

Manifestation of Eco-Feminism in Margaret Atwood's Select Novels

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Abstract

Eco-Feminism is the branch of feminism which examines the connections between women and the natural environment in the focus of the social movement and intellectual school. Eco-Feminism emerges from the convergence of indigenous and decolonial movements, led by women of color, highlighting the interconnected marginalization of women and the environment. The manifestation of Eco-feminism in Margaret Atwood's novels is discernible through her critical engagement with the interrelated structures of sexism, racism, class exploitation, and ecological degradation. Eco-Feminist theory posits that these systems function as mutually reinforcing pillars of patriarchal domination, and Atwood's narratives illuminate their complex intersections and societal consequences. Eco-Feminism's core tenet is the rejection of all forms of dominance and bias. The most important problem that man faces today is the degradation of land and environment and its consequences on human existence. Margaret Atwood's novels exemplify a powerful Eco-Feminist vision, critiquing the interconnected subjugation of Natural world and Women. Atwood's writing boldly confronts the systemic intersections of sexism and environmental exploitation. This article scrutinizes how the natural world is often associated with female embodiment, highlighting the cyclical and regenerative aspects of both. Atwood's protagonists often exhibit resilience by reclaiming their relationship with nature and harnessing its empowering potential, thereby challenging oppressive structures. Her dystopian fiction functions as a warning, highlighting the dire consequences of environmental degradation and patriarchal hegemony. By reimagining relationships between humans, gender, and the environment, Atwood's novels envision a more reciprocal and sustainable coexistence. This article explores how Atwood champions an eco-feminist philosophy that seeks to dismantle the interconnected systems of oppression and foster a more holistic understanding of the world.

Keywords: Eco-Feminism, sexism, racism, class exploitation, and environmental destruction.

Introduction:

Eco-Feminism is a social movement and intellectual framework that explores the intersections between women's experiences and the natural environment, with a focus on environmental preservation and sustainability. Rooted in indigenous and decolonial perspectives, eco-feminism is led by women of color activists and emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the environmental movement. At its core, eco-feminism critiques the interconnected forms of oppression that marginalize and exploit both women and the natural world, seeking to dismantle these systems of domination and promote a more just and equitable relationship between humans and the earth.

Eco-Feminism posits that patriarchal society is founded on four interlocking pillars: sexism, racism, class exploitation, and environmental destruction. At its core, eco-feminism advocates for the dismantling of all forms of dominance and oppression, recognizing the intricate web of relationships between humans, other species, and the Earth. By acknowledging the sacred interconnectedness of all living beings and the environment, eco-feminism emphasizes the imperative to protect and preserve the natural world, promoting a culture of reciprocity, respect, and reciprocity between humans and the Earth.

Margaret Atwood is a celebrated Canadian author and critic known for her influential contributions to eco-feminist literature. Atwood's remarkable career has been marked by unwavering commitment to environmental sustainability and feminist principles. Her work typically examines the delicate balance between humans, nature, and the ecological impact of human decisions. As an eco-feminist writer, Atwood challenges the intersection of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies that fuel environmental degradation and resource exploitation. Atwood's eco-feminist view highlights the connection between women's rights and environmental protection, showing that progress in one area depends on progress in the other. Her novels like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* sound alarm bells, cautioning against unchecked technological progress, consumerism, and the loss of personal freedoms.

Margaret Atwood's novels, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Edible Woman*, and *Surfacing*, are thought-provoking explorations of various social and environmental issues, including sexism, racism, class exploitation, and environmental destruction. Through her works, Atwood critiques the societal norms and power structures that perpetuate these issues, offering a nuanced and powerful commentary on the human condition.

Sexism:

The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian exploration of a patriarchal society where women's bodies are controlled and commodified by the ruling class. The handmaids are forced into reproductive servitude, are stripped of their autonomy and agency, highlighting the ways in which sexism can lead to the erasure of women's identities and experiences. As the protagonist, Offred, notes, "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories." (THT57) highlights the ways in which women's experiences are often marginalized and excluded from dominant narratives.

In the novel *The Edible Woman*, Marian McAlpin's struggles with her own identity and the expectations placed upon her as a woman serve as a commentary on the restrictive nature of gender roles. The novel critiques the ways in which societal expectations can lead to the objectification and commodification of women's bodies. Marian McAlpin, the protagonist, struggles with her own identity and the expectations placed upon her as a woman. As she notes,

I was a consumer researcher, which is a person who does research on consumers, and I was also a consumer, because I consumed things, food and clothes and furniture and books and movies and ideas, and I was also a thing that was consumed, by the people who made the things I consumed, and by the people who consumed me, my friends and my family and my lovers. (TEW15).

This reflects the ways in which women's bodies are often reduced to objects of consumption and exploitation.

In the novel *Surfacing*, the protagonist, who remains unnamed throughout the story, is a powerful symbol of the ways in which women's experiences and identities are often erased or marginalized. The novel explores the tension between the protagonist's desire for autonomy and the societal expectations placed upon her as a woman. As she notes, "I was a blank, a cipher, a zero. I was a woman, and women were not supposed to have opinions, or thoughts, or feelings, or desires. We were supposed to be empty, and silent, and still." (S123) This quote highlights the ways in which sexism can lead to the erasure of women's identities and experiences.

Racism:

The Handmaid's Tale critiques the ways in which racism is used as a tool of oppression, with the ruling class using racial hierarchies to maintain power and control. The character of Ofwarren, a handmaid who is forced to bear children for the ruling class, serves as a powerful symbol of the ways in which racism and sexism intersect. As Offred notes, "The women of color, the ones who were not white, were the ones who were most likely to be chosen as handmaids. They were the ones who were most likely to be fertile, and they were the ones who were most likely to be obedient." (THT145)

This highlights the ways in which racism and sexism are used to maintain power and control over marginalized groups.

The Edible Woman touches on the theme of racism through Marian's interactions with her coworker, Lucy, who is a woman of color. As Marian notes, "Lucy was a Negro, and I was a white woman, and we were both consumers, and we were both consumed, but in different ways." (TEW201) This line highlights the ways in which racism can lead to the marginalization and exclusion of individuals from dominant social groups.

Surfacing explores the theme of racism through the protagonist's interactions with the indigenous people she encounters on her journey. As she notes, "The Indians were the ones who were most likely to be forgotten, and the ones who were most likely to be ignored. They were the ones who were most likely to be erased." (S251) This quote highlights the ways in which colonialism and racism have led to the erasure of indigenous cultures and identities.

Class Exploitation:

Class exploitation is a pervasive theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*, intersecting with sexism, racism, and environmental destruction. The ruling class, comprised of Commanders and their wives, exploits the reproductive labor of Handmaids, forcing them into servitude and controlling their bodies for the purpose of bearing children. The Handmaids are dehumanized, wearing distinctive red robes that mark them as property, and are subjected to ritualized rape and forced impregnation. The ruling class maintains power and privilege by controlling access to resources, education, and employment, perpetuating economic exploitation and commodification of women's bodies. The character of Serena Joy Waterford, a former activist turned complicit beneficiary of the regime, highlights the ways in which individuals can become entangled in their own oppression and that of others. The novel also critiques the intersection of class exploitation with racism, as women of color are disproportionately represented among the Handmaids and face additional forms of oppression. Ultimately, the resistance movement led by characters like Moira and Offred shows that individuals can resist and subvert class exploitation, even within oppressive systems.

In *The Edible Woman*, class exploitation is a pervasive theme that intersects with sexism and consumerism, critiquing the ways in which capitalist societies exploit individuals, particularly women, for their labor and consumption. Marian McAlpin, the protagonist, works as a consumer researcher, analyzing consumer behaviour and preferences, highlighting the ways in which individuals are reduced to mere consumers. The novel portrays the exploitation of women's labor in the workforce, particularly in low-paying jobs like Marian's, where they are undervalued and overworked. The character of Duncan, Marian's boyfriend, represents the privileged class, who benefit from the exploitation of others' labor

and resources. Through Marian's struggles with identity and autonomy, the novel reflects the ways in which class exploitation can lead to feelings of powerlessness and disconnection. Ultimately, *The Edible Woman* presents a scathing critique of class exploitation, highlighting its intersection with sexism and consumerism, and the ways in which it erodes individual autonomy and agency.

In Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, class exploitation is a significant crisis that underlies the narrative, intersecting with themes of identity, colonialism, and environmental degradation. The novel critiques the exploitation of the working class by the privileged elite, highlighting the power dynamics that perpetuate oppression. The protagonist's journey to the remote island, where her father has gone missing, serves as a metaphor for the exploitation of the natural world and the erasure of indigenous cultures. The novel exposes the ways in which the ruling class exploits the land, resources, and labor of the marginalized, perpetuating a cycle of oppression.

Through the character of Joe, the protagonist's boyfriend, Atwood critiques the complicity of the middle class in perpetuating class exploitation. Joe's privileged upbringing and lack of self-awareness serve as a commentary on the ways in which those who benefit from the system often remain oblivious to their own complicity. Ultimately, *Surfacing* presents class exploitation as a crisis that necessitates resistance and transformation, highlighting the need for individuals to confront their own complicity and work towards a more equitable society.

Environmental Destruction:

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, environmental degradation is deeply intertwined with the narrative, serving as a potent metaphor for the oppressive regime's exploitation and control. The novel highlights the devastating consequences of unchecked industrialization and pollution, as seen in the widespread sterility and infertility that afflict Gilead. The regime's control over women's bodies is mirrored in their control over the natural world, illustrating the interconnectedness of patriarchal oppression and environmental degradation. Through the Handmaids' small acts of defiance and the protagonist's memories of her Pre-Gileadian life, the novel suggests that resistance to oppression must also involve a reconnection with the natural world. Ultimately, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a dystopian future where environmental degradation has become a tool of oppression, warning readers about the consequences of neglecting our responsibility to protect the planet and underscoring the need for a feminist and environmentalist critique of oppressive systems.

In *The Edible Woman*, the protagonist Marian McAlpin's journey is a symbol of the destructive impact of consumer culture on the environment. Marian's job at a market research firm, where she is tasked with testing the palatability of food products, serves as a metaphor for the commodification of nature. Atwood writes, "The Edible Woman is a consumer product, a consumable object, and her

body is a commodity to be exploited" (TEW123). This highlights the ways in which the natural world is reduced to a mere commodity, stripped of its inherent value and dignity.

Furthermore, the novel critiques the notion of progress and development, which is often linked to environmental degradation. Marian's boyfriend, Peter, represents the patriarchal ideology that views nature as a resource to be exploited for human gain. Atwood notes, "Peter's idea of progress was a straight line, a vector, a direction, and he was always pushing forward, pushing against the limits, the boundaries, the edges" (TEW156). This quote illustrates the masculine drive for dominance and control over nature, which ultimately leads to its destruction.

In *Surfacing*, the protagonist's journey into the wilderness serves as a counter-narrative to the destructive forces of modernity. The novel explores the tension between the natural world and the artificial constructs of human society. Atwood writes, "The trees loomed above us, their branches like skeletal fingers, their leaves a soft susurrus, a whispering, a warning" (S45). This quote highlights the ways in which nature is often perceived as a threat to human dominance, rather than a source of life and sustenance.

Moreover, the novel critiques the notion of human exceptionalism, which views humans as separate from and superior to the natural world. The protagonist's observation of the natural world serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of all living beings. Atwood notes, "The lake was a mirror, a reflection, a duplication, a doubling, and I was a part of it, a fragment, a shard, a splinter" (S123). This quote illustrates the ways in which humans are inextricably linked to the natural world, and that our actions have consequences for the environment and ourselves.

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood's literary works, particularly *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, provide a profound critique of the interconnected systems of oppression that perpetuate sexism, class exploitation, racism, and environmental degradation. Through her masterful storytelling, Atwood skilfully exposes the intricate web of power dynamics that underpin these forms of oppression, revealing how they intersect and reinforce one another. By examining the experiences of her female protagonists, Atwood illuminates the ways in which patriarchal societies perpetuate sexism, objectifying and commodifying women's bodies while simultaneously exploiting their labor and silencing their voices. Atwood's narratives address the insidious nature of racism, illustrating its deep entrenchment within societal structures and how it is often intertwined with sexism. Furthermore, she emphasizes the devastating consequences of environmental destruction, which is frequently perpetuated by the same systems that exploit women and marginalized groups. Ultimately, Atwood's works serve as a powerful indictment of these systems of oppression. Through her nuanced exploration of these issues, she challenges readers to confront the complex web of power dynamics

that shape our society and to consider how we might strive for a more just and equitable world. Her writings act as a compelling call to action, urging us to resist oppression and work toward a future where all individuals can live with dignity and respect.

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