

SEMANTICS OF SEED:  
AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE AND  
ANDROCENTRISM IN “THE HANDMAID’S TALE”

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**Abstract:** Ecofeminists endeavour to address the environmental and feminist issues that have gained significant momentum in our current globalised society. Despite its late start in the 1970s, ecofeminism has provided unique insights and perspectives and enriched the academic sphere with significant contributions. Fundamentally an ecologically grounded political movement, ecofeminism posits that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are interconnected strata orchestrated by the male-dominated capitalist worldview. Within this framework, this paper attempts to dissect Margaret Atwood’s dystopian fiction, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, from an ecofeminist standpoint. By doing so, it also aims to uncover the multifaceted aspects of androcentrism in the dystopic novel on the linguistic and metaphorical level. Additionally, it seeks to explore the contentious phenomenon of aligning nature with women, drawing parallels between the exploitation of women and the despoliation of the natural world. The ultimate goal of this paper is, thus, to encourage readers to acknowledge the interwoven oppressions that prevail in their societies at large and to galvanise public opinion into activism that aims to address and heal these divides.

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, speculative fiction, androcentrism, women, nature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, several academic benchmarks have been subjected to critical examination. Feminism, environmental criticism, and deep ecology have all advocated for a re-evaluation of the Western Cartesian mindset. Ecofeminism, which was founded

on the premise that the subjugation of women and the environment are interlinked, has also prompted a reassessment of this philosophical legacy (Plumwood 1993, 42-43). Ecofeminism critically engages with two key dimensions: first, the dismantling of the conceptual dynamics that link nature with women, and second, the examination of the pervasive influence of extended androcentrism that sustains and perpetuates this convergence (Warren 2000, 21). The purpose of this paper is, thus, to thoroughly investigate these androcentric patterns on multiple levels, including the androcentric perspective on nature and women and how the dissection of this framework materialises.

Ecofeminism is chosen as the primary theoretical framework because of its academic suitability in underscoring the novel's depiction of interconnected themes of environmental deterioration and gender-based oppression. Ecofeminism also provides valuable insights into the ways in which power structures, resilience, and resistance intersect in the novel. This, in turn, reveals a wide array of possibilities for collective action against systems of oppression. Subsequently, this paper is an attempt to answer the following questions:

- Q1: How does the patriarchal society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* perpetuate systems of oppression against both women and the environment, and what are the parallels that can be drawn between the treatment of women and the exploitation of nature within the novel?
- Q2: How do the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*, particularly women like Offred, navigate and resist the oppressive power structures of their society?
- Q3: To what extent is *The Handmaid's Tale*, as far as it can be considered ecofeminist, critical of the oppressive conceptual frameworks?

By answering these questions, this paper attempts to investigate the ways in which Atwood's novel further stimulates ecofeminist discussions by questioning traditional power structures and

promoting equality for both society and the environment. It should be noted that Margaret Atwood is one of the most prolific writers of speculative fiction. Her novels have been recognised at the international level and have created a dignified place for Canadian Literature. As a revered writer, poet, and critic, Atwood is also endowed with an extraordinary ability to rekindle in her readers' spirit the flaming tendency towards environmental activism through her masterful experimentalism, her strong advocacy for women's rights, and her unwavering commitment to challenging the status quo.

From an ecofeminist vantage point, Margaret Atwood's novels frequently explore ecofeminist concepts by depicting cultures in which the subjugation of women is related to environmental decline (Hengen 2006, 72–73). Atwood sheds light on the relationship between patriarchal power systems and the abuse of the environment through detailed descriptions and complex characters (Menrisky 2020, 112; Vakoch 2022, 15). Her writings analyse the exploitation of women's bodies and the environment, prompting readers to re-evaluate the interrelation between gender-based and environmental injustices.

In this regard, *The Handmaid's Tale* is treated as a didactic anthology that scrupulously highlights the perilous ramifications of religious extremism, totalitarianism, and the systematic erosion of women's rights (Howells 2021, 122). The narrative unfolds in a future society known as Gilead and centres around Offred, who, among other "handmaids", is compelled by the state to perform the laborious duty of procreation for the benefit of the governing class. The narrative conveys themes of resistance, control, and oppression and stands as a disconcerting reminder of the precarious nature of liberty and the criticality of opposing injustice (Tolan 2022, 25).

## 2. ECOFEMINISM: A REVIEW OF THE CONCEPT

Ecofeminism was coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne (1974, 221), who sought to describe the multifaceted

violence inflicted upon women and nature as a result of male domination (see also Merchant 1996, 13). It is, therefore, an ecological movement that considers the oppression of women and nature as interrelated. Ecofeminism is also an umbrella term that encompasses a plurality of ideas and strongly denounces the system of capitalist patriarchy. That is why it cannot be restricted to a pre-determined border or explained with a single definition.

In addition to this, ecofeminism challenges binary oppositions such as male/female and nature/culture, and ultimately aims to dismantle hierarchies that privilege masculine values and perspectives (Warren 1990, 126; Mies and Shiva 1993b, 14; Plumwood 1993, 42–43). Accordingly, ecofeminists endeavour to contest essentialist notions that equate women with nature solely based on perceived ‘feminine’ qualities, while simultaneously rejecting the association of men with culture based on perceived ‘masculine’ attributes. Through its multifaceted critique, ecofeminism’s ultimate objective is to promote harmony, equity, and ecological awareness among all living beings on Earth.

Aside from its scholarly aspects, ecofeminism encompasses diverse perspectives and extends into various facets of individual life. According to Mann (2011, 2), ecofeminists’ primary task is to actively engage in environmental initiatives aimed at safeguarding Mother Earth, promoting life, and ensuring the protection of essential resources such as food and water. In her widely cited article “Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective” (2018, 4-5), Karen J. Warren argues that one of the most exemplary embodiments of ecofeminist activism is the Chipko movement, which occurred in Northern India in 1974. The Chipko movement was a protest whereby twenty-seven women decided to take action against tree felling and threatened to hug the trees if the lumberjacks attempted to cut them down. Ecofeminist criticism, subsequently, concerns itself with representations and images of both women and nature, emphasising their portrayal in literature and exposing sexist and androcentric stereotypes that characterise our understanding and definition of nature throughout history.

## 2.1. The Oppressive Conceptual Frameworks

Much like other theoretical frameworks, especially in the feminist movement, Ecofeminism has evolved over the past 45 years, aiming to expose women's oppression and environmental destruction through various explorations of oppressive conceptual frameworks. According to Warren (2015, 391), "A conceptual framework is a socially constructed set of basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions that shapes and reflects how one views oneself and others. It is oppressive when it explains, justifies, and maintains relationships of domination and subordination". *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals some of these diverse frameworks within the context of speculative fiction.

An oppressive conceptual framework justifies the systematic domination of women and nature by men through higher-value, privilege, and power thinking. Karen J. Warren (2015, 389) argues that the treatment of women, people of colour, and the underclass is closely interrelated with the treatment of nonhuman nature. Subsequently, the objectives of the women's and environmental movements intersect, as both strive to cultivate perspectives and behaviours free from male-centric patterns of control and dominance. Correspondingly, understanding these intersecting issues further helps us understand the oppression of women from a cross-cultural perspective.

Karren J. Warren (2015, 390) identifies sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and ethnocentrism as unjustified 'isms of domination.' These 'isms', according to her, share conceptual foundations in five interrelated aspects: value-hierarchical, oppositional dualism, power and privilege conceiving, and the logic of domination. Value-hierarchical thinking, for instance, operates by systematically assigning a higher value to Up than to Down, therefore further legitimising inequality. This is reflected in sexism, anthropocentrism, and speciesism. Correspondingly, oppositional dualism places a higher value on one disjunct over the other, such as nature and gender dualism.

These dualisms have historically shaped our perception of the world, attributing a higher standing to male-related aspects and disparaging female or nature-identified aspects. Furthermore, power and privilege are conceived in ways that assign greater value to the Ups over the Downs, maintaining systems of domination over women and nature. Wealthy people, for instance, often have the power and privilege to mobilise resources to self-determined ends, veiling their vision from the challenges of equality and justice. Lastly, the logic of domination is also based on the moral premise that superiority justifies subordination, building upon pre-established stereotypes in society and breaking them into various dualisms. Ecofeminists argue that this logic must be deconstructed to achieve total equality (Warren 2015, 391).

## **2.2. Linguistic Perspectives**

The relationship between language, cognition, and perception has long sparked numerous debates and been a subject of countless inquiries. Like other theoretical frameworks, ecofeminism has also explored the role of language in shaping cultural realities, identities and worldviews. Ecofeminist scholars posit that language can, in various instances, be employed by capitalist patriarchy to exert control and subjugate both the natural world and women (Warren 2000, 53). According to Karen J. Warren (2000, 54), various thinkers have investigated how our languages reflect perceptions of ourselves and our world. However, when a language is sexist or naturalist, it distorts our conceptions of nature, women, and the nonhuman world, depicting them as inferior and diminished compared to anything that identifies as male.

Fundamentally, ecofeminists assert that the sphere of language encompasses a multitude of derogatory and gender-biased phrases that perpetuate the notion of women and non-human nature as subordinate and less significant in comparison to males, masculinity, or the human species. Lisa Kemmerer (2006, 22), a renowned ecofeminist, draws on the philosophy of Wittgenstein (1953, 11), who considered language as a moral matter, to argue that language

plays a crucial role in shaping problematic notions of women, animals, and nature. These notions, in turn, perpetuate an oppressive conceptual framework and effectively contribute to the justification of the subjugation of women, animals, and nature (Warren 2015, 391).

Correspondingly, a language that portrays nature in feminine terms and treats women as inherently tied to nature not only contributes to the unjust patriarchal oppression of women and the exploitation of nature but also deliberately overlooks the cultural parallels and justifications for subjugating these entities. According to Warren (2015, 392), in patriarchal contexts, the majority of animalistic and nature-related terms used to describe women and females function differently from the nature-related terms used to describe men. Within this framework, the English language has historically functioned as a sexist, naturist and androcentric language. This is substantiated by Warren's assertion that for centuries, the male gender was treated as the universal standard for humanity, while the female was the deviation. Additionally, in cultural contexts where women and non-human animals are deemed inferior to men and male-identified culture, the English language often animalises and naturalises women. Pejorative terms such as cats, pussycats, dogs, pets, bunnies, and cows, among others, are used to diminish and demean women, reinforcing societal hierarchies and gender stereotypes (Warren 2015, 392).

Another point worth considering is that the English language currently has no positive, neutral noun that means all animals except humans (Kemmerer 2006, 22). Kemmerer identifies this as a fundamental hole in the English vocabulary. According to her, English speakers are forced to use ambiguous or derogatory language that obscures the reality of other beings because they lack this specific word. Along the same lines of argument, Plumwood (1993, 49) identifies this strategy as an instance of hyper-separation, whereby a language is manipulated to exacerbate the already-existing gap between the human Self and the natural Other. The usage of distinct vocabularies for human and non-human experiences (e.g.,

‘love’ vs. ‘instinct’), therefore, makes the language function as a border guard that not only enforces a dualism but also significantly denies our continuity with nature.

In the same way, languages that imbue nature with feminine attributes in androcentric contexts further legitimise and reinforce the domination of both women and nature. Mother Nature is, thus, raped, subjugated, and her womb is to be instrumentalised by the man of science (Warren 1990, 138). The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by their feminisation in the same way the exploitation of women is justified by their naturalisation. Subsequently, sexist naturist language is an ecofeminist concern (Warren 1990, 138).

### 3. AN ECOFEMINIST STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

Margaret Atwood is a highly prolific, polarising, and inventive author who has carved a niche for herself with her riveting portrayal of multi-faceted societal frameworks and rigorous demystification of gender, identity, power dynamics, and human interaction within imagined worlds. Atwood steels her literary creations with hard-hitting realities and acute social, political, and environmental commentaries. She is an international icon of feminism who has championed environmentalism for years and whose major books include female protagonists who confront specific challenges that women encounter. The majority of her writings also address both the ecological problems and the subjugation of women in male-dominated societies. As her influential books show, she also exhibits a substantial ecofeminist propensity, as the majority of her literary works demonstrate a distinct preoccupation with both nature and women.

Atwood has won multitudinous awards for her works, including the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 2017. For her novel *The Testaments*, she was the co-winner of the prestigious Booker Prize, but her most successful work remains *The Handmaid’s*

*Tale*. This unsettling novel revolves around life within the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, where women have been systematically deprived of their agency and fundamental rights. Atwood describes her novel as a dystopia written in the tradition of George Orwell's canonical work *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. She maintains that "*The Handmaid's Tale* is a classic dystopia, which takes at least part of its inspiration from George Orwell's, particularly the epilogue" (Atwood 2023, 516).

*The Handmaid's Tale* is, thus, a chilling portrayal of a dystopian society where fundamentalist leaders have seized power following a societal collapse in the United States. Women, in this totalitarian regime, are deprived of their basic rights and divided into strict social classes based on their fertility and societal worth. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the narrative is centred on Offred, a Handmaid whose sole task is to bear children for the dominant ruling class. Offred navigates an oppressive world where women are forbidden from reading, working, or having any agency over their bodies. Atwood scrupulously reveals the gradual erosion of women's rights and the rise of Gilead's oppressive regime through flashbacks, reflections and a stream of consciousness. The world she creates in her novel is considered by various critics as an immaculate epitome of gender and nature exploitation due to its engagement with intersecting contentious themes of misogyny, religious extremism, and the consequences of unchecked authoritarianism. Ultimately, the novel constitutes a poignant reminder of the paramount importance of individual freedoms and the detrimental ramifications of allowing power to fall into the wrong hands.

### **3.1. Women and Nature: Unveiling the Bond**

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood deliberately interweaves the phallogocentric societal superstructure of Gilead with both the devastation of the surrounding environment and the oppression of women and minorities. By doing so, she masterfully captures ecofeminist praxis while maintaining an entertaining, captivating narrative and a vivid portrayal that illuminates the myriad ways in

which women are scapegoated for environmental crises. In the novel, women's reproductive role is placed under critical scrutiny and posited as a framework that justifies their oppression, the same way nature is perceived, through androcentric lenses, as a grind to men's mills. According to ecofeminists, the recognition of nature and women as producers of life carries two distinctive, significant implications. Firstly, it exposes the fallacy of conventional development paradigms and reveals them as sources of violence against women and nature worldwide. This violence, however, is not a mere misapplication of neutral models but a brainchild of patriarchal assumptions of homogeneity, domination, and centralisation inherent in prevailing thought and development strategies. Secondly, it suggests that resolving the crises spawned by these flawed models requires a shift away from crisis-oriented thinking to solutions that embrace life-affirming thought patterns, perceptions, and actions (Shiva 1989, 47).

Vandana Shiva (1993, 47) associates environmental crises with reproductive issues and maintains that women's role in the regeneration of human life and the provisioning of sustenance has meant that the destructive impact on women and the environment extends into a deleterious impact on the status of their offspring. In this respect, women have always borne the brunt of toxic hazards and been the primary sufferers of environmental problems (Shiva 1993, 48). These intersecting facets of oppression are also accentuated in Atwood's fictional society, whereby women are forced to undertake various back-breaking and laborious tasks while being directly exposed to toxic hazards. This further cements the ecofeminist assertion that a contaminated environment manifests in the health issues of women and children and highlights the interconnectedness between environmental degradation and human well-being.

At the heart of *The Handmaid's Tale* lie various ecofeminist themes, chief among them is the issue of infertility and congenital disabilities. Atwood's dystopian narrative revolves around a society steeped in reproductive fundamentalism as a consequence of

widespread pollution and other anthropogenic environmental issues. In this futuristic nightmare, the fate of women and nature is interlinked, and the ruling class exerts total control over women's lives and bodies. Women are, thus, relegated to the narrow roles of breeders and caretakers or are relegated to undesirable positions such as mistresses or exiles to the colonies.

In the ethical universe of the novel, women are not only deprived of their agency but treated like vermin, a weed-like aberration, or an ugly blemish on the face of society. Moreover, the drastic population decline in Gilead is attributed to the reckless implementation of reproductive control measures by women. The widespread availability of contraceptive methods of various kinds, coupled with sexually transmitted diseases, is the chief factor of the ecological disaster in the novel. Women are, therefore, the worst victims and the first to blame for this environmental and reproductive crisis. In this regard, Atwood points out:

Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase. This trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterised the period, as well as to leakages from chemical and biological warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites [...] and the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays. (Atwood 2023, 316-317)

Women in Gilead also lack basic rights and independence, being limited to the function of reproduction. Laws deprive people of property rights, job prospects, and control over their cash. Fertile women act as Handmaids to bear children for the Commanders. If they fail, they are condemned as Unwomen and assigned to clean poisonous waste in the colonies.

Accordingly, toxic discourse, pollution, and environmental apocalypticism are the backdrops of Margaret Atwood's dystopian storyline. In Gilead, women are more susceptible to ecologically related afflictions. This idea has been issued forth by various ecofeminists, namely Karen J. Warren (1997, 10), who argues that while neither sex is naturally more resistant to toxic agents, and

resistance often appears to depend on the substance in question, there is strong evidence for the existence of gender-related differences in reactions to toxic environmental substances. She maintains that “Persistent toxic chemicals, largely because of their ability to cross the placenta, to bioaccumulate, and to occur as mixtures, pose serious health threats disproportionately to infants, mothers, and the elderly” (Warren 1997, 10). In a similar vein, Vandana argues that women and children are the most sensitive to and affected by the chemical contamination and pollution of the environment. For instance, many health problems afflicted the residents of the Love Canal area, where chemical and toxic wastes were dumped under their houses by the Hooker Chemical Company, problems such as dizziness, nausea, and epilepsy, as well as more severe ones from which children, in particular, suffered, including deafness, leukaemia, and other cancers (Shiva 1993, 85).

Margaret Atwood’s novel frequently explores the connection between women’s bodies and ecological damage and emphasises the adverse implications of a male-centred perspective. Through *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood sheds light on more than reproduction problems, but blends stories of environmental deterioration with discussions of reproductive and climatic justice, as she depicts how environmental degradation, including unpredictable weather patterns and food shortages, worsens the already severe circumstances experienced by women in Gilead. The radioactive colonies, for instance, foreground these intertwined challenges by constituting the most disturbing instances of extreme exploitation of both women and nature.

Within this framework, Maria Mies (1993, 38) uses radioactivity to contest the arrogance of modern science and reductionism. According to her, radioactivity is the ultimate proof that the war against nature has backfired. This failure of the scientific mastery of nature is immaculately illustrated through the Chornobyl disaster, whereby people’s autonomy was vehemently stripped away and life-giving substances were turned into poisoned gifts and vehicles of death. She further demystifies this epistemological break by

asserting that “We could no longer trust our eyes and ears, our noses and taste buds... We were dependent on the ‘experts’, the men of the ‘technological age’, who had the Geiger counters and the knowledge of the becquerels.” (Mies 1993, 38). Mies’ core argument is that capitalism still relies on three colonisations to function: the colonisation of nature, of women, and of the Third World (1993, 2).

Atwood also employs ecofeminist imagery throughout the whole novel to underscore the interconnectedness of women, nature, and animals and further highlight their shared subjugation under patriarchal systems. In the novel, the colonised female body emerges as a central focus and a poignant metaphor for the degradation of both women and the environment. This is depicted through Offred’s reflections and observations, whereby various parallels between the female body and the earth are drawn to portray women as stewards of the natural world. Offred, for instance, often compares her body to the earth as she describes, “I sink into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth. I set my ear against, for rumours of the future” (Atwood 2023, 83).

Additionally, garden imagery and botanic diction, in particular, are used throughout the novel to mirror women’s connection to nature and evoke themes of growth, fertility, and renewal. In the third chapter, for instance, Offred describes Serena Joy’s garden and notices how the red tulips are not described merely as pretty flowers, but as living, bleeding entities that mirror the Handmaids in their red garments. She says, “The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem; as if they had been cut and are beginning to heal there” (Atwood 2023, 13). These flowers also represent Serena Joy’s desperate attempt to cultivate fertility in the ground because of her inability to cultivate it in her own body.

In a similar vein, Chapter 25 introduces distinct botanical diction, which is used to describe Serena Joy’s violent gardening as she tends the plants. Serena’s pruning and amputation of various plants and her control of the reproduction of the garden by snipping the pods reflect the state’s total control over women’s bodies. Offred

describes this ritualistic endeavour by saying, “There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light... Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently” (Atwood 2023, 161). This analogy further blurs the line between women and plants, which are both treated as ‘fruiting bodies’ to be managed. By and large, these ecofeminist themes are interwoven with the dystopian narrative of *The Handmaid’s Tale* to offer a cogent criticism of patriarchal societies and their exploitation of both women and the environment.

### **3.2. Androcentrism and Gender Roles**

*The Handmaid’s Tale* fully explores the themes of patriarchy and gender roles as women’s stigmatisation and their place in the phallogocentric society of Gilead are recurrent issues throughout the novel. The establishment of the Republic of Gilead was a direct response to the catastrophe precipitated by the significantly diminished birth rate. Within this framework, the state’s entire framework, characterised by its religious adornments and authoritative approach, revolves around a singular objective: the regulation of procreation. The immediate approach to address the issue is to exert complete authority over women’s bodies through their political subordination and the enforcement of a patriarchal society that exercises legislative power to govern and structure the social roles and responsibilities of its residents. Women’s fundamental basic requirements are, thus, encroached upon; their rights to vote, own property, pursue employment, acquire literacy skills, engage in writing, or explore any potential for dissent or autonomy that could potentially harm their husbands or the state are all revoked and criminalised.

Significantly, the presence of women in Gilead poses an unsolvable challenge for a male-dominated society. In Gilead, women’s autonomy is undermined and subordinated to male authority, with their value reduced to mere reproductive functions. They are treated as interchangeable and expendable entities, devoid of individuality or agency. Any form of self-

expression is forbidden, leading to a society where conformity is enforced under threat of severe punishment. This institutionalised oppression aims to strip women of their individuality and render them obedient vessels for bearing children.

From one of her earlier statements problematizing rigid gender roles and biological determinism, Offred says, “I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (Atwood 2023, 72-73). The systematic oppression of the Handmaids, particularly, and of Gileadean women, in general, leads to self-objectification. Consequently, when women are taught that they are supposed to act in one way, and men are supposed to act in another, they begin to internalize societal stereotypes and project them onto themselves as is the case with Janine “By that time Janine was like a puppy that’s been kicked too often, by too many people... she’d tell anything” (Atwood 2023, 72). Not only are the women in Gilead subject to objectification for their bodies, but they are also used for their skills and labour. This idea is scrupulously illustrated through the presence of Marthas, who are strictly confined to domestic tasks such as cleaning and cooking. They are valued for their manual labour because of their sex and their inability to bear children.

Additionally, the repressive society of Gilead constructs a logic to sanction the subordination of women in a disaster-afflicted country. Women are set apart and seen as a part of a lower order. This division undermines the recognition of continuity and shared attributes, thereby rationalising the unequal distribution of cultural resources, particularly limiting women’s access to them (Plumwood 1993, 47–48). In Atwood’s dystopian masterpiece, men’s fascist rule instigates a wide array of discriminatory frameworks that systematically diminish the status of women and transform them into confined bodies devoid of agency. Structural and ideological constraints, whether explicit or

implicit, immobilise women and perpetuate their subjugation (Howells 2021, 125).

As a result, sexual misconduct against women is institutionalised in Gilead. When the Commander attempts to sexually assault Offred during the Ceremony, it is a form of institutionalised adultery. The Commander's wives are also victims of the same systematic humiliation as they are obliged to be present during the Ceremony between their husbands and the handmaids, "with the head of the Handmaid between their thighs" (Atwood 1985, 104). Once a month, on fertile days, the Handmaid lies between the legs of the Commander's wife, Offred explains, "My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it truly means is that she is in control of the process and thus of the product." (Atwood 2023, 93)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the oppression of women on such a large scale is a recurring theme. However, Atwood masterfully reminds her readers that women are not always victims and that sometimes they are an instrument of oppression to other women. This idea is substantiated through the attitudes of the Wives and Aunts who develop an ill-concealed enmity towards the Handmaids, with the token of power granted to them by the Commanders:

All power is relative, and in tough times, any amount is seen as better than none. Some of the controlling Aunts are true believers and think they are doing the Handmaids a favour: at least they haven't been sent to clean up toxic waste, and at least in this brave new world they won't get raped, not as such, not by a stranger. Some of the Aunts are sadists. Some are opportunists. And they are adept at taking some of the states of 1984 feminism\_\_such as the anti-porn campaign and greater safety from sexual assault\_\_ and turning them to their own advantage. (Atwood 2023, XVI)

The Aunts are responsible for sustaining the Ceremonies in Gilead by training the Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Centre, where women are transformed into Handmaids and take an integral part in the birthing process. This process of indoctrination and brainwashing takes

the most dehumanising of fashions while false ideologies are forced into the handmaid's minds.

In the novel, the Aunts are also granted the highest status for a working female in Gilead. They are the instructors and the enforcers of Gilead's women, including the Unwomen, Marthas, and the Jezebels. When Offred secretly accompanies the Commander to the club, which serves as a brothel for the Commanders, she learns from Moira that an Aunt is responsible for regulating the behaviour of the prostitutes. The Aunt determines when the prostitutes' breaks are taken and for how long (Atwood 2023, 313). The Aunt's responsibilities also include discipline and health, and everything from brutal branding rituals to regulating the diets of pregnant handmaids. Their violent methods of psychological manipulation are primarily meant to create women who will blindly submit to their Commander's desires and further the goals of the phallogocentric society. In the Red Centre, for instance, the Handmaids are taught that rape is acceptable and learn to betray each other to gain immunity within the system. This systematic indoctrination reveals the insidious nature of patriarchal control and its detrimental impact on women's autonomy (Howells 2005, 96). Such control is rooted in what ecofeminists identify as an oppressive framework of value dualism, which is the chief reason for Gilead's internal crisis and eventual collapse.

Atwood showcases how the republic's attempt to transform Handmaids into mechanical robots backfires, a failure evidenced in the novel's Historical Notes. Although the Theocratic Republic's specific end is not explicitly narrated, it is evident that internal pressure and a disfigured image of utopia cause its demise (Plumwood 1993, 194). The novel's provocative conclusion suggests that, despite the horrors of Gilead, women's deep connection to the organic cycles of nature emerges as a potent weapon against patriarchal and dualistic ideologies.

### **3.3. Language as a Vessel of Androcentrism**

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, language is another tool of domination honed by the repressive Gileadean regime to guarantee total submission on the part of its citizens. The phallogocentric society

creates a language of its own to suit its repressive tendencies, and almost every aspect of daily life is affected by these linguistic alterations. In this regard, Atwood deliberately elucidates how gender-biased language shapes the characters' thoughts and perceptions of the world, even during the pre-Gileadean era. That is, the language that had for centuries been dominated by male-oriented choices becomes the pure manifestation of male despotism in Gilead.

In Gilead, an official lexicon is constructed to obscure reality with deceptive language, serving the interests of the ruling elite. Stripping women of their fundamental rights, Gilead solidifies its control through the imposition of hierarchical titles. Whereas men's titles are structured in accordance to militarized lines of command, women's designations derive exclusively from their reproductive, domestic functions and their gender roles as Aunts; the women who control and train the handmaids, Wives; The Commande's wives who also belong to the elite of Gilead, though being females, they have significantly less status, Handmaids; fertile women who live with the elite to bear their children, Marthas who are household servants, and the worker bees or Econowives who work menial jobs to support the lifestyles of the elite.

This idea is further exhibited when Offred reflects on the absence of a word to denote sisterly affiliation between females: "Fraternise means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister. Sororise it would have to be, he said" (Atwood 2023, 11). This cultural ethos, whereby women internalise underlying competitiveness against each other, is immaculately mirrored in Atwood's society. From a young age, boys' peer groups are hierarchical and activity-based. Therefore, boys are usually encouraged to engage in healthy competition as they display their personality traits in social interactions (Maccoby 1998, 36). Conversely, girls lack the resources to manage feelings of anger and jealousy, since they are taught that being nice is the primary female virtue (Underwood 2003, 14). Their competitive drive persists into

adulthood, often visible in workplace dynamics or female peer groups, and morphs into indirect aggression (Crick & Grotpeter 1995, 712; Campbell 2004, 11)

Another manifestation of the power of language in shaping realities is Offred's reflection on her ideas on what men might say as 'pure speculation.' She realises that she is clueless about what men used to say. "I had only their words for it" (Atwood 2023, 32). The use of 'words' instead of 'word', in this context, transforms the expression 'their word for it' into a direct allusion to the subordination of females by a male-dominated society. Likewise, the process of linguistic manipulation further erodes individuals' identities and degrades them to a subhuman status. In the novel's ethical universe, female feminists and deformed babies are labelled as unwomen and unbabies, while non-heteronormative identities are outright rejected and branded as Gender traitors.

By the same token, Jewish and black people are linguistically dehumanised through biblical terms like 'Sons of Jacob' and 'Children of Ham'. This process of linguistic segregation of non-white and non-Christian populations is state-mandated to create a pseudo-Christian ethnostate. The term children of Ham, for instance, is deliberately used by Atwood to refer to the curse of Ham (Genesis 9:25, King James Version), which is a biblical interpretation historically used by pro-slavery advocates (Evan 2006, 15). In the same way, the forcible displacement and relocation of black people and Jewish minorities are justified through the usage of the euphemistic term "resettlement" (Atwood 2023, 317). Black Americans are displaced to national homelands in the Midwest, whereas Jewish people are given the choice to return to Israel. However, the historical notes at the end of the novel show that many of the ships transporting Jews were dumped in the ocean due to privatisation and cost-cutting by the regime.

However, the ultimate epitome of linguistic reductionism and biological essentialism is the standard greeting "Blessed Be the Fruit," (Atwood 2023, 23) which is met with the traditional reply "May the Lord open" (Atwood 2023, 23). This use of the prescribed

greetings for personal encounters not only enforces conformity, but syntactically reduces women to a resource and their children to agricultural products (the fruit). The reply “may the lord open” is also indicative of the state-sanctioned socialisation of women as passive vessels who completely lack agency even during casual interactions. Any deviation from pre-Gilead vocabulary is, thus, met with suspicion and accusations of disloyalty. Furthermore, Gilead’s rituals are defined by specially created terms such as ‘Salvagings’, ‘Prayvaganzas’, and ‘Particutions.’

More significantly, Gilead asserts authority over women’s bodies by exerting control over their identities through names. Women are deprived of their names and identities in the totalitarian regime, and even some of the Commander’s wives are given new names. Serena Joy, for instance, is not the commander’s wife’s real name. Her original name in pre-Gileadian life was Pam. Offred learns this information through a news magazine (Atwood 2023: 45). Another manifestation of the Handmaids’ deprivation of their self-identities is the constant interchangeability of their new names in different households. Every facet of the Handmaid’s individuality is erased (Freibert 1988, 285). Their names are taken away. Instead, they are given titles derived from the names of their Commanders, or their owners, as far as the law of Gilead is concerned.

For example, the naming convention for Handmaids involves the possessive ‘Of’ followed by the Commander’s Christian name they serve, as seen with Offred, Ofwarren, and Ofcharles. After fulfilling their birthing duties, Handmaids exchange these names for new ones in each household they serve. Offred, serving under Commander Frederick Waterford, becomes known as Of-fred. Her name would change again when she moves on to a new assignment. When Offred’s shopping companion and friend, Ofglen, was replaced, her replacement also introduced herself as Ofglen. Offred describes that horrifying moment as she encounters the new Ofglen, saying, “Ofglen, wherever she is, no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you get lost, in a sea of names” (Atwood 2023, 295). The protagonist herself yearns to hear her real

name and the feeling of individuality it gives. Once emblematic of her humanity, her name now reduces her to mere objecthood:

I yearn for Luke's presence, for the comfort of being acknowledged by name. I crave validation, longing to be recognised for more than my utility. Recalling my former name serves as a poignant reminder of my lost agency and how others once perceived me. (Atwood 2023, 08)

The interchangeability of names proves the general principle of male domination in Gilead's patriarchal society. The Handmaids are subjected to this type of domination from the outset.

When dominated and controlled by a patriarchal mentality, language becomes weaponised. It allows masculine figures to assert their masculine machismo and maintain utter control while oppressing women. The formation of the fictional system of Gilead has mainly been carried out through the sexual inequality in language. With her masterful narrative technique, subtle use of puns, and deconstruction of words and their definitions, Margaret Atwood unveils the ease with which the power of language is overshadowed, as she attempts to expose the dangers of ignoring this power.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Ecofeminist scholarship has increasingly turned to *The Handmaid's Tale* not just as a critique of Gilead's phallogocentric order, but as a map of the intersecting oppressions binding women and the environment. Tracking the evolution of these interpretations reveals more than the simple marginalisation of female characters; it uncovers a narrative architecture deeply embedded with ecofeminist logic. In Gilead, the domination of the womb and the domination of the land are not separate projects. They are the same war. Atwood's novel acts less as a prediction and more as a diagnosis of current political and ecological trajectories, specifically the toxicity of unchecked imperialism and androcentricity. It is a warning shot

against the dangers of severing human society from the natural world it inhabits.

Yet, characterising Atwood merely as a prophet of doom misses the fundamental engine of her writing. In her discussions on *The Testaments*, she insists that “writing is always an act of hope” (Wagner 2019, 14). The very act of setting words down presupposes a future reader, a consciousness across time and distance that can receive the message. This hope is often subterranean in her dystopias, buried under layers of repression, but it remains the driving force. It surfaces explicitly in *The Testaments*, where a pillar of the Gileadean regime corrodes the system from within, leaking the data necessary to topple it (White 2020, 1).

Atwood reinforces this resilience in her Peggy Downes Baskin lecture, rejecting the idea of inevitable collapse. “As you will notice by looking in the mirror, the human race has survived up until now”, she notes (White 2020, 2). For Atwood, hope is not an intellectual choice but a biological imperative, a built-in survival mechanism that distinguishes us from machines. As she frames it, hope is the prerequisite for action: “If you don’t have hope, you don’t work for something better because you don’t think it’s possible” (White 2020, 2). Without it, resistance dies.

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