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# Feminist Themes in Dystopias

Elsa Klingensmith

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FEMINIST THEMES IN DYSTOPIAS

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduates Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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This thesis is an exploration xenophobia, the commodification of women's bodies, and the construction of personhood in feminist dystopias. Through this analysis of various works it is shown that women and nature are largely ignored in classic male-authored dystopic works, which favor technology and male characters, while female-authored works are able to give more time to women and nature without ignoring the issue of technology. In examining these trends, ecofeminism is discussed as a theoretical lens, in which Val Plumwood's idea of binaries and dualism in western culture is crucial.

George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* are used to establish a status quo for male-authored dystopias which is then contrasted with various female-authored dystopias such as Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, culminating in the final chapter with explores Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy in depth and brings together all the previously discussed themes and issues from the other novels. This trilogy connects the constructions of personhood with genetically modified organisms/alien life-forms, xenophobia, and the commodification of women's bodies. Atwood clearly shows the various ways that women construct identities and visions of personhood through their actions, even in a world that attributes them with no intrinsic power.

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## CHAPTER 1

### SETTING THE SCENE

The dystopian genre, which focuses on a wide variety of social ills, is varied and rich, although it began as a fairly narrow field of male authors. While women authors did not enter the field in force until the 1970s, they have made their presence known in the decades since by the volume and quantity of dystopian works created. The social issues that women focus on in their novels are varied; however, there is an overall tendency among women writers to emphasize characters and issues that were previously silenced and elided from the narrative by male authors. As will be shown, women and nature are largely ignored in classic male-authored dystopic works, which favor technology and male characters, while female-authored works give more time to women and nature without ignoring the issue of technology. While care and attention to women's issues suggests that I take a feminist approach, the inclusion of technology and nature has led me to an ecofeminist and posthumanist approach. I will be examining what exactly it means to be human and to hold personal agency, as well as exploring various author's visions of the next step for humanity.

It is important to take a moment here to define what I mean by posthumanism, as well as the term "person." The *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* notes that "person" is variously both narrow and broad. Not only can it include "nonhuman entities such as angels or other extraterrestrial beings" but it can also exclude "some human beings, such as fetuses and those who are permanently comatose". Many contemporary views on personhood tend to "emphasize moral concerns rather than metaphysical considerations" (1936), meaning that "the attribution of personhood usually entails an **assumption of moral agency**" (1936, emphasis mine). This is key to the discussion that will follow, as the characters who must fight to receive personhood and a

social identity are moral actors who are overlooked by the members of society who define personhood.

My use of the term “person” will be similar to “human,” but broader. “Human” typically denotes intelligence, separating us from animals and the natural realm; by using the term “person” I want to include any entity that is self-aware. I want to take physical bodies out of the picture and instead focus on actions and morals.

N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, removes physical bodies from the discussion of personhood by adapting the famous Turing test used in order to test a machine’s ability to pass as human and broadens it to include other blind tests as well. For example, in Alan Turing’s paper presenting the concept of a Turing test, he uses an illustration of a blind test differentiating between a man and a woman. Hayles asks, “if your failure to distinguish correctly between human and machine proves that machines can think, what does it prove if you fail to distinguish woman from man” (xii)? In this way she clearly includes gender issues in the field of posthuman criticism, pointing out that gender roles are an enacted identity rather than something intrinsically connected to a physical body, something that should become clear with the advancement of technology. As Hayles says, “the overlay between the enacted and the represented bodies is no longer a natural inevitability but a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject” (xiii).

In this way, then, not only do humans or beings that are similar to us deserve this acceptance, but aliens such as are found in the works I will discuss in future chapters would be included as well. As explained above, with the acceptance of the Turing test as a valid method



for understanding the nature of others, there is an assumed definition of “human life as intelligence, or more specifically, as information patterns – not as embodiment” (14). Thus, any life form that can exhibit intelligence or awareness matching that of humanity is equal to humanity.

Lake believes that the first priority for anyone wishing to “advance” humanity ought to be ethics. If the “improvement” does not show a love for those around you, it is not an improvement and should not be made. Unfortunately, Lake realizes that as today’s culture values individual freedom as its highest priority, it is impossible to ethically advance society. As she says, “when one’s ultimate value is freedom to remake the self through technology, this value shapes a view of the other that makes love for *particular persons today* almost impossible. No good decisions about the future can be made from this foundation” (8). Lake describes her own preferred ethical position as “‘personalism’: the belief that ethics must start with the basic assumption that human beings are, simply by virtue of being born, persons within the human community and thus our neighbors” (9).

Lake’s definition is crucial to understanding my readings of these texts. Without this ethical grounding and attention to how individual actions affect society as a whole, there is no reason to argue for any specific course of action. This is to be contrasted with “personism” which Lake describes as “the view that not everyone born into the human community is worthy of the same kind of loving care” (9). When you consider everyone around you as a real person with real rights that ought to be respected you are more likely to care about how your actions affect others, and so become a morally responsible actor. In this reading, personhood is best exemplified by empathy and compassion.

I will be working with this idea of personhood as self-aware relationship. If a person insists on existing in isolation by ignoring the fact that society forces interaction and codependency, then any moral responsibility he or she may have is negated. If an individual acts without concern for any repercussions his or her actions may have on others, the person is blind to reality and must be held accountable for his or her actions. The possession of moral agency is critical to holding a person responsible for negative consequences following an action. When viewing characters through this lens, it becomes impossible to argue that some of the characters in the novels that are discussed are not persons, as they are keenly aware of their relation to others and work to make this relationship beneficial for both parties, or at least as painless as possible. In fact, the only way that moral agency can be negated is through literal isolation from all types of society, an escape from any interaction with or dependence on any other person that is practically impossible to achieve.

In this way, posthumanism, which deals with the use of technology to “improve” or at least adapt human bodies, is intimately connected with my work here, which shows the various ways that gender, technology, and nature are envisioned and presented in various futures. In the final chapter of this thesis I will explore the complex issues of agency and personhood of female characters and genetically modified organisms in Margaret Atwood’s *Maddaddam* trilogy (2009-2013), specifically focusing on the way personhood is constructed. I will trace Atwood’s concerns with these feminist issues given the fact that they are prominent in her previous novels, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1984) and *Surfacing* (1972), which will be discussed in the third chapter.

Of course, Atwood has not been the only female writer with these concerns. While there are many to choose from, Ursula K. LeGuin and Octavia Butler’s works usefully cover a broad historical range and offer a comprehensive overview of discourses about nature and the female

body. The specific works that will be examined in this thesis are LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), and *The Dispossessed* (1974), and Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-2000).

Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy is significant to this study because it continues the work done by earlier female science fiction authors in continuing to question the perceived differences between men and women. Although the trilogy seems to argue that women are at the disposal of the male characters, a closer examination of the characters in this series reveals how Atwood actively breaks down gender roles in innovative ways.

The rest of this chapter will set up the difficulties presented by typical gender roles by discussing the general tendencies of these classic male-authored dystopias. I will use *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell, 1949) and *Brave New World* (Aldous Huxley, 1932) to show how male-authored dystopias are typically male, technology centered and tend to erase women and nature from their discourse. When women *are* present, their passivity is highlighted by the fact that their agency and personal value are limited in the eyes of the male characters.

The second chapter will provide context for Atwood's work by focusing on the aforementioned female science fiction authors and the critical treatment of the female body as well as the power that women in these novels have over their bodies. The assumption of essential differences between men and women is confronted in LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, which alternately show a society without gender and a society supposedly free from all gender roles. Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy explores the nature of humanity as the characters, both male and female, struggle to remain human in a world invaded by aliens bent on creating a hybrid race with the remaining humans. All of these texts highlight the issues of agency and the ability to control their own identities in various ways, whether through

envisioning a completely new society composed of genderless individuals or by starkly showing the contrast between the important roles women play in continuing human existence and the miniscule power they hold over their own bodies. It is in the alternate worlds and societies that these novels find their strength, and as the characters interact with cultures whose sexual practices differ so much from our own, the reader is able to envision new ways of constructing gender and power.

The final two chapters will focus on Margaret Atwood. The third chapter will discuss Atwood's most popular work, *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as her first novel, *Surfacing*, and her treatment of women's reproductive rights. Both of these novels focus on women's struggle to gain a semblance of control over their lives and bodies in worlds where men have a stronger voice on the subject than women. The fourth and final chapter will focus solely on the *Maddaddam* trilogy and the complexity of Atwood's female characters whose agency is marked by attempts to become more than simply their reproductive capabilities in the eyes of their male peers. These novels also emphasize the personhood and agency of genetically modified creatures. Of particular importance are the "Crakers," genetically modified humanoids designed as a potential replacement for humanity. By showing the way these genetically modified organisms hold agency and personhood, Atwood begins to develop her own definition for personhood.

### **Ecofeminism**

While critical to posthumanist criticism, personhood is also a crucial element in ecofeminist works, as they are intentional in giving a voice to the previously silenced. Although ecofeminism has many definitions, the one that is simplest is that ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that has come to understand that care for the earth and the equality of human rights go

hand in hand. If feminism is the idea that all humans should have equal rights no matter their gender, ecofeminism is the idea that **all life** is valuable, not just human life, both in the present and in the future. Because of this, ecofeminism is not just interested in the rights of women but also the agency of the natural world as well, and is concerned with protecting the earth against irreversible and avoidable harm at the hands of humans.

Nature can be defined as broadly as anything in the physical world that is not human or created by humans. Ecofeminism thrives on the disconnect between modern humanity and the natural world that is clear in almost every aspect of our lives today. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood details the completeness of this dualistic mindset today. As she argues, "western culture has treated the human/nature relation as a dualism . . . [which explains] the western construction of human identity as 'outside' nature" (2). In this way, the term "nature" will be used broadly throughout this thesis in following Plumwood's example.

It is useful to examine ecofeminism in order to contextualize it among other approaches. In "Are Earth Girls Easy? Ecofeminism, Women's History and Environmental History," Virginia Scharf reviewed six critical works in the fields of ecofeminism, women's history, and environmental history, showing them to be similar in many aspects, but also strikingly varied. Scharf does not offer a unique definition of ecofeminism; instead she borrows from Greta Gaard in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals and Nature*, who states, "ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (1). Scharf argues that ecofeminism, as she understands it, is too varied; of the essays she discusses, she finds very little common ground between them.

However, Scharf also argues, somewhat contradictorily, that ecofeminism conflates the world and views things as black and white. As she says, “Femininity, and indeed, for that matter, masculinity, is historically a more varied, complicated, and contradictory phenomenon than ecofeminism of this type can comprehend” (166). She disagrees with the statement that men and women have basic character differences, and that women are naturally closer to nature; she states that by making this claim, ecofeminists hurt their cause. As she says, “to say that women and animals have been treated in ‘parallel’ fashion is to conflate rather than explain” (167). In this manner Scharf neatly ignores that ecofeminism is a varied and lively discourse based on a mutual respect for all life and instead presents it as a unified movement. This idea is key to understanding ecofeminism: it is a way of thinking, a movement of ideas rather than one fixed thought or formula. Noel Sturgeon best explains, saying, “rather than understand ecofeminism as a new form of identity politics, I want to challenge the notion that movements produce fixed identities. Instead, I want to demonstrate the shifting and strategic qualities of various forms of identity politics” (4).

This treatment of ecofeminism shows the multiplicity present in the field, and illustrates the contradictions that are continually present in critical discourse. It is important to keep this in mind when considering ecofeminist theory, as these contradictions are crucial to understanding the movement. However, these contradictions are precisely the reason ecofeminism struggles to gain validity as a theoretical approach. The power it has lies in its primarily activist identity, yet this is also its downfall, as criticism of literature necessarily takes a lesser role to activism which limits its growth as a contemporary critical lens.

One of the most controversial interpretations of ecofeminism that Scharf addressed is the belief that women are inherently closer to nature and have a unique bond with nature that defies

rational explanation. It is important to note, however, that the equation of women and nature, while a trend that has been remarked upon by many scholars, is not something that all ecofeminists take as irrefutable fact. This bond is explained in a variety of ways, the most powerful explanations coming from the idea that both women and nature have typically been silenced by the master discourse, so women are intrinsically connected to nature through their shared subjugation. As Maria Mies states in her preface to *Ecofeminism*, “We also understood that women all over the world, since the beginning of patriarchy, were also treated like ‘nature’, devoid of rationality, their bodies functioning in the same instinctive way as other mammals. Like nature they could be oppressed, exploited and dominated by man” (xxiii). Another explanation for the perceived connection is the idea that nature is a woman (Mother Nature) due to the fact that fertility and the ability to bear children is an inherently female trait. This is not what ecofeminism actually suggests. It is an assumption that is made by some people, both ecofeminists and others, but it is unfounded, and many ecofeminists fight to break free from this unsubstantiated view of women and nature.

Val Plumwood comments that “a common misconception is that the critique of the masculinity of dominant culture requires us to affirm women’s difference in the form of a special, biologically based feminine connection to nature, now worn as a badge of pride rather than as one of shame” (35). Plumwood labels this way of thinking as “uncritical reversal,” which takes the currently culturally accepted position that male and culture are more valuable opposites of female and nature and flips the equation. Plumwood denounces this position, saying, “affirmation of these qualities, which are the products of powerlessness, will not provide a genuine liberatory alternative. Rather, it reactively preserves and maintains the original dualism

in the character of what is now affirmed” (32). Instead, she calls for an abolishment of the dualisms that have been so long embraced by western society.

Plumwood argues that the connection of women and nature came about because of binaries that are entrenched in western culture. Because these categories are a foundational part of how we define our world they are extremely hard to escape. For example, Plumwood explains that “the framework of assumptions in which the human/nature contrast has been formed in the west is one not only of *feminine* connectedness with a passivity towards nature, but also and complementarily one of exclusion and domination of the sphere of nature by a white, largely male elite” (22-23). This “others” the female perspective, making it less valued than the male, or “typical” perspective.

This “othering” is closely connected to the way that women and nature are commonly treated as if they were “providing the background to a dominant, foreground sphere of recognized achievement or causation” that is masculine (21). This is what Plumwood describes as “backgrounding.” This backgrounding happens not only in literature, where, as will be seen, male characters take precedence over their female counterparts, but also in day to day life, as Plumwood points out that “the immensely important physical, personal and social skills the mother teaches the child are merely the background to *real* learning, which is defined as part of the male sphere of reason and knowledge” (22). Clearly, these binaries are deeply entrenched in western culture.

### **Masculine Dystopias**

Ecofeminism can be aptly applied to dystopias, particularly because of the depiction of the female body, as the male authored texts often background nature and female characters while the female authored texts allow women much more freedom. George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-*



*Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* are representative texts that each show that classic male-authored dystopic science fiction is significantly different in theme and purpose from feminist works, even though the subject matter and style may appear similar. Women and nature are largely ignored in the novels with male authors as science, technology, and men dominate society. Even simply examining which characters hold authority or are given attention when they speak shows that these texts are unconcerned with allowing women a voice.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the female characters are thoroughly backgrounded, as they are not only incapable of meaningful action and are dependent on the men around them, but are relegated to minor roles of little importance. The one female character who is allowed any sort of meaningful role is Winston's mysterious coworker, Julia. She embodies a power that fills him with an overwhelming dread that can only be explained by Winston's aversion to women in general. This clearly shows that there is power in women's bodies. As the narrator remarks, Winston "disliked nearly all women, and especially the young and pretty ones. It was always the women, and above all the young ones, who were the most bigoted adherents of the Party, the swallows of slogans, the amateur spies and noser-out of unorthodoxy" (12). Winston consciously views women as more susceptible to the brainwashing of the party and so more likely to accuse and betray him than the men around him. Later, this is linked to Winston's assumption that women are able to completely accept the movement to abolish sexual pleasure, something that he sees men as incapable of doing. Both of these assumptions are shown through the course of the novel to be unfounded, but are never verbally remarked on by Winston or the narrator, as they are not crucial parts of the novel.

Even after Winston decides to trust Julia and begins his affair with her, he loves her solely for her "animalistic" passions. In this way she is shown as being less rational and so closer

to nature than Winston. It is this sort of living, he thinks, that will destroy Big Brother, and she is merely an object to be used by his masculine hands. Similarly, O'Brien ignores Julia when giving them their oaths to join the Brotherhood, "seeming to take it for granted that Winston would speak for her" (142). Again, Julia is less important and agential than Winston in a tangible way. And tellingly, Julia does not mind. Orwell has set her up as simply a sexual creature who lives only for the pleasures of the body and is uninterested in the politics of a revolution. In fact, she is pleased when Winston remarks that she is "only a rebel from the waist downwards" (129). This, then, is the portrayal of Julia: a lively girl who is only interested in her own day to day pleasures rather than the good of society as a whole; a description that is not far from that of an animal. She is a lesser creature.

Winston's next door neighbor, Mrs. Parsons, is similarly held back by this portrayal of women. She remains at home with her kids, incapable of fixing her own telescreens and so is reliant on Winston, the man next door, whenever her husband is not around. She cannot control her children, and is in fact terrified of them, for she knows that one day they will turn her in to the Thought Police simply for being their mother. Like Julia, she can do nothing about this, and is incapable of changing her fate. Although these women supposedly have a form of power (rebellion, authority over the children), in reality they are completely dependent on the men around them, and their personal issues and struggles are constantly ignored throughout the novel.

This reading is complicated by the corresponding lack of independence of the men in this society. Winston is the only character shown with a desire to break free from the control of the Party, but he is ultimately incapable of freeing himself. This idea that all freedom will vanish is the terror manifested in the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The frustratingly invisible point is that women are practically living in this world already, perpetually relegated to the background

and only allowed to play supporting roles to the rational and capable male characters whose world they inhabit.

*Brave New World* differs from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in that one of the main characters, Lenina, is a woman and is afforded a certain amount of authority and narrative attention throughout the course of the novel and so the backgrounding of women in this novel is distinctly less than in Orwell's. However, Lenina is still relegated to a tertiary role behind John and Henry Foster; she is still a minor character in a man's world. While her reactions to brutal and horrifying events show her to be more empathetic than her male counterparts, she is ultimately shown as incapable of changing her life based on any of her experiences. When given the opportunity, she gladly returns to the blissfully and willfully ignorant life she had before.

*Brave New World* also stands out from the female-authored works in that it continues the subjugation of nature. Unlike *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which negates any power nature may have, *Brave New World* recognizes the power of the natural world while also consciously repressing it. Ultimately, *Brave New World* recognizes the need for a discourse between nature and civilization, but is unable to propose any significant way of achieving this. Without an understanding of Plumwood's dualities, the problem remains stagnant with no solution.

In this novel, Aldous Huxley displays the disconnect between nature and culture and the difficulties that the characters have navigating between the two worlds. In the world of culture, science and order, everything is regulated from birth and individuals are brainwashed into accepting the class that they are born into in order to keep everyone satisfied. Discord enters into this world through the "savages": people born and raised separate from the mechanized society who have maintained a connection to nature. John, the son of a Beta woman who was

accidentally abandoned on a Savage Reservation for seventeen years, illustrates the inability to incorporate a connection to nature into this mechanized society.

On a vacation to this Savage Reservation, Lenina is only able to cope with the differences and uncomfortableness she encounters by appropriating the unsettling features of nature and comparing them to human-made constructs. On climbing up to the top of a mesa, Lenina describes the view as similar to “the Charing-T tower,” and the white lines on the savages bodies are “like the asphalt tennis courts” (104). She is unsettled by the natural beauty she sees and so diminishes them by comparing them to something man-made and mass produced. She is unable to connect with the “other” of nature. And yet, when witness to the sacrificial ritual of the savages where the young boy is whipped to death, she breaks down and cannot watch any longer. As Huxley writes, “suddenly Lenina covered her face with her hands and began to sob. ‘Oh, stop them, stop them!’” she implored” (109). Although she is unable to connect with the impersonal, natural “objects,” she is able to overcome this distance and connect with the humans, perhaps showing an innate ability she has to empathize with others.

In contrast to this, the rest of society laughs at the images of savages beating themselves bloody. When questioned by John as to why the students laugh at the images, the Provost replies, “*Why?* But because it’s so extraordinarily funny” (150). This matches the crowd’s reaction to John’s self-inflicted beating at the lighthouse. Rather than reacting with sympathy, as Lenina had, they are intrigued and fascinated by this unusual behavior. Instead of feeling his pain and wincing at the blood, they repeatedly chant “we – want – the whip!” (229). When they finally receive the longed for response, the crowd becomes entranced by the “horror of pain and, from within, impelled by that habit of cooperation, that desire for unanimity and atonement . . . they began to mime the frenzy of his gestures, striking at one another” (230). They turn into a mob,

dancing around and flailing wildly, singing and beating each other in gleeful abandon. To them, this is simply another vacation, a “feelie.” None of the actions have any meaning or consequences; they are simply living in the moment and enjoying themselves as a group. This is easy to understand as their society has been plainly and painstakingly laid out for the reader to comprehend. So far the novel holds up favorably under and ecofeminist critique, as a divide between nature and culture that subjugates nature is untenable and will necessarily lead to fractures such as these.

What is harder to understand is John’s inability to sympathize with or even understand the viewpoint of the “civilized” society. Of all the characters, he ought to be the most capable of empathy with others, as he was raised not only closer to the earth in the Savage Reservation, but he has also immersed himself in Shakespeare and so has the benefit of high art and drama to help him relate to others. However, John has no sympathy for those whose worldview clashes with his own. When he realizes that Lenina does not value purity in the same way as he does, he shakes her violently, shouting, “Whore! Impudent strumpet,” and finally pushes her forcefully away from him, saying, “get out of my sight or I’ll kill you” (177). There is no doubt in either Lenina’s or the reader’s mind that he will follow through on his threat. As his mother is dying he has a similar outburst when she fails to recognize him, thinking instead that he is her Indian lover. Because she is unable to value the purity of his love over what he terms the crass love of a filthy man, John “caught her by the shoulder and shook her” (185), thus speeding her death. In the immediate aftermath of his mother’s death John then violently pushes aside an eight-year-old child who has been acclimated to the inevitability of death and so is unperturbed by its traumas. Unnerved by the child’s calmness and serenity in such a traumatic moment, John reacts with violence and rage.

In this way John shows a lack of sympathy for anyone who does not understand his ideologies and point of view. When confronted with their conflicting viewpoints, he becomes enraged and loses any advantage he may have had over the others because of his connection to nature or love of Shakespeare. He is the only man left on earth with a mother, and yet he cannot value this bond. Neither his mother nor any other woman has any power over him. In this way he fits into the society of the “civilized” and so desecrates the relationship between mother and son. Because of this the novel seems to subscribe to the idea that women are naturally more sympathetic and men more violent, and in this way displays a need to undo these deeply entrenched binaries.

Huxley rejects the idea that women are intrinsically closer to nature, showing a world where both females and males are incapable of connecting to nature, leaving only John to navigate the divide between society and the natural. In the end, this is shown to be futile: incapable of maintaining a close sympathetic connection bond to anyone who differs from himself, John is driven mad and commits suicide in order to escape. There is no hope in this novel for anyone, male or female, due to natural differences in capabilities.

In this way, then, each of these novels shows a varying regard for and interaction with the natural, while also digressing from the basic tenets of ecofeminism in one regard or another. Whether by disconnecting women from rational society, or completely silencing both women and nature, these books are clearly male-centric and, while they warn against certain approaches that will lead to totalitarianism, they tend to reinforce the gendered discourses ecofeminism seeks to subvert. In contrast, the women-authored dystopian works of the same time period have a very different vision and focus. These novels care more for the treatment of women, their roles in society and the power that they have, as will be seen in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE BORDERS OF HUMANITY AND THE FEMALE BODY

While many dystopias portray societies that greatly differ from our own, neither of the masculine-centered ones discussed in the previous chapter dealt specifically with the idea of a post-human society or even the borders that define humanity. While *Brave New World* begins to touch on these issues, its focus remains fixed on the societal implications on a grand scale rather than on individual responses such as are found in the works of Le Guin and Butler. Because of this lack of attention to these issues, it is interesting and worthwhile to take into consideration the varying ideologies set forth in *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* (Ursula K. Le Guin) and *Dawn* (Octavia Butler) as female-authored works of science fiction. In particular, I will focus on the various versions of “humanity” set forth and debated in these texts, especially focusing on the interactions that various humans have with aliens, as well as how the women in these novels are treated when it comes to reproductive choices and matters of power.

The question of what truly defines humanity is a recurring one in science fiction. Keith Hull wrote broadly about this question in “What is Human? Ursula Le Guin and Science Fiction’s Great Theme,” showing the full breadth of the question by saying “artificial intelligence research, genetic engineering, life-prolonging machines, the abortion controversy, and the self-styled scientific creationism movement all present immediate practical challenges to our conception of what a human being is” (66). Connected to this discussion of humanity is the construction of personhood and the level of moral agency that is allowed to characters who are typically silenced and oppressed. Feminist science fiction tends to focus on these questions, such as when Butler discusses the possible humanity of Oankali/human hybrids, or when Le Guin discusses genderless and government-free societies. While neither of these authors expects these

types of situations to occur in our lifetime, they still provide scenarios that enable us to further the discussion of what defines humanity.

### **Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness***

In these two novels Le Guin brings to light various political and social problems that are still present in our culture today. While *The Dispossessed* (1974) is more concerned with politics and the feasibility of anarchism, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) discusses sexual politics. Both are problematic in that they highlight societies that have separated from the original (supposedly corrupt) society in order to escape from their influence, but they are each useful as images of societies built on strikingly different principles.

In *The Dispossessed*, an ideological revolution led the communally minded Annaresti to separate from the capitalistic Urrastans and settle Annares, a bleak and empty world not far from Urras. They establish an anarchist society, create an entirely new language without possessive terms, and literally build a wall to keep outsiders from infiltrating their "utopia." However, after several generations, the anarchists have begun to cling to the teachings of Odo, the leader of their initial revolution, blindly following him instead of thinking for themselves and so destroying the anarchist tradition.

Realizing this, and also realizing that the barriers between the Annaresti and the other societies were raised against the communal ideals said to be held by the Annaresti, Shevek, a physicist from Annares, decides to visit Urras. When on Urras, Shevek engages in conversation with several Urrastans about the differences between their societies. At a dinner party, Shevek discusses the importance a knowledge of time passing has on moral responsibility and ethics. As Shevek explains, infants and animals cannot "see the difference between what they do now and what will happen because of it. They can't make a pulley or a promise. We can. Seeing the



difference between *now* and *not now*, we can make the connection, and there morality enters in. Responsibility” (225). For Shevek, knowledge of the concept of time is crucial to moral agency, as it is only with this knowledge that an individual can understand that their actions have consequences.

When speaking privately with an Urrastan woman named Veá, Shevek argues that while the law of evolution argues that the strongest will survive, the strongest example in a “social species, are those who are most social. In human terms, most ethical” (220). For Shevek, ethics is intrinsic to a strong human existence. As he elaborates, “there is no strength to be gained from hurting one another. Only weakness” (220).

Veá, however, is not convinced. “I don’t care about hurting and not hurting. I don’t care about other people, and nobody else does, either” (220). For her, true freedom and strength only manifest in caring about oneself. Moral responsibility is repugnant to her, but that doesn’t mean that she has totally escaped from societal pressures to coexist. She is a thoroughly social creature, she is bound by social codes and constructs, and so she is a morally responsible actor, whether she wants to be or not. Despite her resistance to the concept of moral responsibility, she acts in accordance with the rules, and does not actually rebel against the constraints; she merely speaks against them without any actions to back up her words.

Through Veá, Le Guin is able to comment on women in society today. Shevek questions Veá for details about her society, specifically asking if Urrasti women are “content to be always inferior” (214), as this is how he sees her in comparison to the Urrasti men with whom he has interacted. She has no job, she lives off the money her husband makes, and she has no schooling. In fact, this situation is the norm for all Urrasti women. Only the men are permitted higher education; all important decisions are made by the men; and even women’s last names come

from their male relations, just as in western society today. Shevek, assuming that women desire education and occupation, asks, “Why don’t you do what you like” (214)? Vea practically laughs at this, explaining that the Urrasti women are perfectly content with their situation, for they believe that they control the men without them ever realizing it. By playing games of sexual domination that Shevek witnesses, Vea is able to see herself as superior to the Urrasti men.

For example, during an intense discussion at a dinner party, Vea steps in just as things become tense between two men, throwing in an absurd remark to diffuse the tension and remind the men that, while they might disagree with each other, they can at least agree that they are more intellectual than women. As Le Guin’s narrator remarks, “Vea nodded brightly [at the man’s dismissal of her comment], as if quite relieved to be put in her place. Seeming to gain courage from his dismissal of the woman from the realms of higher thought,” the man continued the discussion in a calm manner (224). This interaction shows that power and agency are a matter of perspective, and while Vea’s societal constraints might be limiting to the point of frustration for some, she thrives under them and views herself in a position of true power, after all, she kept an argument from breaking out and maintained social peace. In this way Le Guin is able to show how women like Vea are capable of constructing narratives in order to maintain a certain level of power. This is something that Offred does on a much grander scale in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

While there are “aliens” present in this novel, they do not differ greatly from “humans” in any obvious way. The society on Anarres is the biggest difference, but this is nothing compared to the radically different societies found in *Left Hand of Darkness* and *Dawn*. In this way, *The Dispossessed* differs from the other novels discussed, as it is more about ideals and whether

anarchism is feasible or not rather than interaction with the “other.” However, it is still important to this discussion, as Shevek’s conversations set the tone for the novels to follow.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* Le Guin examines the construction of gender and identity in our society by depicting a society without a binary gender system. On the planet known as Winter, the normal state of being is androgynous, with the Gethenians and Orogotans only taking on male and female characteristics in order to reproduce. As Lewis Call describes it in “Postmodern Anarchism in Le Guin’s Novels,” “gender is no absolute category, but rather something that must be viewed as flexible and fluid” (92).

This understanding of gender as flexible is illustrated in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. In this novel, Genly Ai is an ambassador to Winter, a previously uncontacted planet where the inhabitants are ambisexual. Each sexually mature adult goes through cycles; for approximately twenty one days “the individual is *somer*, sexually inactive, latent . . . on the 22<sup>nd</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup> day the individual enters *kemmer*, estrus” (90). During the first phase of kemmer the individual experiences strong sexual desire, and if able to find a willing partner also in kemmer, they each assume a gender role, hormones are released, genitals respond appropriately, and the individuals engage in sexual relations for the next two to five days. It is very common for an individual to assume both genders during kemmer throughout his sexual life, and it seems to be relatively uncertain which gender a person will assume, as an early observer of Gethenian society observed, “the mother of several children may be the father of several more” (91). It is into this society that Genly Ai, a male ambassador, enters. He is as much of an oddity to the natives of Winter as they are to him.

Genly Ai notes during his time on Winter that “there is no unconsenting sex, no rape” in Gethen (94) because there is no sexual frustration. This society is clearly meant to be preferable

to that which we have today, as well as to the Terran society to which Genly Ai is accustomed. While the idea that removing genders/sexuality from a society will solve any problem is far-fetched, however, this novel also implies that positive social change can only come with radical changes in the makeup of humanity, particularly change that brings humanity “closer” to nature.

Cultural and genetic differences aside, Le Guin has been criticized for not diverging enough from the gendered norms of our society by maintaining male pronouns throughout her descriptions of the Gethenians, as well as for depicting most of her characters as having predominantly “masculine” traits. In fact, a reader with no prior knowledge of Gethenian society would think they are all male instead of predominantly genderless due to Le Guin’s use of masculine pronouns. She does address this issue, albeit almost halfway into the novel, when Genly Ai notes that “you cannot think of a Gethenian as ‘it.’ They are not neuters. They are potentials, or integrals” (94). It seems that this criticism ought to reflect not on Le Guin, but on the English language, which does not have an appropriate pronoun for this situation. Call provides another counter to this critique, arguing that assuming the traits of the Gethenians are masculine “says more about the audience than it does about [the characters]” (95), since by this reading the critics reveal their acceptance of the masculine/feminine binary.

What I found more telling was the way that Le Guin’s depiction of sex on Gethen seems to continue the puritanical idea that sex itself is undesirable and wrong. The Gethenians are presumed to be better than us because they have transcended the carnal desire for sex at all times. There are some Gethenians who do not fit this ideal but others see them as perverts, sex-crazed maniacs who irrationally seek to retain their male or female gender past the necessary time for reproduction. Once again readers encounter a society where sex is viewed as something necessary but somewhat dirty and not to be overused.

Another, more applicable, critique of Le Guin's depiction of Gethenian society can be found in Elizabeth Cummins' "The Land-Lady's Homebirth: Revisiting Ursula K. Le Guin's Worlds," where she comments that Le Guin's separatist mindset is problematic. As Cummins says, "if equality for the sexes were to exist, she would have to create a world and a new biological structure for the condition" (158). In order to even imagine a society where all individuals are equals, Le Guin had to remove gender and create a form of life that is drastically different from any imaginable human society. In this novel there is no concept of "separate yet equal." In these societies, equality can only be found in sameness. Just like with the human/Oankali hybrids, or even simply the Oankali themselves, we must determine how to treat the Gethenians in our scholarly discussions. Are they truly human or something different, and why?

According to my pre-established definition of personhood, it quickly becomes clear that the Gethenians are self-aware and morally responsible actors, as they each take the course of action they think will be best for their family and friends. Only Estraven has the foresight to understand that Genly Ai's proposed union with the intergalactic civilization is best in the long run, although it is easy to misinterpret the steps he takes to ensure Ai's success. All other Gethenians oppose Ai, out of fear of the unknown, which ultimately makes them similar to the humans in *Dawn*, afraid of the unknown and so unwilling to commit to any major change.

People in Orgoreyn, the nation bordering Gethen, are also distrustful of Genly Ai, but they show it completely differently. While Gethenians were polite but distant, the Orgotans are enthusiastic about his presence in their midst, seeming to welcome him with open arms into their country. But before long they arrest him for attempting to ruin morale in Orgoreyn and they send him to a labor camp in the north. Both nations could only see a man who was extremely different

in both appearance and attitude, who promised to bring others like him to their world. His presence was unsettling enough, others would prove that they were not the only intelligent life in the universe, and they felt threatened by the sheer otherness of the entire encounter.

When Genly Ai succeeds in calling his shipmates down to the planet and the nations are forced to accept Ai's words as truth rather than the lies and threats they chose to believe instead, change begins to occur and when the novel ends there is hope for the successful integration of the planet's inhabitants in the coalition of planets, despite the fact that their society is so much different from any found in any of the other planets.

It is easy to get carried away by the superficial distinctions between bodies, and this is why I have defined personhood as dependent upon relationship and ethics. With self-awareness and moral responsibility as the defining traits for "humanity," it is clear that the Gethenians and the Oankali ought to be included in these discussions, as both are aware of the rights and desires of others. While they respond in differing ways, each show their ability to learn and interact better with other civilizations.

### **Octavia Butler's *Dawn***

While Le Guin examines the construction of gender and identity in our society by depicting a society without a binary gender system in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Butler examines the role of women in changing the borders of humanity by literally merging humans with an alien race known as the Oankali. In *Dawn* (1987), the first part of the Xenogenesis trilogy, Butler explores a future where the earth has been devastated by nuclear war. An alien species known as the Oankali rescued a number of humans and are bent on providing the survivors with the tools needed in order to renew life on earth. One of their stipulations, however, is that the humans join with the Oankali in reproduction, essentially causing the

extinction of the human race, as all children will no longer be humans, but rather human/Oankali hybrids. This is the main goal of the Oankali, to interact with new species, learn from them, and finalize the acceptance of this knowledge by reproducing with the new species. In this way the Oankali adapt in an irreversible way. Not only have they forever changed the human population, but they will also have permanently changed themselves as well.

Having set up this predicament, Butler is able to examine what it truly means to be human. She does this by focusing on race, class, and gender as well as ideology, showing that nothing is completely separate from outside influences. This is the Oankali's chief purpose, their *raison d'être*; they embrace outside influences and welcome change to their genetic makeup. Butler also focuses on the role of women in creating this potential new form of humanity and how much power they have over their own bodies as well as others. In the end, Butler questions the very existence of true borders, using the Oankali to show that the entire universe borrows from the tendencies of its parts. What, then, distinguishes humans from other life forms? Is it simply an aversion to the "other" that makes us distinct?

In looking for an answer to this question, it is helpful to look to Donna Haraway's "Manifesto for Cyborgs." In this essay she argues "for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction" (9). She defines cyborgs as those entities that are created in and inhabit the spaces between human, animal and machine. Haraway establishes that forcing these strict distinctions is harmful to our culturally accepted understanding of the world, since they demonize science and technology and support a way of life that is unnaturally segregated in all understandings of the world. Instead of shying away from this, she argues that we should be aware of these boundaries in order to better break them down. This awareness of the "other" is particularly relevant in Butler's work.

In *Dawn*, Butler introduces the reader to the Oankali, an alien race that greatly diverges from humanity. While essentially humanoid in basic form, their sensory organs are so alien to the humans that all are initially repulsed by the physical form of the aliens. Lilith, the main character, was rescued from earth when it was on the brink of nuclear fall-out. The Oankali saved not only Lilith, but also many other humans, placing them in suspended animation until they could learn enough about humanity to begin to successfully interact without seriously traumatizing the humans.

Butler uses the Oankali to highlight many of the problems with human society, but she avoids depicting the Oankali as role models for humans, repeatedly stressing the genetic differences between the two as well as the almost insurmountable gap that this creates. The humans' reaction to the Oankali is almost exclusively to rebel against what they view as their "captors" and attempt to escape. Even Lilith, who is eventually convinced to work with the Oankali and comes to appreciate and even love Nikanj, her Oankali mentor and companion, with whom she develops a close bond, remains convinced that cooperation with and reproduction through the Oankali will only ensure humanity's destruction.

Butler's vision is indicative of a longing for a new understanding of humanity that will be inclusive rather than exclusive. She wants to tear down the unhealthy boundaries that have been constructed by society and create a new version of culture and politics. However, it is unclear whether this will ever be possible without the introduction of new genes that will change humanity forever.

Instead of understanding that Butler is playing with ideas rather than setting up a new ideology, many critics have responded negatively to the trilogy. For instance, in "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler" Hoda M. Zaki reads the fact



that the Oankali must fundamentally change the genetic structure of humanity in order to save them as suggesting that Butler is maintaining an essentialist view of humanity. By reading this trilogy we find that destruction is literally written in our DNA, Zaki tells us. She believes that the Oankali model Butler's ideal culture, and argues that because the Oankali view hierarchy, a fundamental part of human society, as wrong, then "Butler believes that human nature is fundamentally . . . flawed" (241).

This is, however, a very limited reading of the text, since Zaki believes that all the flaws Butler points out in humanity throughout these novels can only be transcended by genetic manipulation, which shows "human nature as a biologically-determined entity" (242). This deterministic world leaves us with no freedom to change ourselves. In contrast with the fatally flawed human political sphere, Zaki says the reader is then presented with the ideal form of government in the Oankali; a merging of individuals into a group consciousness. Zaki comments that this "communitarian impulse . . . often figures as a desideratum in feminist utopian SF" (243). This deterministic reading is problematic because it removes any reason to examine these societies (or even our own society) more deeply. If there is no way to overcome these flaws, any attempt to do so is useless.

While Jim Miller acknowledges in "Post-Apocalyptic Hoping: Octavia Butler's Dystopian/Utopian Vision" that Butler's trilogy can be read from a deterministic or biologicistic standpoint, he argues that this is a faulty reading based off of a forced equation of "Butler's position with that of the biologicistic Oankali" (342). Miller contends that the only "problem" with the merging of humans and Oankali is socially constructed. Lilith argues for natural human reproduction rather than Oankali-enabled reproduction, saying that as new generations of humans are born, they will be better equipped to accept the Oankali because they will be

indoctrinated from an early age. As Miller says, “Lilith’s claim that indoctrination might be a solution to human-male violence and xenophobia would seem to suggest that it was indoctrination, not biology, which created it” (342).

While this may seem to resolve the issue of determinism present in these novels and show that Lilith has come around to the Oankali agenda, Miller’s use of the term “indoctrination” is problematic. He suggests that if it is not biology that commands the humans’ distrust and disapproval of the Oankali, then it is indoctrination; humans are socially programmed to react in this way. While this socially programmed predisposition may be removed from the next generation, it will only be replaced by a new one. New indoctrination cures old indoctrination; new story supersedes old. For this reason, Lilith remains skeptical of the possibility of true union between the Oankali and humans. As she explains to Nikanj, children born from unions between humans and Oankali “won’t be human . . . that’s what matters. You can’t understand, but that *is* what matters” (247). Whether this is because of biology or something else is irrelevant, as the result is the same. Ultimately, Butler does not favor any one side of the argument over the other. She presents both the humans (including Lilith) and the Oankali as complicated and complex. Neither side is completely right at all times, which makes this novel all the more interesting to examine.

Continuing the examination of *Dawn*’s treatment of the human as a biological creature, the way that Butler treats bodies as a whole is very interesting. When humans join with the Oankali, everything about their bodies is changed. Sexual “acts” become a passive experience for the humans as the Oankali take control, and, as Zaki points out, “sexual pleasure involves eschewing all contact with human genitalia” (244). The fact that the Oankali do away with physicality in regards to sex does not mean that they have transcended the body. In fact, human

bodies (or, in this case, genes) are very important to the Oankali, and can even be helpful in saving lives. When Nikanj is seriously injured, Lilith's genetic "talent" for cancer (17) allows her to help it "stimulate growth of cells that would not normally regenerate" (234). She permits Nikanj to enter her body and share her cells, and the physical intimacy of this moment is a key factor in Nikanj's recovery. In this interaction, Lilith holds power over it and the other Oankali, because without her permission, it would have died. However, this act also costs Lilith the respect she had won from the other humans and jeopardizes her position among them.

However, even though Lilith had to give express permission for Nikanj to use her genes to save his life, it does not need her permission to impregnate her. In fact, when Lilith is impregnated at the end of *Dawn*, it is not only without her consent, but also without her knowledge. Nikanj implanted her with Joseph's sperm on its own volition, through a process that went unnoticed by Lilith. She is initially repulsed by the idea of her child, saying, "It will be a thing – not human" (243), but Nikanj ignores her, simply saying "nothing about you but your words rejects this child" (244). For the Oankali (and, it seems, Lilith), consent is not a primary issue in this situation. In Lilith's case, this might be because she has grown too accustomed to decisions about her future and her body being made for her that consent is no longer an issue. Because Butler offers no commentary on this matter we have only Lilith's reaction to go by. She is repulsed, not because of the breach of her personal space and the abuse of her body but because the child will not be human. The matter at hand is not control of the body but control of the species. As Lilith says, "this will destroy us" (245). This is not to say that Butler is not concerned with the issue of rape and consent, but by focusing on the bigger picture of humanity as a whole she allows the novel to remain focused on the issue of defining humanity rather than distracting from this question with other (equally important) societal issues.

Even though Lilith remains upset, at the end of this novel she allows herself to be led back into the Oankali ship by Nikanj because she still sees it as humanity's best hope. If she cooperates she will be given another set of humans to mentor, "another chance to say, 'Learn and run'" (246). While she does not condone the use of her body as a breeding site for a new form of life, she is levelheaded enough to see that she may be humanity's last real chance to survive the apocalypse.

In this way Butler furthers the discussion of what it truly means to be human by focusing on the repercussions of genetic deviation, whether in this specific instance by the introduction of new genes from an outside source of life, or, as can be extrapolated from this situation into the real world, by genetic manipulation conducted in a laboratory, as well as Lilith's unique chance to try to free humanity. While some humans insist on continual rebellion against the Oankali, Lilith's understanding of the full situation, and her ability to empathize with others, makes her uniquely able to act in solidarity with the Oankali while simultaneously sympathizing with the plight of humanity. Ultimately, it is her regard for humanity as a whole that allows her to cooperate with the Oankali, as she understands that this is truly the only way that humans will stand any chance of survival. Because she feels responsible for the rest of her people, Lilith cooperates with the aliens, and displays self-aware moral agency.

Almost more importantly, the Oankali also follow what could be defined as "standard ethical behavior," as demonstrated by their dedication to preserving the lives of as many humans as possible. They show a care and concern for others that is central to the definition of personhood laid out at the beginning of this thesis. They never wanted to hurt any living being, although the humans view the actions of the other species as manipulative at best and dictatorial at worst, the Oankali had the best interests of humanity as their goal. They understood that it was

the humans' fault they were on the brink of extinction in the first place, and that without any intervention they would have become extinct. Without their immediate intervention, and the introduction of new genes to revitalize the species, humans were doomed. The driving purpose behind every Oankali action is to ensure a better tomorrow for the universe. While they may seem cold and distant, they are extremely aware of the consequences of their actions and strive to do what is least painful in the present and will ensure the best future.

It is clear that these novels, although greatly varied in setting and style, share a common interest of bringing into question any set definitions of humanity as well as showing how these definitions affect our daily life. Whether it be through imagining a union between an alien race and humanity, imagining a society that has moved beyond gender as a binary, or imagining the interaction of two societies that have been separate for centuries, these novels show the importance of diversity. When our definition of humanity becomes narrow and exclusive, only violence and difficulty will ensue. Along with this discussion of what truly defines humanity, these authors bring up issues of power and control over women's bodies. While both authors suggest that sexuality is a source of power and sexual frustration can be a driving factor in societies, neither make this a focus in their novels, preferring instead to contemplate the future of the entire human race.

The alien societies depicted in these novels show how meaningful and caring interactions are necessary between individuals and societies, as it is only through connection that any change can happen. Without Lilith's acceptance of Nikanj, Genly Ai's friendship with Estraven, and Shevek's interactions with the people of Annarres, none of the novels would have been able to show anything meaningful, and these interactions stem from an understanding that someone can be "other" while also being knowable. By trying to understand to view points of the other

characters, each character showed a capacity for moral agency and caring that is crucial to any meaningful interaction.

### **Margaret Atwood**

It is out of these traditions that Margaret Atwood began writing. Even Atwood's earliest works were concerned with feminist ecological issues and debates. In a sense, Atwood was before her time with her second novel, *Surfacing* (1972), which is concerned with the idea of masculine and feminine roles, the manner in which females are more connected to nature, and the ways that women can escape from the male gaze and domination.

Perhaps her most famous work, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), discusses the silencing and appropriation of women in typical protestant religion, as well as throughout society. In this novel, Atwood focuses on the way that women's bodies are controlled by others and what this does to society as a whole. She looks briefly into the heart of humanity in order to display the reasoning behind the founding of the Republic of Gilead, but she, like the authors from the previous chapter, is not interested here in discussing the borders of humanity in depth. These two novels will be discussed in the next chapter.

In contrast, the *MaddAddam* trilogy, which will be discussed in the final chapter of this work, examines these issues of the post-human and what the definition of humanity ought to be, but in a different context from Butler and Le Guin, who needed to send their characters away from earth in order to imagine a potential new form of humanity. The binaries and essentialist views that arise when discussing the genders, as well as the effects of scientific progress on the female body, are key concepts in these novels. By setting the events in a post-apocalyptic future on earth, Atwood enables the trilogy to be a warning to readers; it is a critical dystopia, giving an

insight into a possible future that can be stopped. Because of the ambiguous ending, it is only in examining the details of these novels that hope can be found.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONSTRUCTIONS OF PERSONHOOD AND THE FEMALE BODY IN

#### *THE HANDMAID'S TALE AND SURFACING*

Having established the focus in recent feminist dystopias on the way different versions of personhood are constructed and accepted in various societies, I now come to Margaret Atwood. The discourses of personhood and agency are instrumental in many of Atwood's works, such as the *MaddAddam* trilogy, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Surfacing*. In this chapter, I will examine these latter two and will discuss how they show varying ways that Atwood deals with the social difficulties facing women and the control of their bodies. In *Surfacing*, the narrator must struggle through the brutal after-effects of a forced abortion, while *The Handmaid's Tale* shows the debilitating effects of a patriarchal society with complete control over women. In both of these novels, the main characters must fight to maintain control over their lives and bodies, struggling against societies that insist on choosing for them. In this way, these characters are struggling in order to have a sense of personhood, as their moral agency is questioned by the societies they live in.

*Surfacing*, while not a dystopian novel, still handles themes that fit in perfectly with the other novels discussed and sets up an early take on many of the same issues that Atwood returns to in the *Maddaddam* trilogy. *Surfacing* deals directly with the lack of power women have over their bodies by telling the story of an unnamed woman who had an affair with a married man and was subsequently pressured into obtaining an abortion. The guilt that she feels after this event haunts her as she attempts to hide her abortion not only from those around her but also from herself. It is only after coming to terms with the truth that she is able to return to a normal, civilized life.



In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood explores the definition of personhood by examining the way society responds to the startling drop in birth rates due to women choosing not to have children alongside genetic mutations and widespread sterility that came as a result of toxic pollution and sexually transmitted diseases. This novel is a critical stepping stone towards the *MaddAddam* trilogy, because in it Atwood introduces themes and ideas that take on a greater significance in the later trilogy. The main focus of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the treatment of women's bodies in a society controlled by a religious government, stemming from a desire to return to a previous, "safer" way of life.

### **Surfacing**

In *Surfacing* the female protagonist received an abortion, not because she did not want the child but because of the societal and cultural pressures that arose from the specific situation in which she got pregnant. After her abortion, the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* experienced guilt and was unable to accept what happened to her body or face the consequences in her life. I contend that these struggles arose not simply from the fact that she had an abortion but because of the significant role that other people play in her life, especially her father. It is a deep-seated desire for the father's approval that drives this character. Eventually the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* is able to move past this desire to please others and is able to become self-fulfilled.

It is important to restate here that my definition of personhood is meant to be used for self-aware and moral actors, and is not equipped to deal with the moral question of whether or when a fetus is or becomes a person. According to the narrow definition being used in this thesis, they cannot be persons because they cannot act, but this is not the place for a discussion of this nature, and my focus will be on the unnamed narrator, rather than the unnamed and aborted child.

Val Plumwood's discussion of the divide between nature and culture in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* is instrumental in understanding what motivates the actions of the narrator, especially in regards to the father figures and the importance placed on paternal approval. As previously discussed, Plumwood discusses the extent of systemic subjugation and othering of women and nature. She points out that feminism, while attempting to subvert the control of the dominant patriarchal culture, often falls prey to the same dualistic manner of thinking that continues oppression by shifting the subjugation rather than insisting on true equality.

Plumwood shows how oppression has become internalized in language and logic through the dichotomous ways of thinking that consistently invade academic discussions. For example, the perceived divide between nature and culture helps to reinforce the subjugation of women who are consistently portrayed as closer to nature than men are. Reason and nature are another, similar, binary couple that Plumwood points out as essential to reinforcing the idea that women are lesser. In this way, patriarchy is intrinsically supported and reinforced by today's culture.

Also important to this discussion are ideas about the politics of reproduction that are highlighted in Karen Cardozo and Banu Subramaniam's "The NatureCulture of BioFiction in Ruth Ozeki's *All Over Creation*," especially concerning the contradictory approaches to the narrator's abortion. She needed to have this abortion from a cultural and societal standpoint because the conception occurred not only outside of marriage but also in a culturally taboo relationship, yet by having the abortion she is also placed outside of accepted, patriarchal culture where a woman's duty is to produce children.

An understanding of cultural or radical feminism is important when discussing the binaries Plumwood highlights, as a misunderstanding of these, as pointed out in the first chapter, often leads to an uncritical reversal of these dualisms. The single most distinctive feature of

cultural feminism is a rejection of masculine ideals that leads to the preservation and continuation of these false binaries, with a preference for those ideals that are typically oppressed and the subjugation of those that have been traditionally dominant. As Plumwood says, “if liberal feminism rejects the ideals of feminine character, radical feminism rejects masculine ideals” (30).

These ideas are instrumental when reading *Surfacing* because this novel features a leading woman who must fight to overcome this systemic oppression and her perceived debt to the patriarchy, especially as regards her reproduction and abortion. She must not simply come to terms with the culturally prevalent idea of her body as a commodity to be exploited through reproduction but she must also find a new language and set of terms for understanding herself as a person if she is to forge a new identity for herself.

The narrator of *Surfacing* finds herself unable to return home and face her parents after her abortion. Instead, in an attempt to create a new version of reality for herself, she blocks the true memory from her consciousness. When she returns to her childhood home during the events of the novel, the warped memory hangs over her head as she remembers a strangely “antiseptic” wedding (88) and a birth where the child was taken out from her “with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar” (79), until she is finally confronted with the truth about her past. Once she remembers what has truly happened to her, that both these memories are of the same event, are of the day she had an abortion, she is able to make peace with her past and is potentially ready to move forward with her life as she returns to civilization. When the novel ends, the reader is left believing that her life will be different when she returns to society, although the specifics of this change are unclear.

This novel challenges the way that women are disallowed control over their own bodies and simultaneously seen as reproductive machines. While the narrator was negatively affected by the abortion of her child, at no point does the novel suggest that this is because abortion is wrong – it is because of the circumstances in which the abortion occurred. The narrator was at no point in control of the choices; she remarks that the presence of the fetus as well as the choice to abort was entirely “his idea, his fault” (80). The trauma that she experiences is a result of this negation of her own agency as well as the paradoxical societal expectations of her as a woman.

*Surfacing* also works to break down gender barriers through the various depictions of the male and female characters. In *Brutal Choreographies*, J. Brooks Bouson discusses cultural or radical feminism and its significance in the development and portrayal of the novel’s characters. Bouson comments that “*Surfacing* rejects the masculinist culture – which is depicted as both rationalistic and dangerously aggressive – and idealizes a nature-identified femininity” (40). This reading is initially challenged by the unexpected portrayals of the main characters that seem to defy traditional gender roles. For instance, while both men do represent aggression and danger at times throughout the novel, Joe is also frequently described in more typically feminine terms as animalistic, natural and passive. This is perhaps best exemplified in the description of Joe as a buffalo, “shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction” (4). Joe is also typically mute throughout, as the narrator remarks, “speech to him, was a task, a battle, words mustered behind his beard and issued one at a time, heavy and square like a tank” (76). Bouson explains this as a “backgrounding and silencing” (46) of Joe that “overturns literary and cultural expectations by doing to him what traditionally has been done to female characters in literary texts” (47). In this

way, then, *Surfacing* simply flips the dichotomous categories around rather than working to break down the binaries as Plumwood desires.

However accurate this reading may be as regards the characterization of the male characters, when it comes to the narrator, Atwood complicates the stereotypes through what Bouson describes as the novel's "troubling depictions of female madness and rage" (40). While Bouson focuses on the narrator's descent into madness and irrationality in the final section of the novel, he largely ignores the events that ultimately led to this reaction, namely the narrator's abortion.

In order to fully understand the impact the abortion had on the narrator's life, it is important to examine her depictions of family life both as a child and into adulthood. From the beginning, the novel stresses family structure. During the trip to the island, the narrator describes a family of stuffed moose displayed prominently on the roadside, saying there was "a father moose with a trench coat and a pipe in his mouth, a mother moose in a print dress and a flowered hat and a little boy moose in short pants, a striped jersey and a baseball cap, waving an American flag" (9). Notably separated from this image of familial harmony is the "little girl moose in a frilly skirt and a pigtailed blond wig holding a red parasol in one hoof" (9) that is placed on the roof while the rest of the family is displayed prominently on a ground level platform. This distancing of the daughter moose mirrors the distance that the narrator feels from her family.

An early anecdote from the narrator's childhood reinforces this distance she feels from her family as well as illustrates the family dynamic she experienced growing up. Describing a typical journey up the winding road to the lake, the narrator says her father would drive as fast as possible while "the rest of them clamped onto the inside of the car, getting sicker and sicker despite the Lifesavers their mother would hand out and finally throwing up groggily by the side

of the road” (10). In this story, the father is the dominant force, controlling the experience of the others, while the mother is cast in the role of support for the children, but is ultimately unable to protect them from the negative effects of the father’s control. Also highlighted is the narrator’s intentional distance from this family, as she “others” them. However, she recognizes this and works to change her approach, saying “that won’t work, I can’t call them ‘they’ as if they were somebody else’s family: I have to keep myself from telling that story” (10). Clearly she is attempting to construct an identity for herself that is separate from this past, but is aware that this effort will be futile.

The father’s control over the lives of the rest of the family is clearly seen not only in the passage above, but also throughout the novel. Furthering this image of a controlling father figure, the narrator remarks that, according to her father, “Jesus was a historical figure and God was a superstition” (104). Reflecting on this later in life, the narrator understands the power play occurring in this statement. As she notes, “if you tell your children God does not exist, they will be forced to believe you are the God” (104). However, the level of distance that was required for this amount of clarity also allows her to understand the repercussions of such childhood manipulation. She asks, “What happens when they find out you are human after all” (104)? Clearly she is working through the aftereffects of this patriarchal control in an attempt to find a new place for herself in the world.

The narrator continues this attempt to construct a new identity for herself by subconsciously altering the significant events of her life in order to add social legitimacy to her identity. Her affair with Paul, a married man, and her resulting abortion become, in her altered version of her past, a marriage of which her parents disapprove and a child to whom she could not relate.

When thinking about introducing her fictional child to her actual childhood home, the narrator says, “I couldn’t have brought the child here, I never identified it as mine . . . it was my husband’s, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator” (30). She clearly did not choose this child, as she places all the responsibility for its existence on her fictional husband. Because of this distance, the narrator works to disown the child while paradoxically clinging to its memory.

The memory that the narrator labels as her wedding is clinical and disturbing until the reader realizes that this is actually an abortion, intentionally mislabeled in an attempt to lend social credibility to the narrator’s life. The details that the narrator still remembers are the smells – particularly the “chill of antiseptic” (88) – and the feeling that her “husband” was “protecting me from something . . . he was talking to me as though I was an invalid, not a bride” (88). When the reader becomes aware that this is the aftermath of an abortion and not her wedding, Paul’s supposedly reassuring comment, “I know it’s tough . . . but it’s better this way” (88), makes complete sense.

Throughout this description, what sticks out the most is the narrator’s awareness of Paul’s control over the entire process. Paul seems to be the sole voice in deciding whether or not to abort. This is made clear when the narrator finally realizes the lies she has been telling herself. The words she chooses to use when describing what she now realizes was an abortion are very telling of her emotional state. She says, “I couldn’t accept it, that mutilation, ruin I’d made” (144). Even though she did not appear to have a choice in the decision-making process, the narrator still holds herself responsible for the abortion, saying, “whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn’t a child but it could have been one, I didn’t allow it” (144).

It was this guilt that completely severed her from her family. After her abortion, she was never able to return home to her parents. As she says, “I couldn’t tell them . . . they didn’t teach us about evil, they didn’t understand about it, how could I describe it to them. They were from another age, prehistoric, when everyone got married and had a family” (145). Her guilt stems from the reaction she anticipates from her parents if they were to find out, but it is only in returning to her childhood that she is able to find peace and acceptance in herself.

In this way, then, *Surfacing*’s unnamed narrator is in a better position at the end of the novel, descent into madness included, since she has at least gone through a life-defining event and has taken steps to truly overcome the opinion of her absent father. She did construct an alternate reality for herself, but when it falls down she seems to have the tools needed to cope in the new world and finally be able to lead a healthy life. In the wilderness she found herself finally able to act on her own accord again, and after a brief retaliation against the rigid control she had been under, she comes out at the end, a new person, aware of her past and able to make her own decisions and accept consequences going forward. She regained her moral agency and personhood, and is better equipped to responsibly interact with society.

### ***The Handmaid’s Tale***

While *Surfacing* focuses on an individual in her struggle against societal expectations, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is concerned with depicting a society eerily similar to our own through the lens of one woman’s story. Critical to *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the awareness of an “other” that Donna Haraway, in her work on cyborgs, defines as the separation of individuals in society. In Gilead this separation has caused an extreme othering not only between men and women but also among the women who occupy different functions in this society. In Gilead, Handmaids and



Wives are seen simply as sexual objects to be used by the men in an attempt to procreate and continue the human race.

The setting of *The Handmaid's Tale* is northeastern America in the near future. Pollution has caused sterility rates to rise dramatically, leading many to worry about the future of humanity. In order to ensure that humanity will survive, the Republic of Gilead was formed, where women who can still produce children are “protected” and “valued” as potential mothers. The high-ranking men whose wives have not been able to bear a child are assigned “Handmaids” so as to increase their chances of having a child. The institution of the Handmaids, as with most everything else in Gilead, is based on an Old Testament story where Rachel, jealous because she could not conceive children for her husband and her sister, Leah, could, gave her handmaid, Bilhah, to her husband so that she would conceive in her place. Because of this precedent, the lawmakers in Gilead decreed that any Commander whose wife could not conceive should be given a Handmaid so that his wife would not be shamed.

The narrator, Offred, finds herself plunged into this society as a Handmaid after attempting to escape to Canada with her husband and child. Having no officially sanctioned name other than that which marks her as “of” her Commander (of Fred), she has no official identity outside of those duties she must provide for her Commander’s household, which are minimal. Other than the required monthly ceremony where the Commander attempts to impregnate Offred, she must only walk to the town to procure the needed food items for the household. All other time is her own, but she is given no leisure activities to pursue, and so she along with all the other Handmaids must merely sit and wait.

The Republic of Gilead views women as reproductive tools, and so it punishes women who, in the time before Gilead was established, made the choice to sterilize themselves. They are

labeled “Unwomen” and sent to the colonies. As Moira, one of Offred’s friends from before Gilead, tells her, in the colonies these women “spend their time cleaning up . . . the toxic dumps and radiation spills” (248). These women have no value other than as menial laborers, and when they burn out after about three years of work, the government simply replaces them. After all, “they’re mostly people they want to get rid of” (248).

As Jennifer Denbow states in her article “Sterilization as Cyborg Performance,” women who choose to become sterilized subvert the notion that womanhood is inherently maternal, as well as the “widespread binary notions of woman-man, nature-culture, and organism-machine” (109). This directly threatens the Republic of Gilead, which wants to protect this dichotomy. These women are a sort of cyborg, inhabiting a space that is termed something other than woman. Donna Haraway, in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” states that the cyborg breaks down these three binaries and more, joining not only man and woman, nature and culture, organism and machine, but also human and animal as well as physical and non-physical. The merger that Haraway suggests goes beyond anything we can imagine. As she says, “far from signaling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleurably tight coupling” (10). By surpassing these labels, these women, by controlling their own reproductive cycles and thus limiting their “uses,” have created something entirely new, outside the reach of the patriarchy, and so must be condemned.

Because of the radical nature of these women, the colonies were the only official option for them, as they needed to be secluded since they might corrupt others. But, as Moira found out, there was another unofficial option; the officer’s underground “club” where Offred and Moira are reunited for a night. This “club” exists because of the belief among the high-ranking men in the Republic that men need variety. As Offred’s Commander explains to her, “Nature demands

variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan" (237). Because the women in this underground club are all infertile, the Commander claims not only the need for multiple women in order to increase the chances of conception (which is provided through the Handmaids) but also the need for enjoyable sex, which is something the Commander does not get at home.

This belief supports the unspoken idea that men are the only actors in conception. Women are simply passive vessels in which the child is grown. They have no active role in the process. Similarly, sterility is only assigned to females, as Offred confirms, "there is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (61). Not only is this the case, but even hinting that a man is sterile is sacrilege, while women who cannot give birth are viewed as deviants, purposefully refusing to fulfill their societal roles. When Serena Joy suggests that Offred try conceiving in another way and states "maybe he can't," Offred remarks, "it's heresy. It's only women who can't, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective" (204).

It is clear, then, that Handmaids are only respected when they provide children, yet are paradoxically given no role in the actual production of these children. However, Offred also informs the reader that the Handmaids only have value in proportion to their likelihood of having a child. Furthermore, if a woman is pregnant, she is respected and great care will be taken of her, but all choices that are made have only the baby's interests in mind. As Offred states, "once they drugged women, induced labor, cut them open, sewed them up. No more. No anesthetics, even. Aunt Elizabeth said it was **better for the baby**" (114, emphasis mine). Because anesthetics are viewed in the Republic of Gilead as solely for the mother, they are non-essential.

Because of this commodification of children, sex is also affected. Offred comments that “we are for breeding purposes . . . we are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (136). In the “ceremony” where the Commander acts to impregnate the Handmaid, every detail is regulated and symbolic, from the gathering of the household to hear the reading of the Bible passage beforehand to the placement of the Handmaid between the Wife’s legs as the Commander performs his duty. Offred describes what is actually occurring:

The Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. (94)

This distinction is important, because it emphasizes the lack of emotion involved in such an intensely personal act. Offred also emphasizes her passivity through the ceremony, and yet she ends by accepting responsibility, saying that it was her choice. She does not blame the Commander for what he is doing to her body. As she says a little later, “this is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty” (95).

It is Offred’s ability to relate to the other members of the Gileadian society that makes her a problematic narrator. This is where Glenn Deer, in “*The Handmaid’s Tale: Dystopia and the Paradoxes of Power*,” catches hints of Offred’s strategic manipulation, as it is in these moments when Offred shows compassion and sympathy for the members of society that hold complete power over her. It is in these moments that she is the most active. It is clear in that she is carefully working to spin the tale she is telling, and this is where her reconstruction becomes questionable.

Deer comments that Margaret Atwood, throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, has “consistently written about women who are both powerful and vulnerable, strong enough to endure and retain a sense of self yet unable to elude the grimmer aspects of entrapment” (93). Deer argues that Offred is a very complex character, and reads her as “an authoritative and authoritarian storyteller, one who manipulates the reader as she tells her story, but one who is also caught in the web of Gileadian power politics” (95). Essentially, Deer does not accept the persona that Offred constructs for herself, pointing out that Offred “does not speak entirely in the voice of the victim, the writer who pleads “mayday;” rather, she speaks in the skilled voice of the rhetorician and the fabulator who is purposefully telling a story” (100). This is significant, because Offred’s passivity and subjugation is thematically important in the novel.

Offred is not only sympathetic towards the Commander, but she is able to relate to Serena Joy, as well, even though the Commander’s wife is nothing but hostile towards the Handmaid. After the ceremony is done, Serena Joy dismisses Offred immediately, even though, as Offred remarks, “she’s supposed to have me rest, for ten minutes, with my feet on a pillow to improve the chances . . . but she’s not in the mood for that. There is loathing in her voice, as if the touch of my flesh sickens and contaminates her” (95). Yet, even after enduring this humiliating process and then receiving such unfair treatment, Offred is able to wonder “which of us is it worse for, her or me” (95)? She is able to relate to Serena Joy’s humiliation and how uncomfortable the ceremony must make her, reminding her that she is unable to provide her husband with a child without help from the Handmaid.

While at first glance Deer’s reading of Offred grants her power and agency, he also implies that she is engaged in a manipulation of the audience. From Deer’s perspective, the reader ought to question the validity of her perspectives, since she is not the powerless body that

she portrays herself as being. Another way that this reading is problematic is the way that Deer rejects off-hand Offred's projection of herself. By rejecting the persona that Offred (and Atwood) have constructed, Deer claims that he holds more authority over Offred's narrative than she does.

It is important to keep in mind that Atwood has constructed the character of Offred and that Offred is also engaged in a construction of her own visible character throughout the narrative. Offred is not everything she might claim to be, whether because she wants to appear better than she would otherwise, or in order to protect someone is unclear. The novel is twice constructed, which makes any interpretation of the narrator difficult.

My reading differs from Deer's in a small but crucial way. Deer questions Offred's validity as a narrator because of these constructions and rejects the idea that Offred can be as passive as she claims throughout the narrative while still actively constructing a persona for herself. In this way Deer perpetuates the dualistic thinking that dominates the current dialogue on identity. I would argue that it is not only possible but common for a person to remain passive during a situation but then actively control the narrative in retrospect. While Deer's point is valid when considering Offred's character as a construction and pointing out the need to acknowledge this when interpreting the narrative, it is not necessary to criticize her passivity throughout the narrative simply because she has become active after the fact.

It is important to consider Offred's motives in creating this narrative. She openly admits the difficulties that are inherent in an account of this type. As she says, "this is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction" (134). She admits that she cannot fully replicate the events as they truly occurred, "because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents" (134). Later, she again says that she cannot

remember exactly how the events occurred and that “all I can hope for is a reconstruction” (263). There is no doubt, then, that Offred is engaged in constructing a narrative in a certain manner, and so taking control of her story, and by extension, her body.

Before Gilead, women had freedom to voice their opinions and control their own bodies, which meant that women were free to choose sterility and, as previously mentioned, change the conception of womanhood as equal to motherhood. In reaction to this, Gilead removed these freedoms, arguing that women in these days were not truly free. As Offred remembers being told during Handmaid training, “there is more than one kind of freedom . . . freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (24). Instead of being free to do whatever they want, the women are now free from the fear of being molested as they walk down the street, free from the fear of violence because they are women.

It is this view of womanhood, as something that needs to be protected, that Offred reacts to in her narrative. By demonstrating that even though she may have been passive throughout the events she describes she was still able to actively define and portray her persona in her narrative, Offred shows that women are not merely objects that must be protected, but rather active, empathetic agents that are capable of deciding their own futures.

Offred’s passivity as a Handmaid is not a complete picture of her true character. Her ability to empathize with the Commander and Serena Joy throughout the narrative shows this. This is the identity that Offred most wants to emphasize, as this is the side of humanity that she finds most important. Without the ability to relate to others, humanity is not worth preserving.

In this way, then, *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows the emergence of a society where women’s bodies are completely commoditized and Offred’s attempt to remain in control of

her narrative in a society that is constantly trying to turn her into an object. By remaining capable of sympathy even towards her tormentors, Offred shows an interpretation of what it means to remain morally capable in a world where her options are extremely limited. This is not to say that Offred's sympathy for the Commander is a requirement for her personhood, but by showing that she understands herself as one viewpoint in a complicated world Offred is able to engage with and theorize in ways that are important. What little hope there is in *The Handmaid's Tale* can only be found in Offred's ability to construct an identity for herself, signifying that she is able to retain her personhood despite her surroundings. Even though Gilead worked to remove all agency (and thus personhood) from the handmaids, Offred fights to retain control.

Both the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* and Offred work to construct their own identities and come to terms with their social situations. Despite having very little control over their bodies, each are able to work to define themselves outside of the narrow box society placed them in, thus allowing themselves more prominent roles in society.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### REPRESENTATIONS OF IDENTITY, MORAL AGENCY, AND THE FEMALE BODY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *MADDADDAM* TRILOGY

This final chapter focuses on Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, which connects the constructions of personhood with genetically modified organisms, xenophobia, and the commodification of women's bodies, ties together the issues and themes discussed in the novels mentioned in the previous chapters. In this trilogy Atwood is interested in breaking down the binaries Val Plumwood discusses, both the idea that the terms "masculine" and "feminine" have any intrinsic value as well as the idea that the pairing of reason/passion and nature/culture are mutually exclusive. She does this by showing characters who defy gender stereotypes as well as through the Crakers and pigoons, genetically engineered creations whose personhood is a subject of discussion among the human characters of the novel. By joining the humans and Crakers in hybrid children, Atwood shows that these two groups are not as different as they might appear, showing that nature/culture, reason/passion and masculine/feminine are false distinctions with no intrinsic value.

Val Plumwood's discussion of the divide between nature and culture in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* is instrumental in understanding what motivates the actions of Atwood's characters. Plumwood discusses the extent of systemic subjugation and othering of women and nature. She points out that feminism, while attempting to subvert the control of the dominant patriarchal culture, often falls prey to the same dualistic manner of thinking that perpetuates oppression by shifting the subjugation rather than insisting on true equality.

Plumwood shows how oppression has become internalized in language and logic through the dichotomous ways of thinking that consistently invade academic discussions. For example,

the perceived divide between nature and culture helps to reinforce the oppression of women who are consistently portrayed as closer to nature than men are. Reason and nature are another, similar, binary couple that Plumwood points out as essential in reinforcing the idea that women are less than men. In this way, patriarchy is intrinsically supported and reinforced by today's culture.

An understanding of cultural or radical feminism is important when discussing the binaries Plumwood highlights, as a misunderstanding of these often leads to what she terms an "uncritical reversal" of these dualisms. The single most distinctive feature of cultural feminism is a rejection of masculine ideals that nonetheless leads to the preservation and continuation of these false binaries, as the result is simply a reversal of values that valorizes those types that are typically oppressed and subjugates those that have been traditionally dominant. As Plumwood says, "if liberal feminism rejects the ideals of feminine character, radical feminism rejects masculine ideals" (30). Atwood does not fall into this trap, and is careful to show well-rounded characters who demonstrate both "masculine" and "feminine" traits without passing judgment or valuing any one in particular over another. As Plumwood says, "western culture itself has been deformed by its masculinization and denial of the sphere associated with women" (30), and Atwood's trilogy works to expand on this idea. Atwood shows that destruction of western culture is the only way for women and others to become full persons. In order to allow these dominated and silenced individuals to hold their own place, a new society must be created.

It is important to restate here that personhood, as defined for this thesis, stems from the possession of moral agency. The individuals who achieve a sense of personhood in this trilogy are all conscious beings, aware of the consequences of their actions and are thus able to be held responsible. As will be demonstrated, the pigoons, the Painballers, and the Crakers all show

signs of moral responsibility, and thus are all granted the status of “persons,” despite the fact that only the Painballers are human.

### **The Setting**

The first novel of the series, *Oryx and Crake*, follows the actions of Jimmy as he navigates the world after a near-extinction event destroyed society and killed most of humanity. Interspersed with his actions in the present are his memories of his childhood and the events leading up to the plague that wiped out humanity. It is revealed that the plague was designed by Jimmy’s childhood friend, Crake, in order to wipe the earth clean and give the planet a fighting chance to survive the atrocities that humanity had wrought upon it. To further this end, Crake developed a new form of humanity that become known as the Children of Crake, or Crakers. Having genetically modified the Crakers in a controlled biosphere to be superior to humans in every way, Crake tasked Jimmy with protecting them and making sure that they integrated into the outside world after the apocalypse without any significant damage.

Another focus of Jimmy’s memories is Oryx, a woman who was sold from her home in a third world country at a young age to be a child prostitute. After being passed from man to man and finally arriving in the United States of America, she used her body to further her education and prospects. Jimmy and Crake first saw her on a child pornography website, but when Crake eventually meets her in real life he brings her onto his team of scientists working on the Children of Crake. Oryx’s official job is to teach the Crakers about the world around them, but she also acts as liaison to Crake and delivers his BlyssPluss Pill around the world. This pill was invented by Crake to remove sexual frustration from the world, but it also secretly sterilized anyone who used it and introduced the deadly virus that almost wiped out humanity.

In the present, Jimmy struggles with huge genetically altered pigs called pigoons in order to make his way back to the Paradise dome and acquire supplies needed for his continued survival. In this journey he mirrors the outbound trek he made with the Crakers immediately following the virus outbreak. The pigoons, whose genetic modifications include the introduction of human genes, show themselves to be crafty and cunning as they hunt and trap Jimmy before being driven away by a storm. They return in the last novel and prove to be important actors in these events.

In the second book, *The Year of the Flood*, Jimmy's perspective is enlarged upon by alternate views of the pre- and post-apocalyptic events from the perspectives of two women. Toby and Ren show the problems with Jimmy's limited point of view. He was obsessed with Oryx and as a consequence his perception of reality is flawed. Passages focusing on Toby show the inner workings of a cult known as God's Gardeners, and their preparations for the "waterless flood" that they believed would soon come as retribution for humanity's depravity. The Gardeners preached that humans were no better than animals and so had no right to use and exploit them. Among the Gardeners that Toby's narrative focuses on is Zeb, an enigmatic character who does not quite fit the Gardener type. Survival is his main priority, which, along with his efficiency and self-reliance, attracts Toby to him. Alone after the plague, having been sent away from the Gardeners for her protection some time earlier, Toby sets up in a spa, hoping to find other survivors.

Ren, a Gardener in her youth, was removed from the cult by her mother before she became an adult and is a strip dancer at a high-end exotic club known as "Scales and Tails" at the time of the virus. After society crumbles, Ren joins up with Amanda, a childhood friend, and they make their way through the remnants of civilization hoping to find some sign that they are

not the only survivors. After coming across Toby, Ren and Amanda are abducted by two Painballers, convicted murderers who were sentenced to fight in a *Hunger Games*-esque arena where their savage tendencies are encouraged. Toby is able to successfully free Ren, but the Painballers manage to escape with Amanda.

*MaddAddam*, the final novel, relates the way Toby rescues Amanda before joining up with a group of Gardeners, among them Zeb, as well as a very sick Jimmy and the Crakers. Toby enters an intimate relationship with Zeb and begins to learn about his past in order to relate it to the Crakers, who have turned to Toby as their “spiritual” leader in Jimmy’s absence and have picked up on Zeb’s revered position not only in Toby’s eyes, but also for the other humans.

As Toby learns about Zeb’s colorful past, she learns that his brother, Adam, was involved in creating not only the God’s Gardener cult, but also an organization known as MaddAddam. The MaddAddamites were a group of scientists who were obsessed with extinct animals and were involved in creating new genetic modifications to preserve the variety of life on earth. Many of the MaddAddamites were recruited by Crake and were involved in his Paradise Project. Some of these individuals also survive the virus and join the other human survivors. Most notable for my purposes is Swift Fox, a middle-aged woman who vies with Toby for Zeb’s attention. Swift Fox works hard to emphasize her sexuality and is a stark contrast to Toby in many aspects.

As these groups join together, they work to integrate the Crakers into the new version of human society. They are also confronted with the fact that the pigoons are not as blindly dangerous and subhuman as previously assumed, so they must work to find a new way of thinking that includes the pigoons and Crakers as sentient and agential actors alongside humanity.

## **Reason versus Nature**

One problem with the dualistic mindsets that dominate rational western thought according to Plumwood, is the way that nature is “instrumentalised as a mere means to human ends via the application of a moral dualism that treats humans as the only proper objects of moral consideration and defines ‘the rest’ as part of the sphere of expediency” (69). Plumwood argues that western culture has denied nature any sort of personhood, allowing for its backgrounding and exploitation.

This is not only bad for nature, but has negative repercussions for women as well, since supposedly they are closely connected to nature and therefore are also excluded from the conventional idea of personhood. As Plumwood argues, “it is not only a masculine identity as such which underlies the Platonic conception of reason and of the life of reason, but a master identity defined in terms of multiple exclusions, and in terms of domination not only of the feminine but also of the slave, of the animal, and of the natural” (72). Humanity is defined by what it is not, and the preference for traits that are typically considered to be “masculine” is a long-running cultural assumption. As Plumwood so clearly demonstrates, these biases are present as far back as Greek society.

Since these dualisms are so deeply entrenched in western thinking, it is no surprise that they are so hard to escape. Even in works like this trilogy, it could be argued that Atwood does not fully escape these binaries. For example, the Craker women seem to be more attracted to roles of nurture, catching and preparing fish for Jimmy and constantly being aware when he and others are in need of medical attention (which they provide in the form of purring). It is the Craker men who are in charge of protecting the group by administering the protective circle of

urine that repels not only insects but predators as well. Clearly certain gender roles are still in place in this “perfect” Craker society.

However, before rejecting Atwood’s trilogy as succumbing once again to these pervasive binaries, it is important to remember that the Crakers were engineered by Crake for a very specific purpose. While intended to be perfect, it must be understood that this is Crake’s idea of perfection, not Atwood’s. Of the human characters, Jimmy and Toby illustrate Atwood’s careful attention to the destruction of false differences between masculine/feminine, reason/passion and nature/culture particularly well. Both Toby and Jimmy unite reason and empathy, showing that these binaries are not upheld in these novels.

It is easy to see that Crake falls into the role of reason and culture while Oryx embodies the characteristic of passion and nature. One could say that Crake is the head and Oryx is the heart. However, this is not an entirely accurate depiction of Oryx, who is also capable of being rational and empathetic. Jimmy and Toby also complicate this picture, breaking down these binaries by showing that the opposing sets of characteristics are not mutually exclusive and a character can be strongly identified with reason in certain circumstances and passion in others. When in high school, Jimmy constantly dated and dumped girls, living for the joys of the flesh. In contrast, Crake was never interested in women. When Ren began to hang out with Crake in order to make Jimmy jealous, Crake was only interested in the information she could give him about the Gardeners. He questioned her persistently for details about her life as part of the God’s Gardeners cult. The focus of his questions shows that he was interested in how their beliefs would hold up under complete deprivation. As Ren remembers Crake’s interrogation, ““So, they think we should use nothing except recycled. But what if the Corps stopped making anything new? We’ll run out.’ . . . ‘Would you eat animals if you were starving?’ and ‘Do you think the

Waterless Flood is really going to happen” (YotF 228)? Crake was interested in the details of their lifestyle, but had no interest in their actual lives.

Crake was not interested in Ren for any other purpose than gaining information and was using her, just as Ren was attempting to use him. This is no different from Jimmy, whose romantic relationships always depended on manipulation of feelings in order to achieve his desired end. Through Jimmy it is clear that Oryx wasn't the only one who used sexual manipulation to get her way. In this way Atwood shows the variety of motivations for these characters. All four of these characters use various manipulative tactics in order to achieve their ends, showing that both men and women are capable of distancing themselves from emotional connection with others in order to view them as resources. This is a more rational way of approaching the issue, and so could be thought of as masculine, but Atwood makes no distinction among her characters.

Although all of Oryx's actions are mediated by Jimmy's narrative, making it difficult to tell how much is Oryx and how much is Jimmy's faulty remembering, it is still possible to see that she constantly seeks to take advantage of every situation she finds herself in while Jimmy tries to make her version of events fit the identity he had constructed for her. For example, when Jimmy and Oryx are together he constantly attempted to read his ideas and impressions into her story; he controlled her narrative, and attempted to forgive her for “indiscretions” she never considered herself to have made. Although her story may have been exactly what Jimmy imagined, it is unclear if any of the story she told him is true or not. If it was true, she saw it in an entirely different manner and so was unable to accept Jimmy's forgiveness. “You have a lot of pictures in your head, Jimmy. Where did you get them? Why do you think they are pictures of me” (O&C 114)?



This is typical of the interactions that Oryx has with the people around her. She is always being used and spoken for by the men in her life, while she is never shown interacting with other women. However, Oryx never complains about this treatment. Instead, she seems to embrace this image of herself and finds a way to take advantage of every situation. In this way she fits into the more distanced and rational mindset of Crake, rather than the traditional image of woman as nurturing and empathetic.

However, she is also depicted as closer to the Crakers and so better suited for interacting with them than either Crake or Jimmy because, unlike Crake, she was able to “communicate on their level. Simple concepts, no metaphysics” (*O&C* 309). While Jimmy’s collegiate training in advertising may have helped prepare him to pick and choose what to emphasize and how to spin a story, he did not have the patience necessary to deal with the Crakers as effectively as Oryx. She is also better fitted for the task than Crake, whose incapability to connect with those around him allowed him to engineer the virus and wipe out humanity but kept him from being able to enter the new world he brought about.

While Jimmy proves to be adequate at interacting with and leading the Crakers after the extinction event, Oryx is better for the initial process of teaching the Crakers about their environment. When Jimmy is allowed to lead them, he relies on his language skills to create a legend about Oryx and Crake, but Oryx was able to navigate the Crakers’ questions without creating a quasi-religious backstory.

Understanding that Oryx is best suited for this task, and hoping to keep his precious creations free from the taint of the broken world, Crake selected Oryx to interact with the Crakers inside the Paradise dome. He chose Jimmy to lead them after the plague because Oryx would be unable to enter the new world, having been exposed to the deadly virus. More than this,

Crake made it impossible for Jimmy to even try to allow Oryx back, killing her in front of Jimmy in order to emphasize the fact that it needed to be Jimmy who would shepherd the Crakers into the “cleansed” world (*O&C* 321).

However, because the Crakers need a mediator between them and the world outside their biosphere even after the extinction event, they soon become corrupted in ways that Crake never desired. If Crake had been able to eliminate all of humanity from the post-apocalyptic picture, if he could have left the Crakers truly alone in the new world, then things might have been entirely different. As it is, by interacting with the remaining humans, the Crakers began to learn habits that Crake never intended, such as reverence for individuals and symbolic thinking.

It is behaviors such as these that Crake sees as the problem with humanity and was so intent on eliminating. Crake knew that the human race was not able to self-police in the face of deprivation. As he says, “*Homo sapiens* doesn’t seem able to cut himself off at the supply end. He’s one of the few species that doesn’t limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources” (*O&C* 120). Crake states that this is because of imagination: “Men can imagine their own deaths . . . Human beings hope they can stick their souls into someone else, some new version of themselves, and live on forever” (*O&C* 106). Seeing their deaths coming, humans refuse to react logically to the news that they are running out of resources, and instead of working to limit the population, Crake notes that they actually create more children and increase the burden on the already limited resources.

With this as his primary belief about humanity, it is no surprise that Crake decided to simply eliminate humanity from its place of power on the planet and give other lifeforms on earth a better chance of survival. He knows that it will not be an overly difficult matter to force humanity into extinction. As he tells Jimmy, “All it takes is the elimination of one generation.

One generation of anything. Beetles, trees, microbes, scientists, speakers of French, whatever. Break the link in time between one generation and the next, and it's game over forever" (*O&C* 223). It is this example of cold, rational thinking that defines Crake.

However, as will be seen in the next section, Toby is also very rational and calculated in her decisions. She is portrayed as one of the most capable characters, only matched by Zeb. She is able to make the best of every situation because of her moral strength and indomitable desire to survive. As seen through her interactions with the Crakers, this does not mean that she is calloused or hard-hearted. On the contrary, Toby is occasionally hindered by the fact that she is unwilling to hurt any living creature. This does not make her weak; it simply means that she must work harder to come up with an alternate solution. In the few circumstances where she cannot avoid hurting another creature, she does what is necessary to survive.

### **The Women**

It is important to address the way that Oryx constructs her identity. As she discusses her childhood and the fact that she was sold at an early age to a foreign pimp, Oryx tells Jimmy that she knew even then that she had a monetary value. Her perspective on this value system and its effect on her is unique, though:

Having a money value was no substitute for love. Every child should have love, every person should have it. She herself would rather have had her mother's love . . . but love was undependable, it came and then it went, so it was good to have a money value, because then at least those who wanted to make a profit from you would make sure you were fed enough and not damaged too much. Also there were many who had neither love nor a money value, and having one of these things was better than having nothing. (*O&C* 126)

This is a typical response from Oryx, a quiet acceptance of the way the world works coupled with a determined effort to see the positives. In this way she is able to convince herself that even as a young child she has a sort of power. As Jimmy comments on her memory of her involvement in an under-age sex entrapment scheme, “It made her feel strong to know that the men thought she was helpless but she was not. It was they who were helpless” (*O&C* 133). They could not resist their urges to take sexual advantage of a young, helpless girl and so they were caught every time. And yet, this power was false, for it came through her relationship with Uncle En. If she had not had his protection she would have been truly helpless. It is only with the protection of this male figure that she has any semblance of power, which is completely subservient to and dependent on his good will.

While she never lost this dependence on men’s value of her, she was eventually able to take “ownership” of her body in order to manipulate men without the assistance of a figure like Uncle En. Knowing that her body has value that she can use, she begins to “trade” with Jack, a man who filmed her in child pornography, so he would teach her how to speak and read English. When she tells Jimmy this, he is enraged, but Oryx questions his motives. ““Why do you think he is bad?” said Oryx. ‘He never did anything with me that you don’t do. Not nearly so many things!’” (*O&C* 141). Clearly this was not a traumatic event for Oryx, as she has come to terms with using her body to acquire things she would not otherwise have. Jimmy cannot see past his perception of exploitation to understand this from Oryx’s point of view. In this way, then, Oryx displays an acceptance of the exploitation of women as well as the complicated way that some women choose to understand it as a form of power instead of as complete subjugation.

Like Oryx, Amanda also knows how to manipulate men. Even as a child, she would pretend to be interested in every subject so the adults would be impressed with her and give her

special favors. When questioned about this by Ren, Amanda explains, “it’s how you find stuff out” (*YotF* 84). Zeb sees this quality on first meeting her, commenting “You’re a sly little operator, aren’t you” (*YotF* 81)? But Amanda played it off, looking at him “straight-faced, with her eyes wide open. ‘Excuse me, sir?’ Zeb laughed. ‘You’re very good’” (*YotF* 82). Zeb, interested in surviving no matter the costs, is able to recognize and appreciate her spirit and survival instincts.

Amanda wins over the boys her age as well the adults because she can to defend herself. While “they had a bunch of sick names for girls,” they didn’t have one for Amanda; “she had their respect. She had a piece of glass with duct tape along one edge to hold it with . . . She showed us how to ram a guy in the crotch or trip him up and then kick him under the chin and break his neck” (*YotF* 86). Because of her ability to beat any of the boys up, even the older ones, they respect her.

Amanda is also used to trading her body for favors. When she was a child she told Ren that she was unable to follow the Gardeners’ view of the body, saying, “you could snigger at it or trade it or both, but you couldn’t respect it” (*YotF* 137). She understands the value that is found in her body and how to use that to her advantage. Amanda made her way to the Gardeners because she was willing to “do a trade” for a lift (*YotF* 84). She was also willing to trade with two Gardener boys in order to cheer Ren up. When the drugs that they acquired for Amanda did not affect Ren the way she intended and Amanda refused to pay, it became clear what exactly were the terms of the deal as well as the level of power Amanda held over the boys. “‘You owe us two fucks,’ said Croze. ‘One each.’ . . . ‘Piss off,’ said Amanda . . . ‘Now they’re mad at you,’ I said. ‘They’ll get even.’ . . . ‘I’m not worried,’ said Amanda. ‘I can take care of them’” (*YotF* 156). Clearly Amanda has power over the boys because of her willingness to do what it takes to

get what she wants. There is nothing she will not do in order to protect herself and her friends. It is this willingness that links Amanda and Oryx, although Oryx is not shown as having friends and so is only focused on protecting herself.

Ren, one of the two main characters in *The Year of the Flood* and one of Jimmy's significant girlfriends, is also shown using her sexuality to make her way in life. She became a "Scales and Tails" girl, a valuable asset, one of the "talent." Ren chooses to become essentially a stripper, but she constructs an identity for herself that allows her to retain her self-respect. She has an idea of personal value that is derived from seeing herself as superior to other women, in particular the street prostitutes, "wrecked, diseased old women wandering the alleyways, practically begging. . . 'Hazardous waste,' we Scales girls used to call them. We shouldn't have been so scornful, we should have had compassion. But compassion takes work, and we were young" (*YotF* 7). She is aware that she should be more compassionate to these other women, but they are not individuals in her mind, they are merely hazy figures, and so it is easy to degrade them.

Because Ren is aware of her actions towards these women, she is also aware of the perception others must have of her as a stripper. When Ren thinks back on her God's Gardener days while she is at Scales, she wonders how her friends from that other life would react to her new occupation. She decides that Toby would object to the institution on moral grounds while Zeb would not care about the morals but would be all for getting her out simply for the challenge. This might not be entirely true. Zeb probably would not care about the situation at all, as evidenced by his lack of sympathy for Amanda's plight – Ren would be seen as disposable and not worth the risk, and so would be left to fight her own way out. Regrettable, but logical. Toby, on the other hand, would definitely disapprove of the institution because she wants better

for Ren. But while Ren reads this potential reaction as judgment, it would truly stem from Toby's sympathy for Ren's position (*YotF* 58).

What Ren does not realize is that Toby would soon be her primary advocate. Once Ren and Toby were reunited, along with a handful of other Gardeners and MaddAddamites, Toby finds herself in the role of protector of the younger women. When Amanda is taken away by the rogue Painballers, it is Ren and Toby who go after her, while Zeb leads the men in search of other Gardeners.

Unlike Oryx, Amanda and Ren, who are all able to construct identities for themselves but remain dependent on others, Toby is an example of a strong woman who makes her own way in life without depending on men. Throughout the novels Toby is typically characterized as sexless, not a source of desire or longing for many. Part of this sexless identity comes from her body type. A fellow Gardener said that there was "nothing sexual about [Toby] . . . flat as a board, back and front. Worker bee" (*YotF* 114). The only two men that are ever interested in her after she becomes self-sufficient are her SecretBurgers boss, Blanco, and Zeb. Blanco had been a Scales bouncer, but he'd "ripped up a Scales girl – not a smuggled illegal-alien temporary, they got ripped up all the time, but one of the top talent, a star pole dancer" (*YotF* 36) so he'd been fired and had to resort to running a SecretBurgers franchise. He blamed the girl for his demotion, but soon realized that his workers were his "perks" (*YotF* 36), and began taking advantage of his position. Not long after Toby began working at SecretBurgers, Blanco calls her into his office and makes her his "one-and-only," despite the fact that he preferred "curvy butts" (*YotF* 35), and in two weeks she realizes that "she'd be used up soon" (*YotF* 38). For Blanco, women were simply resources, to be used up and then disposed of in favor of another, more fruitful option.

After being liberated from her SecretBurgers job by the God's Gardeners, Toby is free from forced sexual encounters and finds herself without a sexual partner for many years. She does not mind this, however, as the narrator says, "during her immersion in the Sewage Lagoon she'd had far too much sex, though not the kind anyone would want" (*YotF* 103). She is almost raped by an old Gardener soon after joining, but this was a one-time incident that was passed off as harmless. "'We never make a fuss about such things,' said Pilar. 'There's no harm in Mugi really. He's tried that on more than one of us – even me some years ago'" (*YotF* 104).

Toby is affected by Oryx and Amanda's understanding that women have an intrinsic value based off their bodies even though her identity is consistently portrayed as sexless. When Toby has to leave her home after her parents' deaths, her acquaintances take solace in the fact that "at least she had something of marketable value, namely her young ass, and therefore she wouldn't starve to death, and nobody had to feel guilty" (*YotF* 28).

In order to make ends meet, Toby has to resort to commoditizing her body in order to survive, so she sells first her hair and then her eggs. The eggs that she donates are given to couples who could not get parenthood licenses for one reason or another. In this world, it is no longer a simple thing to have a child, as children have to be officially sanctioned or acquired on the black market. Toby is infected her second time donating eggs, which means that "she could never donate any more eggs, or – incidentally – have any children herself" (*YotF* 32). Although she had never thought about it before, "when she was told she'd been accidentally sterilized she could feel all the light leaking out of her" (*YotF* 33). While she had never been particularly sexual beforehand, after this event her lack of sexuality becomes clear and she is not able to use her body to gain favors.



However, this inability to manipulate men through the use of her body does not make her any less powerful as a character. In fact, it could be argued that she gains power through this experience. Toby is able to understand her worth better without the complications of sexuality and childbearing. She is not lesser because of her sterility, nor is she more important; she has the same value in her own eyes and she is just as capable of providing for herself after the incident.

Atwood clearly shows the various ways that women construct identities and visions of personhood through their actions, even in a world that attributes them with no intrinsic power. They prove themselves to be morally capable actors even though they are repeatedly silenced and degraded. This is achieved through their ability to overcome their various circumstances and construct a meaningful life for themselves. Toby in particular shows the power a woman can hold when allowed freedom to choose her actions for herself.

### **Genetically Modified Organisms**

Similar to the human women, genetically modified organisms in this trilogy are shown to be moral actors and responsible individuals capable of holding the rights of personhood. While there are several varieties of genetically modified organisms such as rakunks (raccoons and skunks), liobambs (lions and lambs) and wolvogs (wolves and dogs), pigoons are the most integral to the plot because they so aptly prove themselves to be agential and moral actors. Pigoons are pigs that were developed with human neo-cortex tissue in order to advance a neuro-regeneration project. Because of the presence of human brain tissue in their genetic makeup, they have become not only cunning and able to track down threats to their pack, but are able to understand the needs of the humans and Crakers and learn how to communicate with them in order to better protect both groups.

Most of the genetically modified organisms are created with a (more or less) noble purpose in mind. For the rakunks, this is companionship. Because they were created inside the science community's compound walls, their presence would not endanger the other experiments with outside germs. As Jimmy's father describes them, these creatures have "no smell too, not like a skunk . . . it's a clean animal, with a nice disposition. Placid. Racoons never made good pets once they were grown up, they got crabby, they'd tear your house to pieces. This thing is supposed to be calmer" (*O&C* 51). The rakunks were created for recreation. They are a cute, unique pet.

Pigoons, unlike rakunks, are created to grow human organs for transplants. They are never intended to be released into the wild, much less interact with humans in any place other than a laboratory. However, after the waterless flood, they are set free with serious consequences. As Jimmy knows, they are "clever enough to fake a retreat, then lurk around the next corner" (*O&C* 235), and "they were always escape artists, the pigoons: if they'd had fingers they'd have ruled the world" (*O&C* 267). In these descriptions it becomes clear that they are more than simple creatures, having these seeming human behaviors. Jimmy continually describes them in almost human terms, "if they were guys, they'd be having a smoke and shooting the shit. Alert, though; on the lookout" (*O&C* 270), using his forgotten garbage bag of possessions as bait to lure him back to the ground floor (*O&C* 271). Toby takes more time to come to terms with the identity of the pigoons and has to remind herself to refer to the pigoons as persons even after they establish their connection with Blackbeard, the Craker child. As she reminds herself, "the pigoons were not objects. She had to get that right. It was only respectful" (*MA* 351).

While the pigoons seem to be "elevated" to a more "human" status, Jimmy in particular is shown as reconnecting to a more "animalistic" level. As the reader is told, "he can hear the

rakunks pawing through this private dump of his, searching for a free meal among the leavings of catastrophe, as he himself has often done, and is about to do again” (*O&C* 152). Even as a child, he felt closer to his pet rakunk than he did to either of his parents or any of his classmates (until Crake showed up), as he remembers, “his secret best friend was Killer. Pathetic, that the only person he could really talk to was a rakunk” (*O&C* 59). Similarly, in the new world Jimmy’s health and survival is intrinsically connected to his feet, as he remarks, “like a horse, his life now depends on them. If he can’t walk, he’s rat food” (*O&C* 230). Jimmy shows that sympathy and connection with nature is not an intrinsically feminine role.

The Crakers are also genetically modified organisms, created by Crake to replace humanity. Crake’s solution to the “human problem” is to eliminate humanity from the equation. To do this, he created a pill that would solve all his perceived problems:

The aim was to produce a single pill, that, at one and the same time:

- a) Would protect the user against all known sexually transmitted diseases, fatal, inconvenient, or merely unsightly;
- b) Would provide an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess, coupled with a generalized sense of energy and well-being, thus reducing the frustration and blocked testosterone that led to jealousy and violence, and eliminating feelings of low self-worth;
- c) Would prolong youth.

These three capabilities would be the selling points, said Crake; but there would be a fourth, which would not be advertised. The BlyssPluss Pill would also act as a sure-fire one-time-does-it-all birth-control pill, for male and female alike, thus automatically lowering the population level. (*O&C* 294)

Limiting population growth was important to Crake, because he saw that the human population was growing disproportionately to the resources available, and so “with the BlyssPlus Pill the human race will have a better chance for swimming” (*O&C* 295). However, what Crake did not tell Jimmy was that this pill was also the trigger for the epidemic that would ultimately bring humanity to near extinction, leaving Jimmy as the sole protector of the Crakers. Unable to wait until the Crakers were mature and able to protect themselves, Crake had to recruit an unwilling Jimmy, in the hope that things would work out for the best.

However, Jimmy was not committed to Crake’s values, and so did not bother to follow Crake’s instructions to keep the Crakers pure and untainted by human culture. It would have been extremely difficult for him to succeed, not being capable of communicating on the Crakers’ level, as Oryx was, but he did not even try. In fact, Jimmy’s incompetence in this matter created rituals and myths that Toby must work to deconstruct. This was not entirely Jimmy’s fault, however, as Crake had not been able to eliminate either dreams or singing, however much he may have wanted. “Singing and dreams were entwined” (*O&C* 352). Although he thought he had eliminated the need for a god figure, after Jimmy brought the Crakers out to the beach, they began to reverence Crake and Oryx as the creators of themselves and the world around them. While he was unaware of what would happen when he began this legend, Jimmy takes a perverse pleasure in knowing how Crake would have responded to this.

Even without Jimmy’s encouragement the Crakers “revert” to what Crake considered more “primitive” behaviors. When Jimmy leaves and is gone for longer than expected in *Oryx and Crake* because of the pigoon attack, the Crakers make a picture of him and call his name out in order to help him find his way back. This is significant, as Jimmy remembers Crake being concerned about this sort of behavior appearing while monitoring the original prototypes.

*“Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we’re in trouble. Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall, in Crake’s view” (O&C 361).* However, what Crake views as a downfall is positive for the Crakers, as it shows that they are not as far from “human” as they may initially appear and definitely helps the humans accept the Crakers more quickly.

While Jimmy was able to create stories for the Crakers entirely from his own imagination and rely on his language skills, Toby must rely on simplified versions of the truth when speaking to the Crakers. For instance, she uses the Crakers’ fascination with Zeb in order to provide their nightly stories. She needs to ground her stories in truth in order to keep the internal consistency so necessary when dealing with the extremely focused Crakers.

Toby also makes intentional connections with the Crakers in ways that Jimmy did not. For instance, when speaking with the Crakers, Toby repeatedly requests that the Crakers wait patiently during her pauses, which they believe occur because she is listening to Crake. As she tells them “it doesn’t help me to listen when you are singing” (*MA 54*), something Jimmy ignored, not knowing how to approach the subject. Toby also connects with Blackbeard, a Craker child who attaches himself to her. She teaches him how to read and write, introducing him to symbols, and he ends up becoming her replacement as story-teller and go-between for the rest of the Crakers and their revered Crake.

By these interactions the Crakers prove themselves capable of moral agency, and so have a right to hold personhood and a place among human society. Because the Crakers in particular are eager to please and quick to learn the intricacies of human society, they quickly gain the respect of the humans. The pigoons take more time, being less humanoid, but also gain access to human society through their ability to understand and respect the needs of the humans and Crakers.

## Human Reproduction

While the Crakers show themselves to be morally responsible actors, breaking down the false divide between culture/nature, reason/passion and masculine/feminine, the births that occur at the end of *MaddAddam* continue to deconstruct these distinctions. The fact that the babies are all human/Craker hybrids shows that there is no real difference between them, even though the humans have culture and the Crakers were meant to embody the complete lack of any form of civilized culture. After being abducted and viciously raped by the Painballers and then raped again by a group of culturally confused Crakers, Amanda behaves very differently from the Amanda seen throughout *The Year of the Flood*. Having been impregnated, she is subdued and diminished, “so traumatized she was almost catatonic” (*MA* 11), and even for a long time after the events, Amanda is typically found seated, “hand in her lap, doing nothing. She does nothing a lot” (*MA* 91). It is not until the Painballers are dealt with that she begins to return to her normal self. For example, she was part of the group who went back into the woods to take care of the body of a fallen Gardener (*MA* 373). After the successful birth of her daughter, Amanda seems to make a full recovery. Although Blackbeard, who takes over the narrative of the final few sections, does not comment explicitly on her behavior, he refers to her as “quite fond” of her child (*MA* 380) and as one of the “Beloved Three Oryx Mothers” (*MA* 386). Blackbeard does not see her as any different than the other mothers, as he undoubtedly would if she had remained in her broken state.

Amanda’s full recovery is likely due to the removal of many factors that would have made raising the child difficult. The Painballers are no longer at large reminding her of the traumatic events surrounding the conception of her child, and her child turns out to be of Craker parentage, allowing her to disassociate this traumatic experience from her child. The other

children that are born to the human women are also Craker hybrids, meaning that Amanda's child will not be the only one of her kind. Instead, the child will have companions. Finally, Amanda is surrounded by the Craker women, who are used to raising children communally and so are more than ready to assist wherever possible. All of these factors can only help Amanda's healing process.

Amanda is not the only one uneasy at the idea of being pregnant in this environment. Before finding out that she herself is pregnant, Ren expresses hesitancy to raise a child in the new world, a world without conveniences: “‘Who’d bring a baby into this? Without running water? I mean . . .’ ‘Not sure you’ll have that option,’ says Swift Fox. ‘In the long run. Anyway, we owe it to the human race. Don’t you think?’” (*MA* 157)? Swift Fox's point implies that the pure Craker children will not count towards the continuation of the human race, even though they will consistently produce children to replenish their population. However, as we find at the end of the book, Swift Fox chose to become pregnant with a Craker man, so she seems to value their genes and believes that the hybrid children will count as full humans rather than an inferior hybrid mix.

The initial uncertainty of the parentage of Amanda's and Ren's children and the possibility that they could either be Craker/human hybrids or children of the Painballers makes the idea of the hybrid children more appealing than it otherwise might. As Toby remarks to herself, “poor Amanda. Who could expect her to give birth to a murderer's child? To the child of her rapists, her torturers” (*MA* 215)? Because this is the alternative, even the possible dangers of bearing a Craker child to term are lessened in the eyes of the characters. This is a stark contrast to the reaction of the characters in Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy, who adamantly oppose the idea of human/Oankali hybrids as viable options for replenishing the earth.

The passage describing the births of the hybrid children is particularly important to understanding the reception of this new step in human evolution:

Over the past two weeks, all three births have taken place. Or all four, because Swift Fox gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. Each of the twins has the green eyes of the Crakers, which is a great relief to Toby; she'll have no tiny Zebs to contend with . . . Amanda's baby is fortunately of Craker descent, not Painballer: the large green eyes are unmistakable. The birth was difficult, and Toby and Rebecca had to perform an episiotomy. Toby did not want to give too much poppy, for fear of damaging the newborn; so there was pain. Toby worried that Amanda might reject her baby, but she didn't. She appears to be quite fond of it.

Ren's baby is also a green-eyed Craker hybrid. What other features might these children have inherited? Will they have built-in insect repellent, or the unique vocal structures that enable purring and Craker singing? Will they share the Craker sexual cycles? Such questions are much discussed around the MaddAddamite dinner table.

The three mothers and the four children are all doing well, and the Craker women are ever-present, purring, tending, and bringing gifts. The gifts are kudzu leaves and shiny pieces of glass from the beach, but they are well meant . . . Crozier and Ren appear united in their desire to raise Ren's child together. Shackleton is supporting Amanda and Ivory Bill has offered his services a so-called distant father to the Swift Fox twins. 'We all have to pitch in,' he said, 'because this is the future of the human race.'

'Good luck to it,' said Swift Fox, but she tolerates his help.' (MA 379-380)



In this passage we find that all the children born to the pregnant women are Craker/human hybrids, and that this is a relief to all involved. In the aftermath, although none of the human men are responsible for the children, they still step up to take on the traditional roles of fathers. While Swift Fox seems dismissive, she accepts this assistance, which shows that the men are also willing to accept these hybrids as humanity's future. Unsurprisingly, the Craker women are also present in the care and support of the children. Every member of this new culture, then, both pure Craker and human alike, step up to parent this new generation.

Because Blackbeard has taken over the narration of these passages and Toby's presence is greatly diminished throughout, it is impossible to tell if there is a shift in the balance of authority by the presence of the hybrid children and the new mothers. While Toby has been more active throughout the rest of the series, she may begin to take a back seat as the focus of the survival efforts shifts towards reproduction and repopulation, a matter in which Toby cannot contribute. However, it can be assumed that her talents will not be devalued simply because she cannot produce children, and it is even likely that she will help with raising the children along with the others. She has already raised Blackbeard to take over her role as story-teller, so it can be assumed that she will be involved in the education and support of the other children as well.

It becomes clear through this examination that Atwood breaks down the false binaries of reason/passion, culture/nature and masculine/feminine. Jimmy and Toby in particular defy gender stereotypes, and Oryx, Ren and Amanda display resilience and construct their own definitions of personhood that grants themselves agency and power in unconventional ways. Through the pigoons and the Crakers, Atwood broadens the definition of personhood, and by joining the humans and Crakers in hybrid children, Atwood shows that these two groups are not

as different as they might appear. It is through her ability to understand characters in three dimensions, rather than as conglomerations of behaviors and characteristics, as well as through the way that she pulls all these various issues together into one cohesive series that Atwood sets herself apart. While the other authors discussed have skillfully dealt with various combinations of these themes, Atwood brings them all together and masterfully shows the way that men and women share characteristics and the need for a more inclusive definition of personhood. The impact on the environment of this need for inclusion could be elaborated on at length. Atwood makes it clear that it is only when men and women have equal rank and personal agency that the natural world can hope to gain its rightful role in society.

Through this analysis of these various works it has been shown that women and nature are largely ignored in classic male-authored dystopic works, which favor technology and male characters, while female-authored works are able to give more time to women and nature without ignoring the issue of technology. Without an understanding of ecofeminism, and especially Val Plumwood's idea of binaries and dualism in western culture this discussion would have been limited as it likely would remain entrenched in the false distinctions these dualisms enforce.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*, the two male-authored works discussed in the first chapter, a common theme was illustrated as the female characters and the natural world were relegated to minor roles and deemed unimportant in the creation of revolution. In chapter two this is contrasted with the works of several female authors and the ways in which they deal with many of the same issues. While *The Disposessed's* Veia is on the surface similar to *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* Julia, Veia is portrayed as calculating and controlling while Orwell continually downplays Julia's importance and makes her out to be less important and less knowledgeable than the men around her.

Octavia Butler's *Dawn* introduces aliens to the discussion by presenting the Oankali, a strikingly different species of life who have the chance to decide whether humanity will live or die. The Oankali strive for inclusion rather than exclusion and so the humans must choose whether or not to allow themselves to be changed by these strange creatures. In this way the question is raised: what makes us truly human?

Haraway's Manifesto for Cyborgs is critical to this sort of discussion, as she acknowledges that in our highly diverse, highly technological society today everyone is in some way a cyborg, a mix of human, animal, and machine. She helps to introduce the idea that the "other" is not always bad, and she works to break down the strict and demonizing boundaries and distinctions we have constructed.

Chapter three brings the discussion to two of Margaret Atwood's early novels. While *Surfacing* is not a dystopia, it fits into the discourse as it challenges the way that women are disallowed control over their own bodies and simultaneously seen as reproductive machines. *The Handmaid's Tale* shows the emergence of a society where women's bodies are completely commoditized and Offred's attempt to remain in control of her narrative in a society that is constantly trying to turn her into an object. These novels further the discussion by narrowing in on particular examples of individual women and their respective struggles to remain autonomous and maintain control over their bodies and reproductive rights.

In chapter four all of the issues discussed previously are brought together in Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy. This series connects the constructions of personhood with genetically modified organisms/alien life-forms, xenophobia, and the commodification of women's bodies. Atwood clearly shows the various ways that women construct identities and visions of personhood through their actions, even in a world that attributes them with no intrinsic

power. Resembling the Oankali, the Crakers prove themselves capable of moral agency, and so ought to be given the right to hold personhood and a place among human society.

This was a brief look at many major issues in several novels. There is a lot more that could have been discussed if given more space, such as the rest of Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, of which *Dawn* is only the beginning. I could have also spent all my time discussing the various problems that arise when discussing the character of Oryx, as she is only shown to the reader through a lens; it is almost impossible to decide what is truly her opinion and what is simply part of her façade. I also feel that I have not done enough with Orwell and Huxley. The small amount of time I have spent on these novels should not be read as dismissive in any way; they are crucial works in the dystopian field and much has been said about them already, with much more surely to come. Hopefully, this brief look into common themes and issues in feminist dystopias in general and the *Maddaddam* trilogy in particular has been a helpful overview and can lead to much more meaningful discussion on this topic.

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