



# Contesting Subjectivity: A Posthuman Perspective in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of The Flood*

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## Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the anthropocentric position in which human being assumed itself as the forerunner of the civilization and to rest, whether it is nature or any form of life, he believed, as a subject of domination. Feminist school of criticism according to Black feminist Kimberlé W. Crenshaw identifies patriarchy as one of these structures which dehumanizes females on the basis of Intersectionality. The intersectional positions, according to her, divide human beings from one another based on their identity of colour, gender, religion and so on. In this context, the paper studies Margaret Atwood's representation of intersectional positions in the novel, *The Year of the Flood*(2009) where she categorically prompts on the issue of gender politics on one part and on the other she hints upon decoding the politics of subjective identity through the genetically modified Crakers who appears to be giving the reflection of what Donna Haraway calls as 'cyborg'. The Crakers, in the novel, are genetically modified humanoids that indicate human beings as a reflection of engineered machines which gets swiped away by pandemic called "waterless Flood". The paper demystifies idea of identity politics through the concept of 'cyborg myth'. Cyborg myth according to Donna Haraway, terms human as evolutionary form in which, "We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" ("A Cyborg Manifesto" 150). In order to highlight the uncanny politics of identity she takes charge to redefine the social functioning of human beings through the scientific progress in which the construction and reconstruction of human identity is played out.*

## I. INTRODUCTION: CONTESTING SUBJECTIVITY

Margaret Atwood's speculative vision in *The Year of the Flood* deals with post-apocalyptic conditions and the repercussions of anthropocentric politics. The anthropocentric position enables human beings to take control over the all forms of life on the planet earth. It is self assumed position obtained by human species. Rob Brodice says, "Anthropocentrism is expressed either as a charge of human chauvinism.... It is in tension with nature, the environment and non-human animals (as well as non-humans per se)" (Brodice 24). The novel, *The year of the Flood*, contextualises human subjective positions in the time of "Waterless Flood" where human chauvinism is challenged.

The *Flood*, symbolic to the present pandemic COVID-19, is known as "waterless flood" which swipes out the entire human civilization from the planet, leaving few in numbers. The novel begins with, one of the survivors of pandemic Toby, who recounts the events of life before and after the apocalypse. Margaret Atwood's representation of human beings in technological mediated society reflects how human beings represent themselves at the centre and marginalize others living organisms on the planet. The Coronavirus pandemic, originated in Wuhan, China, reminds the reader about the similar situation. The *Flood* not only swipes out human beings from earth but it does help to understand epidemic of subjective positions on which human beings are divided. They are positioned superior and inferior based on their colour, region, religion, race and gender as Crenshaw states, "You've got to show that the kind of discrimination people have conceptualised is limited because they stop their thinking when the discrimination encounters another kind of discrimination" (Crenshaw 23).

Nevertheless, the main thrust of the narrative is gender-oriented, as Atwood herself claims, "What fabrications they are, mothers. Scarecrows, wax dolls for us to stick pins into, crude diagrams. We deny them an existence of their own, we make them up to suit ourselves -- our own hungers, our own wishes, our own deficiencies" (Atwood 93-94). Margaret Atwood in this novel touches upon number of themes like

gender, environment, poetry and speculative fiction, in order to predict the improbable nature of human invasion. The patriarchal structure highlighted in the novel is analysed through Posthuman theory in which the Transhumanistic approach helps to understand the material form of human body. Human life in posthuman age, Hayles's context, can be seen as a form of object where the information is uploaded and downloaded (Hayles 3). They, with the passage of time, have suffered from the politics of dualism and created the politics of centre and margin. Base on differences the human species see themselves above the animals, whites above non-whites, colonizer above the colonized. Rosi Braidotti puts it, "Europe announces itself as the site of origin of critical reason and self-reflexivity, both qualities resting on the Humanistic norm" (*The Posthuman* 15). The dominance of patriarchal structure shows how subjectivity as a dominant position is endorsed to men only. Like an ornament, "Subjectivity", according to Braidotti, "is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and selfregulating ethical behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart" (*The Posthuman* 15). This consciousness granted to male dominated society is a subject of debate in posthuman age..

Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* is a part of her dystopian work *MaddAddam* trilogy in which she provides a glimpse of dystopian world where human beings suffer from man-made conflicts. In this novel she alarms human beings from different conflicts, one of them, appears to be the projection of male dominance. She highlights how women are treated as an object, and the interaction between humans and humanoids, called Crakers indicates the emergence of new age. The Organ Inc compound, where the technocrats lived, shows the meaning of life is not static. The meaning of life is manufactured in Paradise Dome where different organs of human beings are arranged. The paper investigates the structure of oppression of life forms in scientifically mediated society.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on gender and subjective identity has been done widely and in order to give shape to this paper few articles and books have been reviewed. An insight from Adrienne Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" gives an account of 'hetero-normative subjectivity' and highlights how subjective identity is inscribed as cultural construct. The study of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is carried out to understand the politics of subjective norms where woman is situated as an object of performance. The identity given to body "as the product of normative effects" by posthuman feminist, Rosi Braidotti, in her *Pattern of Dissonance: A Study of Women Contemporary Philosophy* (1991) highlights how the subjective identity is inscribed to male. This paper is relevant in present context since it unsettles normative construction of body and contests body as mere programmed application that can be commanded according to the prompt commands.

The present age, particularly 21<sup>st</sup> century, is largely dominated by rapid strides in bioengineering and technology, which problematize the human subjectivity as opined by posthuman critic Cary Wolfe, who on the 'normative notion of subjectivity' argues, "this has serious consequences for how we think about subjectivity, because "technology, in these terms, is the extemporization" (*What is Posthuman* 36). It is an age where human being has shown inevitable dependency on machine and bioengineered products, be it prosthetics, mobile phones or any mode of digital arena, human has shown close connection with it. It is an age where life enhancement through "prosthetization of the animate or the human" is common practice (Wolf 36). The 'subjects' determined by liberal humanism intermingle with 'machine', and as a result witness mixed, hybrid or dispersed identities. In this race of dispersed identities, where human has shown extension of life through machine and other digital mode, the word 'identity' in itself becomes mark of question. Either humans have moved away from the patterns of what posthuman theorist N. Katherine Hayles calls "information" or have deciphered the very 'fabric of identity' within the social structure.

The idea to define *subjectivity* is "male centred" and it is a campaign against what Adrienne Rich calls "unassimilated women" ("Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" 19). To elucidate it further she argues, it[subjectivity] is a "male pursuits as more valuable than female within any culture, so that cultural values become the embodiment of male subjectivity" (Rich19). It is classic philosophical dictum Protagoras advocates claiming, "Man as measure of all things" (Plato 31). Theoretically, this paper, through the lenses of posthuman theory and scientific romanticization of *subjectivity*, employs Donna Haraways 'cyborg myth'.

Though the capacity of human within environment is physical however the embodiment is strictly socio-culturally constructed. As a mark of continuous progress, the evolving nature of human beings refers back to *Homo Sapiens*, as historian Yuval Noah Harari says it:

Humans are the outcome of blind evolutionary processes that operate without goal or purpose. Our actions are not part of some divine cosmic plan, and if planet earth were to blow up tomorrow morning, the universe would probably keep going about its business as usual. As far as we can tell at this point, human subjectivity would not be missed. Hence any meaning that people inscribe to their lives is just a delusion. (*Sapiens* 348)

It is evident that the anthropocentric idea situating human, man in particular, at the centre of all, based on his biological origin, is possible to be unsettled through scientific intrudes in contemporary age. Science, having refused the metaphysical origin of human beings, takes a close look on the biological form of human body which can be illustrated completely opposite to John Milton's idea of giving subjective form to human body. As he states:

I now see

"Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, myself

“Before me: Woman is her name;  
of Man

“Extracted : for this cause he shall  
forego

“Father and mother, and to his  
wife adhere;

“And they shall be one flesh, one  
heart, one soul’. (*Paradise Lost* 240)

### III. UNSETTLING SUBJECTIVE IDENTITY

Theoretically, Donna Haraway, as a posthuman theorist challenges the normative construction of subjectivity in posthuman age. Having attacked the patriarchal structure she states, “Western rationalist philosophy as a flawed system based on dichotomies -paired set of opposite concepts such as White/Black, male/female, and human/machine - that are presented as natural truths but that are in fact fictional oppositions that serve to heighten the status of one term over the other” (Haraway 157). She, having refuted, the political idea which demeans the female with its binary implication, comes with new perspective through her *Cyborg Manifesto*. The ‘cyborg’ represents as hybrid, or mixed, state of being- a more complex ambiguous and fluid identity that can free us from the tyranny of binary oppositions in our political and personal relationships (Haraway 178).

The main idea of this argument is to highlight male dominance over the female as the Margaret Atwood in *The Year of the Flood* reveals. The study of “A Cyborg Manifesto” reveals that science has clear answer for countering the idea which privileges man as supreme of all. It destabilizes the idea which situates women as an object and mere product of cultural practice. In order mark break from this politics, Haraway proposes a well reasoned critique.

Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood* is a dystopian text which advocates scientific practices and as well as addresses the gender issues in the novel. The significant scientific practices in the novel by Gardeners suggest the potential that technology, bioscience, and human genome hold the capacity to free human beings (women in particular) from the ‘subjective

identity’ and move beyond the normative structure. It is evident in the novel that Atwood’s portrayal of gender and sexual identities is focussed on inscribed form of ‘body’ which is produced in laboratory as well as constructed by cultural practiced.

The text reveals that Crake, who is bioengineering scientist, invents humanoids, called Crakers at his Lab known as ‘paradise compound’ to replace human being. For humans, he believes are stuck in the chaos of polluted mind and therefore it is his duty to produce an alternate to replace humans. The bodies produced here are assembled and trained, in order to perform their social mechanism. The body, as physiological structure, reveals its identity through biological genetics (DNA and RNA). Having validated biological origin of body, American Biologist, Richard Dawkins like Darwin takes Charles Darwin’s idea of ‘origin of species’ one step ahead where he unlike Darwin rediscovers ‘selfish’ nature of ‘genes’. The emphasis on ‘gender’, as cultural construct, exercising ‘identity politics’ on females-Toby and Ren, highlights how they are continuously chased, harassed and mentally tortured in the novel. For instance, the dialog between Zeb and Toby illustrates how she has been evaluated based on her gender:

“We’re in deep cover,” said Zeb.  
“You have to act the part!” He winked at her, then reached across her and opened the truck door. “Cut yourself some slack. I bet you used to be a babe until the Gardeners got to you.” Used to be, thinks Toby. That about sums up everything. Nevertheless she was pleased: she hadn’t had a gender-weighted compliment for some time. (Atwood 185)

Blanco as an evil creature, shamelessly and rightfully invaded onto the personal space of women employed in his SecretBurger. As Rebecca Eckler, warns Toby, “Stay off his radar”. “Maybe you will be okay... “Praise the Lord and spit,” said Rebecca. “I’m too black and ugly for him, plus he just likes the kittens, not the old cats. Maybe you should wrinkle yourself up, sweetheart. Knock out a few of your teeth”



(Atwood 35). Two things here spring, one is space of women and other is identity based on race. Toby having escaped from his cage enters into completely opposite rhythm of the life with Gardeners. The notion based on identity of 'gender' which privileges men and demeans women, in the novel *The Year of the Flood* has been analysed within the theoretical premises of posthuman conditions. Donna Haraway, upon freedom of women, argues, "Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension of oppression, and so of possibility" (Haraway 150). To free body from the politics of subjectivity she says, "The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century" (Haraway 150).

The main idea in this paper through polemic "Manifesto," is to contest the 'body' which is biologically formed, navigated, constructed and reconstructed, as Margaret Atwood shows, "HelthWyzer had been sticking a slow acting but incurable gene-spliced disease germ inside their supplements so they could make a lot of money on the treatments" (Atwood 125). The Cyborg, having understood cybernetic organism, a *hybrid* of machine and organism eventually exposes the line of demarcation (Haraway 147). She radically disrupts the idea of 'identity', claiming, "We are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" (Haraway 150).

In contrast, the novel presents women to be capable of defining their existence. When Toby and Ren, realize that there is less possibility for defining their place, the structure situates them to accommodate with the situation. Toby recounts the similar incident that forbids her freedom and closes the door for looking the way outside the Gardeners:

Once I found a beautiful camera phone, lying on the sidewalk. It was muddy and the signal was dead, but I took it home anyway, and the Eves caught me with it. "Don't you know any better?" they said. "Such a thing" can hurt you! It can burn your brain! Don't even

look at it: if you can see it, it can see you. (Atwood 67).

The use of theological narrative gives an understanding of how religion acts as an adaptation without choice. Atwood, here, intends to reflect how the social structure restricts women their freedom.

The continuous construction and reconstruction of body in the age of science as the text indicates that nothing is fixed, since body is biologically assembled out of different components. In the age of technology where the components of body are enhanced through prosthetics and other technological mediums, to dwell upon the socio-cultural construction of subjectivity requires an investigation. Donna Haraway having given solution to deal with this 'identity politics', argues, "unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the Cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate" (Haraway 151).

The incidents in the novel recount several aspects limiting the identity of women. Even after choosing space in *The God's Gardeners*, Toby and Ren are forbidden to follow what identifies them as women. Toby's freedom in the *Gardeners* is evident when Nuala asks her:

"You'll want to grow your hair", said Nuala. "Get rid of that scalped look. We Gardener women all wear our hair long." When Toby asked why, she was given to understand that the aesthetic preference was God's. This kind of smiling, bossy sanctimoniousness was a little too pervasive for Toby, especially among the female members of the sect. (Atwood 46)

As a reaction to normative structure and metaphysics of liberal humanism, Haraway states, "The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (Haraway 151).

The scientific practices following by Gardeners to meet holy secular ends were central to their philosophy:

Our teachers were Nuala for the little kids and the Buds and Blooms Choir and Fabric Recycling, and Rebecca for Culinary Arts, which meant cooking, and Surya for Sewing, and Mugi for Mental Arithmetic, and Pilar for Bees and Mycology, and Toby for Holistic Healing and Plant Remedies, and Burt for Wild and Garden Botanicals, and Philo for Meditation, and Zeb for Predator-Prey Relationships and Animal Camouflage. (Atwood 61)

The narrative, looming “Waterless Flood” visualises Atwood’s additional layers of meaning, impelling the EdenCliff Rooftop habitants to resist compromise with the external world as they believe that their practice fall above the human practices. Haraway argues, “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway 152). The study reveals that with the advent of science and the birth of Cyborg, “the transcendent authorization of interpretation is lost” (Haraway 153). The line of gender with the birth of Cyborg is broken down:

Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism....These are the couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of “Western” identity, of nature and culture, of mirror and eye, slave and master, body and mind. (Haraway 470)

Atwood’s idea defining women’s situation the age of technologically advanced society, thus, fulfils the line of argument Haraway wants to communicate. Cybernetic organism demystifies

the idea of subjectivity in the age of scientific development.

To conclude, Margaret Atwood’s speculative vision focuses on exploring an alternate version of world and resolves to liberate human beings from the identity politics. The paper, thus, highlights that *subjectivity* proposed to male by the patriarch system appears to be fragile notion in the age of science and technology. It is an age where ‘science appears to be new religion, and identity awarded by human beings to body rests upon false implications. It is an age where human body behaves like a machine, it is a time when life span of heart patient is enhance through stent, it is necessity for the existence to answer the human conflicts through alternative means of science. When Donna Haraway says that she would prefer to be ‘cyborg than goddess’ she surpasses all line created by human beings to succumb human identity. Having defined human conditions and their close alliance with internet and mobile phone, it is evident that ‘internet appears to be the modern opium. When human beings have to be more dependent on medicinal antidote rather than praying and following practices religious places, then one has to believe that human beings have been witnessing posthuman conditions. In posthuman age, human has already become machine and therefore to define body as temple appears to be the constructed self to which science provides alternative meaning. Since the ‘body’ of both ‘male and female’ is constructed and reconstructed through scientific and technological components. It is evident that in the age of science like Haraway’s cyborg, humans (male and female) have no such identity of their own rather it is an *assembled* self. Ostensibly, the giant leap towards a technologically mediated society resolves the complication of subjectivity, patriarchy, and normative structure.

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