



LITERARY IMAGES OF POLLUTION: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S EARLY NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood, a famous Canadian novelist, is widely known in the world for her handling of 'feminist' and science fiction themes. Her early works are also inspired by Canadian nationalism. But from the very start of her career we can see a gradual intensity in her environmental concerns, in her novels as well as in her poetry and short story collections. Therefore her works easily lend themselves to an ecocritical reading. Ecocriticism is a recent approach in literary criticism, in succession of the various critical approaches we designate under 'literary theory'. Keeping the ecocritical approach in mind, this paper attempts to consider the images of pollution – land, water, air etc. – that occur in the novelistic descriptions of Margaret Atwood.

Key- words:- Margaret Atwood – Canadian woman novelist – feminism – Canadian Nationalism – environmental concern – images of pollution – ecocriticism.

Margaret Atwood is a famous Canadian novelist, widely known in the world as a leading woman novelist of the 20th and the 21st century. She started her career with her first novel 'The Edible Woman' which was published in 1969. As a novelist, she is generally known for her handling of the feminist themes, science fiction (speculative fiction, according to her), and, for her voicing of the importance of female identity in a patriarchal society, in the seventies, even before the word 'feminism' had gained currency. Her initial writing is mostly informed by her sense of Canadian nationalism and her concern for woman as an equal stake holder in society. Her first published collection of poems "the Circle game" (1966) which made her name in the literary circles, by winning for her Canada's prestigious the 'Governor General's Award', mainly focuses on the themes of 'perception and reality', to identify the difference between which is a must for both, the Canadian people as the inhabitants of a former British colony and, women as the inhabitants of the patriarchal "reality that is structured, orderly, and fixed" (Howells, p. 134), in order to overcome "every form of psyche's insularity" (Howells, p. 133). Her first novel 'The Edible Woman' (1969) is clearly written on the lines of feminism though 'feminism' had not yet taken the form of a movement

then. 'The Edible Woman' deals with the story of a female character torn between making her choices known to the outside world and repressing them by suffering silently.

But in these and other earlier works too, her incidental engagement with nature and landscape and their importance in our life is evident at every step. For example, an important poem in the 'Circle game' "This is a photograph of me' is the photograph of a landscape. "The poem is a portrait of artist as landscape, of the artist who *enters* landscape" (Howells, p. 134). In 'The Edible Woman' also, there are many descriptions that talk about the state of nature and our surroundings. This concern for nature and environment, which she thinks as essential for our existence as humans, becomes more explicit as her career progresses. Coral Ann Howells observes,

"...the major themes of her writing which are grounded in her Canadian context, like her fascination with Canadian history and landscape ... have broadened into topics of international relevance with her scrutiny of cultural myths about women, her concern with human rights and threats to the environment" (Howells, p. 3).

As such, Margaret Atwood's writings easily lend themselves to ecocritical reading. Ecocriticism is a relatively new, environmentally / ecologically oriented approach to the study of literature, which, according to Cheryl Glotfelty, "is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty-p. xviii). In this view, the images of air, water and land pollution that occur in the novels of Margaret Atwood makes us to rethink our modern way of life and our treatment of the non human world.

Air pollution:

Atwood's novelistic descriptions are full of references to air water and land pollution the modern society is intensifying daily. For example in her very first novel 'The Edible Woman' (1969), there are numerous references to air water and land pollution. In the opening chapter of 'The Edible Woman' Marin McAlpine refers to a bus "disappearing across the bridge in a cloud of air pollution" (p. 6). Later, she talks of "having scrubbed away the afternoon film of dust and bus fumes" (p. 63). Later in the novel, this air pollution is given a global dimension by referring to car fumes, dust and soot not only in Ontario, Canada, but also in London. In Ontario, "in the streets the cars fumed and splattered by. Pieces of soot fell from the grey air, heavy and moist as snowflakes" (p. 327), and "... London is so dirty too, ... you see the men in the evenings, the collars of their white shirts are black, just black. It's all the soot" (p. 203). The state of air pollution is so bad in the cities that even its memory haunts and sickens us, even if we go away from it. Roaming in the country, the unnamed character in her next novel 'Surfacing' (1972) painfully reminds her city dwelling and says: "Its better here than in the city with the exhaust pipe fumes and the damp heat, the burn rubber smell of the subway, the brown grease that congeals on your skin if you walk around outside. How have I been able to

live so long in the city, it isn't safe. I always felt safe here, even at night" (p. 89). In the novel 'Life Before Man' (1979) William describes air and water pollution thus: "pollutants are pouring into the air, over three hundred of them, more than have yet been identified. Sulphuric acid and mercury are falling. Metallic mist, acid rain, into the lakes ... (p. 134). This is how the air, water, land pollution is taken to its extreme levels by the joint ventures of commerce and industry in the form of mining is described sardonically by Marian McAlpine's friend Duncan in 'The Edible Woman': "The thing I like about the place I came from, it's a mining town, there isn't much anything in it but at least it has no vegetation. A lot of people wouldn't like it. It's the smelting plants that do it. Tall smoke stacks reaching up into the sky and the smoke glows red at night, and the chemical fumes have burnt the trees for miles around. Its barren, nothing but the barren rock ... Nothing would grow even if you planted it" (p. 175).

Water Pollution:

Along with air pollution, water pollution images also figure prominently in the novels of Atwood. For example, in 'Bodily Harm' (1981) a sea beach is described as being polluted with garbage and litter and oil spilled from the ships. "The reef is getting all messed up by the oil and junk from the harbour" (p. 88) and, in 'Life Before Man' (1979), William describes as to how water is being polluted by our consumerist habits, "sulphuric acid and mercury are falling, metallic mist, acid rain, into the pure lakes of Muskoka and points north. Queasy fish rise, roll over, exposing bellies soon to boat. If ten times more control is not implemented at once (at once!) the great lakes will die, A fifth of freshwater in the world. And what for? Pantyhose, he says accusingly, fork dipping noodles, Rubber bands, cars, plastic buttons" (p. 134). This consciousness about water pollution is so unnerving that Rennie, in 'Bodily Harm', "gazes at the deceptively blue sea; even though she knows what kind of garbage runs into it nearby ..." (p. 80). The narrator's friend David, in the 1972 novel 'Surfacing', indicates towards a more dire consequence of the present trend of water pollution resulting into severe water scarcity which will ultimately lead to wars between nations. In his futuristic description of water crisis, David says that America, the super power, will drag Canada into war if doesn't give water to them easily. "They are running out of water, clean water, they are dirtying up all of theirs, right? Which is what we have a lot of ... So in a while, I give it ten years, they will be up against the wall. They will try to swing a deal with the government, get us to give them the water cheap or for nothing..." But, if that doesn't happen, "then the yank pigs will send in the marines, they will have to; people in New-York and Chicago will be dropping like flies, industry will be stalled, there will be a black market in water they will be shipping it in tanks from Alaska" (p. 123). (It reminds us the water scarcity situation in Marathwada- 2016).

As we progress in time, the form of water pollution, in the 1985 novel 'The Handmaid's Tale' (1985), is taken a step further to include other pollutants like chemical waste, atomic

power plant explosions, etc. Offred, the main character in the novel, remembers the times before Gilead, “women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic plants ... during the earthquakes...” (p. 140). The chances of giving birth to a passable, healthy baby have waned, in Gilead, to one in four. It was because, “The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. May be a vulture would die of eating you” (p. 139).

Garbage, waste and Land pollution:

Atwood, in her very first novel ‘The Edible Woman’, describes a tourist spot being polluted and made dirty by the negligent people. Marian McAlpine’s friend Duncan says of this place, “I used to come down (here) because it was cooler. But it’s better covered with snow. It hides the junk. They’re beginning to fill this place up with junk too, you know, beginning with the creek, I wonder why they like throwing things around all over the landscape ... old tyres, tin cans ...” (p. 331). Early on, she describes a typical scene of the woman workers at Seymour Surveys who seem to represent the prevalent addiction of production, consumption and waste. “What peculiar creatures they were ... taking things in, giving them out, chewing, words, potato-chips, burps, grease, hair, babies, milk, excrement, cookies, vomit, coffee, tomato-juice, blood, tea, sweat, liquor, tears, and garbage ...” (p. 206). In the middle of the novel, during one of their academic musings and discussions among Duncan, his university student friends, and Marian McAlpine, Duncan says, “Production –consumption. You begin to wonder whether it isn’t just a question of making one kind of garbage into another kind” (p. 174). He is so nauseated with the endless commercial grip production –consumption process that he comes to equate even books in the library with used car graveyards. “The human mind was the last thing to be commercialised but they are doing a good job of it now; what is the difference between the library stacks and one of those used car graveyards? What bothers me though is that none of it is ever final, you can’t ever finish anything” (p. 174).

In ‘Surfacing’, the narrator who returns to her island home to find her missing father is greeted by its shore thus: “trash was strewn around it (a fireplace), orange peelings and tin cans and a rancid bulge of greasy paper, the tracks of humans. It was like dogs pissing on a fence, compelled them to leave their signature, stake their territory, and garbage was the only thing they had to do it with” (p. 140). Her next novel, ‘Life Before Man’, is a novel with urban setting where garbage and waste has acquired a looming status. When the novel opens, one of the main character’s, Lesje’s, companion William is shown as working on an important sanitary project, which Lesje calls ‘sewage disposal’ (p. 12). Though Lesje refers to William’s job as sewage disposal he is a specialist in environmental engineering. “However, Lesje admires William’s job and agrees with him that it is more important to the survival of

the human race than hers is. Which is true, they are all in danger of drowning in their own shit” (p. 19). Later in the novel, there is a reference to consumer culture created garbage being deposited in the waters in huge quantities (p. 134).

How deep the environmental concern runs through the novels of Margaret Atwood is again evident from the descriptions we find in as feminist a novel as ‘Bodily Harm’. There are references to negligence begotten garbage and litter on beaches (pp. 79-80), oil scum and junk in the harbours (p. 88), “mound of fruits and unknown vegetables discarded and rotting” (p. 174); and finally, Dr. Minnow says, “garbage collection ... is one of our most urgent problems on these islands” (p. 191).

The novel ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ has an atmosphere that is conspicuously removed from the readers’ everyday life experience. The story that Offred relates is full of suspense and surprises too. Yet, in so speedy and power-packed a tale, Atwood’s environmental broodings percolate. For example, Offred can’t help remembering the time before Gilead, when the presence of plastic bags was ubiquitous and perilous. In Gilead, “Not many things are plastic, anymore. I remember those endless white plastic shopping bags, from the supermarket ... (p. 34). But, however Gilead may boast of its shunning plastic and maintaining tidiness, it also is not immune to junk and garbage, though of other kinds. When the commander takes Offred for an evening out in what seems to be a brothel (disguised, of course!), she is met by “a bank of trash cans ... set out beside the door. And there is a smell of fried chicken, going bad” (p. 293). After that, as the novel advances, there are many references to toxic waste dump sites and radiation. And, the useless people for the regime like old, infertile women, being made to sweep deadly toxic waste.

Noise Pollution:

Not only does Atwood give expression to the pollution affected life of the present world, many of her novels also betray a nagging consciousness of the stress and suffocation of city life – its crowd, noise pollution, dust and its stifling pace. For example, in her very first novel, ‘The Edible Woman’, Marian McAlpine’s friend, Len Slank, who has just returned from England describes it as ‘crowded’ (p. 76), “every time you turn around you bump into somebody from here. It’s getting so you might as well not go there at all, the place is so cluttered up with bloody tourists”(p. 76). This crowd-consciousness, elsewhere, makes McAlpine to like the countryside more fervently. For instance, when Marian and Ainsly go to dine with her friend Clara’s home in a suburban area, away from the town, Marian instantly feels the environmental difference of the suburbia. The suburbia had “the cooler air. It was quieter here too. I thought Clara was lucky ... to be living so far away from the heat and noise of downtown” (pp. 29-30).later in the novel, Atwood takes a moment off to describe the beauty and the healing presence of natural surroundings (p. 209) which must have been felt by her character in contrast with the clatter and hum of city life.



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