle of a butterfly. She is encouraged to think of herself in terms of a chrysalis before the transformation. Toby's outer transformation reflects the inner change she has undergone. When she joined the Gardeners, she became conscious of ecological problems and spiritually connected to nature and animals. Her personal experience of place provoked environmental awareness.

The skills Toby has acquired living in the Edencliff Garden help her to survive in the postapocalyptic world. She tends her own garden on the rooftop of the AnnoYoo Spa, where she works after her metamorphosis. The poppies that can be found in her new garden symbolise in this context consolation. Namely, in a world being destroyed by capitalist forces, it is the garden that brings her comfort. Toby interiorizes the hybrid between nature and culture, as do the garden and animals which are genetically modified. It seems that in the postapocalyptic world the natural and artificial elements must be bridged in order to establish a new community.

In *The Year of the Flood* the garden is charged with biotechnological politics as well. It bridges the seemingly opposed worldviews of ecofeminists, who reject technology as inherently evil, and the beliefs of Donna Haraway, who postulates the blurring of the nature-human distinction. Ecofeminists consider binary constructions existing in Western thought, privileging mind over body, reason

over emotion, to be the main factor in the inferiorisation of both women and nature. Haraway provides a solution to this issue in her landmark article “A Cyborg Manifesto”. The scholar proposed a model of a cyborg, combining the natural and the artificial, as a metaphor that can aid in dismantling the women/nature dualism. Given the choice of becoming a goddess or a cyborg, Haraway, just as Toby, chooses the cyborg, since it avoids reifying the oppressive dichotomies of mind/body, nature/culture, men/women (Haraway 1991:175). In this way, the garden perpetuates discussion between technology, ecofeminism and cyborg feminism.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the garden, in the novels discussed, can be described as a liminal space, where different forms and ideas interact so as to provide a commentary on such issues as ecological crises, food system, religion, biotechnology as well as the oppression of women and nature in capitalist societies. The oppression that Atwood describes in her novels with reference to female bodies also extends to the realm of the non-human biosphere. Nature has an allegorical function signalling women’s oppression. The writer establishes numerous metaphors and parallels between the plight of females and nature. The garden is depicted as a place providing autonomy, safety and comfort under the oppressive regime, while flower imagery reflects the needs and feelings of the characters. The Canadian novelist makes use of garden imagery not only as a backdrop to women’s experience; the garden represents an image of resistance to conforming to the capitalist patriarchal regime, where women are forced to be silent.

It is important to remember that the paper analyses novels that were published over 20 years apart and reveals the way in which Atwood’s perspective on technology issues has evolved over time. While in *The Handmaid’s Tale* technology is represented as a means used to restrict women’s freedom, in *The Year of the Flood* Atwood indicates that cybernetic technologies may actually free females if used properly. In one interview, Atwood explains that because the tools to which humans have access have become very powerful, the future of humanity depends on whether “we as a species have the emotional maturity and the wisdom to use our powerful tools well” (Atwood 2003).

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