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Examining Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* as a Cli-Fi: An Effort Towards Survival and Sustainability

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Abstract

'Environmental humanities' is an interdisciplinary field that offers a sound understanding of human-based causes for social, economic, scientific and environmental changes. It helps to understand the intricate relationship between people and the environment they construct. The paper proposes to study Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* as an important contribution to environmental humanities. The study evaluates the text as a 'Climate Fiction' (cli fi) to find ecofriendly ways to co-habit the planet. The novel portrays a post-apocalyptic scenario after the fatal blow caused by an epidemic that nearly wipes out the human race. Two female characters Toby and Ren, locked in a spa centre and a sticky zone, narrate the past and the present. Along with their memories, the text also presents oral hymns told by Adam one, the leader of eco-friendly group of the God's Gardeners. The narrative reveals that Glenn (Crake, the protagonist of *Oryx and Crake*), the top-compound genetic engineer, creates and spreads the pandemic to replace the species with a better version of post humans called Crakers. On a parallel ground the Gardeners who have been active for nearly twenty-five years before the arrival of the epidemic, respond to the sensation of making a positive change by recourse to religion and re-telling of the biblical myths.

Keywords: Cli fi, Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, Survival, Dystopia.

> Our ability to project into the future, imagining alternative lives that lead us to set new goals and work toward new ends, is merely the forward expression of the experience of change we have learned from reflecting on the past. - William Cronon

Humans have drifted far into their own myth of humanity, of a civilized race, that they have set themselves apart from all the other life forms. Things have changed. The

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word 'change' represents transformation in various aspects. It may be adifference in the physical appearance of an individual, variation inculture, morals and the social settings oran alteration in the ecological conditions. A check of where humans have arrived is necessary to study the positives and negatives of their journey of change. The present climate collapse, species collapse and cultural decay need attention and explanation. Climate fiction (hereafter written as cli fi) is such an endeavour in the field of 'environmental humanities,' that offers a sound understanding of the human based causes for the abrupt and abnormal changes in the environmental conditions. It presents an excellent platform to study the intricate relationship between people and the environment they construct. The paper proposes to study Margaret Atwood's novel *The Year of the Flood* as a cli fi. The aim is to focus on sustainability issues by spreading awareness of the unlimited harm done to nature and the posed danger of extinction for humanity as a race. The study intends to focus on possible resolutions that can lead to a promise-filled tomorrow.

Dan Bloom introduced the term cli fiin 2007 to make a 'buzzword' to raise awareness about global warming. It gained mass recognition when Margaret Atwood used the same in a 2012 tweet as she introduced it to her 500,000 followers on the social media (Forthomme). Thereon, this notion of cli fi took hold as publishers and book reviewers began regarding it as a new category. Cli fi truly has come into existence as a modern literary phenomenon: born 'as a meme' and raised into 'a distant genre' by the power of social media (Forthomme). It is interesting to note that, "climate fiction is not the result of a literary 'school' of related authors. No singular influence or unitary 'idea' connects all climate fiction. Climate change itself is a remarkably broad series of phenomena in the nonhuman world, politics, and the media" (Trexler). The fiction often presents bleak visions of the future, but within such frightening prophecies lies the real possibility that it is still not too late to steer in a different direction. Rodge Glass opines that, "…cli-fi writing comes primarily from a place of warning rather than discovery…many of the horrors described seem oddly familiar." The portrayal of apocalyptic world, therefore, is a scheme used to rework the wrong done in the past and avoid the bleak vision in reality; "apocalypse is mainly appropriated as a rhetorical strategy, to make sense of the pointless evil taking place in society and to narrate events that are perceived as senseless and out of control" (Villano 166). In *The Year of the Flood,* Atwood also resorts to this approach. She manifests a dreadful world where the weather is wrong; there is too much or too little rain, it no longer snows, and the heat is blistering. The massive species extinction has reached an extent of involuntary vegetarianism and the few trapped and isolated survivors fight the fear of being the last survivors. 'Pigoons', the enormous malicious beasts sporting human neocortex tissue, and in some cases, multiple human organs intended for harvest roam the streets seeking food-their intelligence, strength, and willingness to eat anything makes them dangerous for their 'creators'.

The novel returns to the dystopian future of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) expanding the scope of the earlier novel. In the words of Atwood, the novel, "is not a sequel, it's not a prequel, it's a meanwhile. It's a simultaneous time span that

goes with *Oryx and Crake*" (Gordon). The book portrays a post-apocalyptic scenario after the fatal blow caused by an epidemic that ends by nearly wiping out the human race. It is a return to familiar Atwood territory; we hear from the women. Two female characters Toby and Ren, locked in a spa center and a sticky zone narrate the past and the present. Along with their memories, the text also presents oral hymns told by Adam one, the leader of eco-friendly group the God's Gardeners. The narrative reveals that Glenn (Crake, the protagonist of *Oryx and Crake*), the top-compound genetic engineer, creates and spreads the pandemic to replace the species with a better version of humans-the post humans called Crakers. On the parallel grounds the Gardeners who have been active for nearly twenty-five years before the arrival of the epidemic, respond to the sensation of making a positive change by adopting a new way of living. They run a little 'green oasis' of health food on the rooftop gardens called Edencliff in secrecy. They also collect wild roots and wild greens, cultivate bees, instruct their children in gleaning, wild survival sewing, mental arithmetic, and holistic healing. Evidently, the author portrays individual and group mentality that adopts various survival strategies with their limited vision to counter the fear of extinction.

Landing in such a world definitely reactivates the flashback. The quest to reason out the disaster sets the mind in a meditative mood. The text explores human journey embedded in inequality and greed leading to "the gaping chasm that has developed between older, so called 'primitive' understanding of the world and our own [new] separatist world view" (Narendra qtd. in Baker). The novel encapsulates the modern worldview that is susceptible to the dangers of bioterrorism, internet terrorism, corrupt corporate security agencies, consumerism, corporate monopoly, income disparity, shady health care and education system-theanomalous foundation of the current socioeconomic society. Atwood conjures up a world to depict the flaws of the so-called 'modern and intelligent generation' that has lost contact with the primitive roots. She portrays a "…complex network of ideas: history, scientific ideas, political discourse, cultural rituals, imaginative leaps, and the matter of everyday life" (Trexler).

The Year of the Flood not only portrays the mess humans have already created but also taps the possible ways to take a U-turn. The indication is not a single restricted road but a set of positive endeavors that rest on the theory of minimum consumption and maximum replenishment. In the novel "scienceis questioned …by recourse to religion and to a re-telling of biblical myths, such as flood. Far from sustaining a naïve counter-scientific argument to solve the problems of the planet, the text poignantly explores the limits of both mysticism and materialism" (Villano 153). Glen and Adam represent two varied ideologies to counter the threat to the sustainability of humans and nature. Their motivation and execution to recreate 'the Garden' differs, but the basic concern for 'betterment' remains the same in both the cases. The former creates a personal Utopia playing God in his 'Paradice'. Adam creates Crakers, the programmed future beings to live in peace with one another and the eco system. They are nature friendly as their excrement supplies nutrition and are devoid of understanding and questioning the basic causes that torment humanity. The latter, however, works on a very different concept. He uses and 'rhetorically' exploits the *Bible* to offer a vision

of life in opposition to consumerism and materiality- he tries to intensify symbolic thinking by creatively adapting biblical myths and metaphors to the current situation of the world:

> A massive die-off of the human race was impending, due to over-population and wickedness, but the Gardeners exempted themselves: they intended to float above the Waterless Flood, with the aid of the food they were stashing away in the hidden storeplaces they called Ararats. As for the flotation devices in which they would ride out this flood, they themselves would be their own Arks, stored with their own collections of inner animals, or at least the names of those animals. Thus they would survive to replenish the Earth. Or something like that. (Atwood 47)

Adam sustains an organization that operates concretely. He warns people about the coming of 'waterless flood' to plant seeds of fear in hearts of his followers- the time-tested method to enablemass attention and support. Let us not forget that this is also the technique used by cli-fi writers irrespective of Atwood. In both the cases, the procedure to revive and return varies, but the ultimate goal is one – survive peacefully on this 'clean' and 'green' planet. It is interesting to note that the author maintains a critical lens on the survival techniques employed by the scientific and the religious ideological commitments. She points out the inherent problems in both the set ups to keep 'on' the search for something better. The novel allows the readers to decide for themselves the extent to which their visions of change are reliant upon the narrative of the catastrophe.

Atwood views that *The Year of the Flood*, "…is a very hopeful book, because right now it's only a book. You can shut the cover and it is still inside there. What you want to do is keep it from getting out of the book and becoming real life" (Gordon). In an effort to do so, "…we need to expand our climate work into a deep adaptation agenda, including resilience, relinquishment and restoration while learning why this tragedy is occurring" (Bendell). Professor Jem Bendell advocates a three steps measure to initiate a process to confront the crisis and restore balance. The first, 'resilience,' means to prepare in advance to endure the approaching calamity. For instance, in the novel the Gardeners resort to special plans to survive the waterless flood. They have secretive places, food collection, surviving devices and stock of rare knowledge to fight the calamity. Therefore, the initial step in the scheme of survival is to tackle the approaching crisis. The next 'relinquishment' demands erasing certain assets, habits and beliefs that helps in intensifying the existing crisis. It is in this regard that Atwood talks about 'set of emotions' or 'a religion'. The relinquishment is a search for a 'new being' or a new belief that is more promising. The God's Gardeners follow their own set of rules to fight consumerism and sustain life. In this context, Atwood remarks, "any religion has its limits that it draws around itself. They pretty much all have special foods, the things that you eat and don't eat. They pretty much all have rules of behaviour: we behave this way, we don't behave that way…they've got dress codes…And therefore my religion is no different, except of course the things that

they consider right to do are a little bit different than other religions might consider to do" (Gordon).

If we compare the available choices of resistance, then, definitely, the Gardeners have adopted a more comprehensible approach. For them 'relinquishment' process includes adopting a modest way of life, "they are vegetarian because of their belief system, and they also grow almost everything they consume. Their entire policy is about reducing their environmental impact and only using what they need at all times…and teach this kind of conservationist lifestyle to their children" (Rowan). The principles of unity, bonding, dedication and family ethics that govern them hold a promise to sustain. This is especially evident at the end as they come together to support each other even after being separated for a long time. Gardeners are a perfect opposite to the corporations who spread the 'poison of materialism'. Atwood conjures up the modern society through these corporations. She explores the result of commodification of science and technology to make profit and the exploitation and abuse of natural resources, animals and the weakest social subjects. The novel interrogates science and its limitations by recourse to religion and to a re-telling of biblical myths. Depicting the divide between the heroes and the villains, the sustainers and the exploiters to restore 'a new balanced way' of life, is Atwood's method of 'relinquishment'.

The 'restoration' demands rediscovering attitudes and approaches to life based on harmony, love, peace and patience. It involves shedding off self-gratification and acknowledging the fact that humans are only a small part of God's creation. The Gardeners are the ones who take-up the role to restore old order and values by taking refuge in the store of indigenous and archaic knowledge. They value life in all forms and make efforts to reduce the harm done by being self-sufficient and nature friendly:

> By covering such barren rooftops with greenery we are doing our small part in the redemption of God's Creation from the decay and sterility that lies all around us, and feeling ourselves with unpolluted food into the bargain. Some would term our efforts futile, but if all were to follow our example, what a change would be wrought on our beloved Planet! Much hard work still lies before us, but fear not, my Friends: for we shall move forward undaunted. (Atwood 11)

The exact role and influence of climate fiction in bringing about a positive change is a debatable issue. Sarah Holding opines that, "Cli-fi advocates restoring equilibrium to our physical environment, making it not just a setting or backdrop to a story, but a story's primary purpose and emotional appeal". There are different views on the authority and the scope of cli fi but one common thing that surfaces is the criticality or the urgency to write about the "sorry state of efforts to address climate change" (Bendell). It is definitely instrumental in raising mass awareness as it "increases debate about the issue; finely constructed, intricate narratives help us broaden our understanding and explore imagined futures, encouraging us to think about the kind of world we want to live in" (Rodge). *The Year of the Flood*, in this regard, passes as an important contribution to the growing pool of cli fi:

> The novel does not design an elsewhere on which to transfer or differ what is unacceptable or unexplainable (such as paradise, the afterlife and so on); on the contrary, it serves the purpose of, on the one hand, encouraging action in this life through activism and political commitment and, on the other, accepting injustice and oppression as consequences of the movements of an on-going fall running parallel to an on-going Creation. (Villano 166-167)

It is reasonable to claim in the end that the novel voices majority of contemporary problems and embodies frightening scenarios of the expected future. Atwood makes use of literary symbols to bring forth the desired message: 'The Garden of Eden'- God's Gardeners turn wastelands into gardens, full of life and promise for a probable bright future; 'The Waterless Flood'- represents the severe punishment for human sins such as murderous virus that spreads as quickly as a 'real' flood. The flood is waterless, an unusual one, but it wipes out most of the humans advocating urgency for change; 'Survival Instinct'-humans are alive as they have an amazing capability to survive in adverse situations. They need the smallest hope and chance to cling and continue the journey of life. Therefore the battle is still not lost and humanity has a definite chance to make a real difference; "We can do both-it takes control, will power and commitment but…it is possible to reconcile the old world and the new-indeed, perhaps we can take a step forward, creating untold stories and new possibilities for ourselves" (Liggett).

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