

Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* : An Eco Critical Perspective

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is a prolific Canadian writer, who has penned several books in varied genres. Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* falls in the category of speculative fiction. Atwood's choice of setting is carefully designed to emphasise certain trends in our current world, showing how they could evolve in the future, and therefore evaluating our current choices and activities. This novel was first published in the year 2009 and is an interesting novel with several themes. There is plethora of themes with which this novel deals, such as Christian values, ecosystem, animal abuse, vegetarianism, violence and sexuality but above all this novel has a vital issue to discuss namely ecological imbalance created by human beings for their vested interests. The novel is a well-knit, gripping, chilling-an uncomfortably believable account of a post-apocalyptic world where humankind has engineered its own doom as well as the destruction of the whole of its environment just for the sake of material gains. So this is the main aim of presenting this research paper on Atwood to analyse her fiction work from the lens of ecocritical theory.

Keywords

Speculative Fiction, Ecocriticism, Environmentalism

I. Introduction

Before analysing *The Year of the Flood* from an ecocritical perspective, it is useful and imperative to throw some light on the theory of ecocriticism for the better understanding of the theory of ecocriticism that will lead us to fathom the undertones used by Atwood in her novel related to the burning issue of environment. Ecocriticism began in 1990s as a study between text and natural environment. Ecocriticism distinguished itself by its commitment to the natural world as an important study rather than simply as an object of romantic study. Today ecology is defined as the way in which plants, animals and people are related to each other and to their environment. In this relationship they are so much interdependent on each other that any disturbance in one disturbs the other. History has proved every now and then that with every little change in the civilization the relationship of animals and human beings has changed and the effect on the civilization of the changes in environment has been so acute that sometimes it has wiped the whole civilization from the face of the earth. Therefore, concern for ecology is one of the most discussed issues of today. Therefore, the present paper is an endeavour to explore Atwood's ecological concerns.

II. Theme of Ecocriticism in the Year of the Flood

Margaret Atwood in the very beginning of her novel reveals the pathetic state of our environment, she claims that now earth is not a liveable place. An ordinary reader easily comes to know that what is going on in the mind of the author and the author is very much disturbed with the degeneration of our environment. In the very beginning of the novel we come to know that the waterless flood has engulfed everything and destroyed everyone and it appears that only two humans survive, both female : Ren, a young sex club worker and trapeze artist, and Toby, a God's Gardner---a member

of a religious group devoted to preserving the environment. At surface level *The Year of The Flood* seems a very simple story of the sufferings of these two female characters but on deeper level one can easily feel the global issues raised by the author. Like Atwood's other speculative novels this too interrogates our understanding of the natural and artificial and it is also interested in the relationship between technology and philosophy, between science and religion. And with a very cursory look this novel appears to be a typical speculative science-fiction novel about the destructive powers of science or simply bad science or about dire consequences those humankind may have to face in future if it doesn't keep harmony with nature. Nevertheless, it is clear from the complexities of the novel as a whole that Atwood's task is not to illustrate some malevolence inherent to science or modern way of life, but to illustrate how science rather bad science is being working against the laws of nature and therefore modern science is paying a way for the doom of humanity.

The modern chaotic life where we find imbalance in the ratio of male and female, plants and men, water and space is the root cause of degeneration of modern culture and literature also. This imbalance came into existence due to loss of deep ethical values towards nature. We find the same thing happening in *The Year of the Flood*. Women are treated only as an entity to satisfy ones lust, men are busy fulfilling their greed, scientists are working on evil plans and they are transplanting human organs, making new breeds of animals and therefore, transmitting new diseases in this world. Where there is no end to their desires. Atwood laments when she sees these scientists and criticises them by saying that instead of preserving the old species they are creating a mess by making new ones. "Risk theorists argue that the traditionally privileged position of science and technology as knowledge systems has come under scrutiny as their limits have become apparent. Contrary to Enlightenment expectations, the more complex, contradictory, and indeterminate it has become. The constant revision of knowledge, the disagreement among its practitioners, and the evident failures of science over the course of the twentieth century have tended to undermine utopian promises of progress; certain knowledge and rational control over nature have given way to a permanent sense of anxiety, as people contemplate the potential failure of globalised technological, scientific, and economic systems."(Shryl 267).

At wood herself claims in an interview "Science is a way of knowing, and a tool. Like all ways of knowing and tools, it can be turned to bad uses. And it can be bought and sold, and it often is. But it is not in itself bad. Like electricity, it is neutral. The driving force in the world today is the human heart---that is, human emotions(Yeats, Blake---every poet, come to think of it---has always told us that.) Our tools have become very powerful. Hate, not bombs, destroys cities. Desire, not bricks, rebuild them. (An Interview" n.page.) This is really a significant issue Atwood takes up in her novel, the author focuses on the relationship between science and art in order to question commonly---held perceptions about humanity's place in nature. So far as *The Year of the Flood* is concerned on the very outset Atwood casts the shadow of the doom she is going to explain in the novel. She builds an environment with her words in the opening chapter that one understands very easily

that something has already destroyed everything and one tries to find out the perpetrators who are responsible for the deserted look of the derelict city. But finally towards the end of the novel it becomes clear that none other than human beings are responsible for the devastation that waterless flood has created.

Novel is not simply the story of the sufferings of two female protagonists but Atwood also exposes the relationship of between Toby and Ren and other female characters such as Amanda and Ren's relationship, Ren's relationship with her mother Lucerne. Therefore, we find that this novel also deals with the issue of feminism or ecofeminism. Atwood tries to realize us that earth is considered as mother earth and the special power of production and reproduction is given to it similarly almighty God has bestowed this special power of reproduction to female gender. Therefore, this novel has the seeds of ecofeminism and there are certain reasons for it, firstly the author Margaret Atwood is a female and she very well knows how the earth or ecosystem is being polluted or plundered on one side and on the other hand how female body is being used for the satisfaction of lust, how females are sold in sex clubs, how they are raped beastly. How women bear physical as well as mental trauma is a subject that Atwood raises in this novel through her female characters who always side with nature, probably that is why Atwood herself and her female characters in this novel are more concerned about the environmental degeneration than their male counterparts.

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