

A Compact Embodiment of Pluralities and Denial of Origins: Atwood's *The Year of The Flood*

Rana Sağıroğlu

English Language and Literature Department / Ege University

ranasagiroglu@yahoo.com

Abstract

Margaret Atwood, one of the most spectacular authors of postmodern movement, achieved to unite debatable and in demand critical points of 21st century such as science fiction, postmodernism and ecocriticism in the novel *The Year of The Flood* written in 2009. The novel could be regarded as an ecocritical manifesto and a dystopic mirror against today's degenerated world, tending to a superficial base to keep the already order in use, by moving away from the fundamental solution of all humanity: nature. Although Atwood does not want her works to be called science fiction, it is obvious that science fiction plays an introductory role and gives the novel a ground explaining all 'why' questions of the novel. However, Atwood is not unjust while claiming that her works are not science fiction because of the inevitable rapid change of 21st century world becoming addicted to technology, especially Internet. It is easily observed by the reader that what she fictionalises throughout the novel is quite close to possibility, and the world may witness in the near future what she creates in the novel as science fiction. Additionally, postmodernism serves to the novel as the answerer of 'how' questions: How the world embraces pluralities, how heterogeneous social order is needed, and how impossible to run the world by dichotomies of patriarchal social order anymore. And lastly, ecocriticism gives the answers of 'why' questions of the novel: Why humanity is in chaos, why humanity has organized the world according to its own needs as if there were no living creatures apart from humanity. Therefore, *The Year of The Flood* meets the reader as a compact embodiment of science fiction, postmodernism and ecocriticism not only with its theme, but also with its narrative techniques.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, The Year of the Flood, science fiction, postmodernism, ecocriticism.

Introduction

Literature is the widest field which one can observe all the changes in the world because whatever the changes are, all of them are touched by human hands. So, if literature is the life and literary works are human products, it is inevitable for literature not to be influenced by the changes of every day. Especially in the 21st century, the members of societies cannot cope up with the changes about the world because of rapid technological advantages which become disadvantages unexpectedly. The world is gradually dragging into complexity, chaos and disorder although technological developments are devoted to the goodness of humanity. For example, if Albert Einstein had known that he provided a basis via splitting the atom theory causing terrible nuclear wars, would Albert Einstein have done it? Science brings many opportunities for the sake of humanity, but the results are not estimated mostly. For that reason, perception of reality changes day by day and no truth is accepted as invariable. At one time, science was one of the most dogmatic issues for people like religion, but the more it causes various and unwelcome events, the more its unbreakable frame exudes. People become anxious and frightened about technological developments rather than trust it outrightly. Scientific and technological developments for 21st century people are not something hopeful and reliable, so it is right to say that science and technology are just like Turkish police officers that creates anxiety, fear and insecurity nowadays.

As a 21st century author, Margaret Atwood wrote *The Year of The Flood* in 2009 by condensing on anxieties of 21st century people and contemporary changes resulting from technology and science. The second book of a trilogy, *The Year of The*

Flood introduces an ecocritical manifesto that reflects a dystopic mirror of the current world which is gradually afflicted by the effects of technology. The novel achieves to compound science fiction reversing the reality notion creating a non-existing world order with postmodern narrative techniques and its multiple reality approach, and suggests an ecocritical way of life as the salvation of mankind. It is possible to say that science fiction gives an answer to *what* will happen in the world if we continue to misuse technology and science, postmodernism displays *how* the world and its values are heterogeneous, plural, multiple and open to differences without any objective standards of belief – as Atwood tries to show it with her narrative technique –, and ecocriticism comes as an answer of the question *why* humanity is at chaos' foot, because what human beings call 'we' is crammed full of people as if there was no creature in the world out of us. Humanity cannot reach peace and safety as long as we are trapped in our anthropocentric habits. For all these reasons, the aim of this study is to construe that how *The Year of The Flood* unfolds science fiction, postmodernism and ecocriticism in itself.

However, Margaret Atwood doesn't want any of her books to be called science fiction. In her recent, brilliant essay collection, *Moving Targets*, she says that everything that happens in her novels is possible and may even have already happened, so they can't be science fiction, which is 'fiction in which things happen that are not possible today' (K Le Guin, 2009), it is appropriate to start with how science fiction is included in the novel because scientific developments carries the quality of reason and functions as an introductory phase to what follows the other developments throughout the work. Science fiction is a problematic concept of perception dealing with how the world might change, for that reason there is a clash of the ideas between the author and the critics as well as the readers. "Can sf, as a set of cognitions which differ from the world, exist in a world which takes on the colouring of our thought? What now is figure, what now is ground? What now is difference, what now is mission statement?" (Clute, 2003, p. 68). Sometimes one cannot distinguish the division between science fiction and what is perceived as possible because rapid technological changes and Internet invasion on each field of human life makes it inevitable to classify the possibilities and impossibilities. However, as the members of the postmodern world and the readers of a postmodern novel, we must kill the author, leave Atwood's personal opinions aside, and try to catch how science fiction takes place in *The Year of The Flood*.

First of all, Atwood creates the characters and places in the novel via science fiction. The God's Gardeners, founded by Adam One describing themselves as a plural Noah feeling the symptoms of the disaster (the waterless flood), is a nature oriented religious sect growing vegetables and bees, which Toby delivers the news to them every morning on the rooftops. They try to cure anthropocentric damages in the universe by trying to live in harmony with nature, and live in a simplest and quite literally life style. They never eat meat, and feed with organic plants. "The Gardeners...they hated the idea of putting either plastic animals or animal bristles inside their mouths" (Atwood, 2009, p. 256). Also, they challenge today's most important values such as money: "Money was old-fashioned...and the Gardeners wouldn't take virtual money because they didn't allow computers" (p. 245). No one can think of a world without money and computers in 21st century because both are the productions of humanity, but they cause disasters in the world. Reversing the roles of money and computers, and even sex because they describe sex as an action of production, in the Gardeners' world, Atwood makes her reader imagine a world without money, technology and meat, and it is one of the best science fiction challenges of her in the novel. Both archaic and futuristic, the God's Gardeners achieves to create the notion of not unreal but hyperreal for the contemporary reader. As the postmodern heroes of science fiction, the Gardeners "interrogates the mechanisms by which this world comes into being...and science fiction...produce[s] an ontological perspectivism of difference" (Jorgensen, 2009, p. 283) between the world we live and the possible world they live in. In addition to the Gardeners, there are some communities belonging to Exfernal World such as the CorpSeCorps serving as a security force which symbolizes the patriarchal social order and the Compounds working with latest technologies such as Helthwyzer (which may remind the reader the drug company Pfizer) and AnooYoo where Toby gets a new identity to escape from Blanco, the head of SecretBurgers. As a need of science fiction, Atwood puts stereotyped concepts aside and searches for the new ones by the help of these communities. Thus, she intermingles the places "by rejecting the notion of unitary" (Csicsery-Ronay, 2005, p. 55) in the novel.

The second science fictional feature in the novel is genetic manipulation. Scientists work on gene-spliced life forms via DNA infusion and splice animals to make a lion-lamb (liobam) and racoon-skunk (rakunk) combinations. Another example of genetic manipulation is the different coloured, naked people who are the creation of Glenn, eating only green things, and the men have blue penises during erection phase. They accept Glenn as God. They are "Glenn's made-on-purpose people" (Atwood, 2009, p. 490). Also, the Corps makes a new kind of hybrid bees that "micro-mechanical systems are inserted to them... it is a bee cyborg spy controllable by a CorpSeCorps operator, equipped to transmit, and thus to betray" (p. 329) which is equal to cyborg notion in science fiction: "A cyborg represents a melding of the natural and the technological, an

artificial construct that does not occur spontaneously as the result of genetic evolution or sexual reproduction, yet contains natural elements” (P. D. Murphy, 2009, p. 374). The CorpSeCorps’ people follow closely scientific developments and get advantages of technology for the sake of their community by creating cyborg bees as a mixture of nature and technology. Thus, Atwood reveals the unexpected results of technology on humanity by both frightening and thrilling the reader about cyborg creation. Also, Toby enters in the process of transformation after she escapes from Blanco, and she changes her appearance to disguise herself: “...Zeb picked her up. He drove her to a clinic at the back of a Mo’Hair franchise outlet. ‘We’re doing hair and skin’, he said. ‘You’re going dark. And the fingerprints, and the voice print...Higher voice or lower?’ he asked her” (Atwood, 2009, p. 311). Not only bees, but also one of the God’s Gardeners, Eve Six, Toby transforms into a kind of cyborg called ‘Tobiatha’. It is appropriate to call her ‘cyborg’ because she becomes a product of both nature as a human being, and all the features stay same apart from her appearance and voice although she has difficulty to get used to her new outlook and identity, and a piece of technology by undergoing operations and changing her natural core. Also, the use of solar cars, solar bikes and the favourite beverage of the Gardener’s Happicuppa are produced with the same technique: combining nature and technology.

Thirdly, one of the features which makes the novel science fiction is the title of the book. When the reader comes across with *The Year of The Flood* title, s/he expects an aquatic flood intrinsically because the flood becomes only with water in the world. However, Atwood uses her wit shockingly and creates a ‘Waterless Flood’ which means a pandemic sickness rushing through the Gardener’s world. It is strange to the reader because it breaks down the universal consensus on how a flood occurs. As Darren Jorgensen (2009) argues “science fiction...focuses on the encounter with the alien, the strange, and the new” (p. 283). So, it can be claimed that Margaret Atwood reverses the reader’s norms which are accepted as normal and without any alternatives and makes the reader question of his/her opaque zones in the normalizing and accepting process of the events, issues, notions, etc.

Fourthly and lastly, what makes *The Year of The Flood* science fiction is its creation of a dystopia. Dystopias may be regarded as negative utopias which represents non-existent societies worse than the society in which the reader lives. It focuses on the terror of future rather than hopes and “quasi-religious rituals are prominent” (G. J. Murphy, 2009, p. 473) just like the Gardeners’ feast days in the novel. Also, Moylan argues that after the 20th century, dystopia authors tend to take care of environmental wellness and propose solutions for the current system: “they go on to explore ways to change the present system so that ...culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to move toward creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self-determination and ecological health rather than one constricted by narrow and destructive logic of a system” (qtd. in G. J. Murphy, 2009, p. 475). It is clearly inferred that *The Year of The Flood* is a total dystopia that cares for ecological enrichment and presents a hopeless future for people because it tries to tell that dystopias will be human’s terrible end unless they do not escape from their anthropocentric egoism.

As it is mentioned before science fiction serves as a ‘cause’ to the developments in the novel. It is appropriate to combine this introductory phase to its development part. The question ‘why’ is explained, and it’s the turn of ‘how’ question because if we are to ask how Atwood develops and carries forward the novel, the answer will come from postmodernism. If we are to consider postmodernism within literature, it is a movement that denies any objective standards of belief and rejects all generalizations accepted as the ultimate truth. “This is the fragmentation of truth and rationality that is distinctive of postmodernism” (Luntley, 1995, p. 12). As it is understood from Luntley’s quotation that postmodernism infracts the rules of normal, usual, dogmatic and canonical in literature, it plays with reality notion of the reader. The postmodernist author displaces what is accepted as real with hyperreal “because one thing has made it possible: technology” (Sheehan 2004, p. 31). What Margaret Atwood tries to do is to change the reality perception and present a variable list of alternatives for it in *The Year of The Flood*.

First of all, the most remarkable postmodern attempt of Atwood is the choice of narrator. The novel is narrated by the two characters of the Gardeners: Ren and Toby who will escape from the Waterless Flood at the end of the novel. What is more, the chapters told by Toby’s point of view are narrated with 3rd person narrator while the chapters told by Ren’s point of view are narrated with 1st person narrator. Also, the feast day narrations are put immediately at the end of some chapters — or let’s think in a postmodern way, at the beginning of some chapters — without any narrator. Thus, Atwood collapses the classical use of narrator taking the plot at the beginning and carrying it to the ending in a literary work. She multiplies points of view while developing the plot and brings the reader variety of perspective. It is right to say that Atwood subverts the homogeneous identity of novel writing. In postmodern literary works just like *The Year of The Flood*, “[n]arrators in

fiction become either disconcertingly multiple and hard to locate or resolutely provisional and limited – often undermining their own seeming omniscience” (Hutcheon, 1998, p. 11).

The second postmodern attempt of the novel is the break and fluidity of time. It is clearly seen that the novel presents the ending, the *Waterless Flood* days at the very beginning of the novel and develops the plot by going back before when the *Waterless Flood* has not started yet. Thus, Atwood repeats the traditional understanding of introduction, development and conclusion triangle and creates transitivity in time and space. “To move from difference and heterogeneity to discontinuity is a link that at least the rhetoric of rupture has readily made in the light of the contradictions and challenges of postmodernism. Narrative continuity is threatened, is both used and abused, inscribed and subverted” (Hutcheon, 1998, p. 59). As a postmodern sample of novel genre, *The Year of The Flood* denies the uniqueness, totality and categorization of narrative techniques. She achieves to maintain the thought of multiplicity, provisionality and plurality of postmodernism by avoiding the difference between binary oppositions.

Thirdly, Margaret Atwood allows parody of the Bible full play in the novel. “Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies...it has been seen by postmodern artists as a liberating challenge to a definition of subjectivity and creativity that has for too long ignored the role of history in art and thought” (Hutcheon, 1998, p. 11). The Gardeners compose a religious sect ruled by Adam One, and is consisted of Adams and Eves. Toby’s being Eve Six means that she becomes one of the most important members of the Gardeners. The hymns read by the Gardeners after the feast days are taken from ‘The God’s Gardeners Oral Hymnbook’, which reminds the Bible to the reader. It can be said that all of these religious references are a kind of pastiche to Christianity. Moreover, the feast days are celebrated for the sake of nature and the hymns appreciates the power and beauty of nature. So, it is appropriate to say that the feast days of the Gardeners is the parody of Dionysia, the pagan celebration of vine cultivation, led by the God of the grape harvest Dionysus, in Greek mythology. In addition, Atwood makes allusion to one of the modernist fiction sample *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf while talking about Toby’s rented room: “She rented a tiny room... A room of her own...” (p. 36). As a postmodernist fiction sample, *The Year of The Flood* “seems to show that we cannot entirely do without old systems of weights and measures, as we attempt to take readings of a world that has gone off the scale” (Connor, 2004, p. 79).

Fourthly, what Atwood presents as a postmodern matter is the multiplicity of realities. From this point of view, one can claim that there is no ultimate reality in the novel, and it is a must for us to accept multiple realities. It is the natural way of a postmodern text to have multiple meanings, characters and styles. For example, Glenn thinks that he uses technology, manipulates genes of people for the sake of human goodness, but the Gardeners try to get away from technology and scientific developments. As Brand Nicol (2009) asserts that “postmodernism...is double or contradictory, that is comfortable with doing two opposing things at the same time or representing both sides of an argument at once. Its approach is summed up by the linguistic conjunction ‘both...and’ rather than ‘either...or’” (p. 16). What Atwood tries to do throughout the novel is to unfold both (or more) sides of the coin rather than compelling the reader to choose one of the realities.

Up to now, how science fiction as the answer of ‘why’ and postmodernism of ‘how’ formed *The Year The Flood* is construed. However, the essential kernel of the novel is set off by its being an ecocritical manifesto. Anything that deals with the relationship between human and non-human may be accepted as ecocritical. “[R]econsideration of the idea of ‘the human’ is a key task for ecocriticism, tending to drag it away from pastoral and nature writing towards postmodern concerns such as globalization and ‘cyborg’ interfaces of humans with technology” (Garrard, 2004, p. 15). That is why; *The Year of The Flood* whose each sentence calls for ecological health and displaces all kinds of anthropocentric ideas and actions is a blatant ecocritical manifesto from top to toe.

Firstly, Margaret Atwood postulates the dramatic end of humans resulting from their anthropocentric egoism via apocalyptic imagination. According to Garrard (2004), apocalypse is “a genre out of crisis” (86) stemming from the reciprocity of humans and non-humans. Atwood (2009) clearly displays how humans fall occurred and continues to occur in a single paragraph in the novel:

“...the fall of Man was a multidimensional. The ancestral primates fell out of the trees; then they fell from vegetarianism into meat-eating. Then they fell from instinct into reason, and thus into technology; from simple signals to complex grammar, and thus into humanity; from firelessness into fire, and thence into weaponry; and from seasonal mating into an incessant

sexual twitching. Then they fell from a joyous life in the moment into the anxious contemplation of the vanished past and distant future" (p. 224).

As it is clear from the paragraph, did not all the tragedies, wars, illnesses, catastrophes and extinctions result from the first fall from the nature's bosom?

Secondly, Atwood mentions the importance of recycling for the continuation of all kinds of lives in the novel. Apocalyptic thought teaches that humans should not resolve the problems for only their sake because the planet will go on to exist after us. For that reason, the Gardeners recycle the things they use, even the diaries and red hearts drawn on it, and probably Atwood (2009) suggests the reader recycling all the inorganic things for the sake of the planet and not to contribute to apocalyptic future of humanity: "I took the diary down the street and around the corner and shoved it into a garboil dumpster. It would turn into oil and then all those red harts I'd drawn would go up in smoke, but at least they would be useful along that way" (p. 272). Another example of recycling comes with the meeting of Bernice and Ren: "...she said there was this organic mix in a recyclable carton made of pressed kudzu leaves..." (p. 343). Ecocritics, just like Margaret Atwood, are of the opinion that human has misinterpreted science up to now, for that reason every action of a human gives damage to nature. Human has to learn how to live by cooperating and coexisting with nature, so Atwood wants the reader to 'recycle' anything superficial, at least. According to William Rueckert (1996), "there is a reciprocal interdependence of one life process upon another, and there is a mutual interconnected development of all of the earth's life systems" (p. 112). *The Year of The Flood* is a kind of warning to all humanity urging them how to live and appreciate the other living and non-living things which constitutes parts of the universe. If not, connected with science fiction, apocalypse grounded in the idea of catastrophe will have brought the tragic fall of human.

Thirdly, one can assume from the development and the end of the events that *The Year of The Flood* is not only an ecocritical manifesto, but also it raises as an ecofeminist idea. It is accepted that ecocriticism shares a common point with feminist and gender critics focusing on social constructions such as gender, class, race, etc. So, ecofeminism focuses on the policies on gender; it is ecological because it points to valuing and preserving ecosystems. Also, it helps to change the concept of otherness dividing it from pejorative hierarchical scale. In the novel, Toby and Ren are the ones who achieve to survive from pandemic. Toby as one of the two main female characters tries to escape from her boss Blanco, who behaves her as a sex machine. Ren, the second female survivor of the novel as a dancer at a local sex club called Scales and Tails. By putting these two female ones into the target point of sexual gaze, Atwood tries to collapse the seducing woman image aimed at female body. She assigns a duty to them: to survive and promulgate the God's Gardeners ideas and actions for the sake of the whole planet. So, the novel blatantly displays "the reality of women's bodies – as well as the lived experience of all gendered bodies in the natural world – are inscribed deepens our understanding of how literature intersects with life itself" (Oppermann, 2013, p. 32). One of the feast days, in an Adam One speech, the respect of the Gardeners to each other is given in an ironic way adverting to gender roles as social constructions: "we are not Chimpanzees: our females do not bite rival females, our males do not jump and down on our females and hit them with branches" (Atwood, 2009, p. 191). As an ecofeminist text, the novel resists to all kinds of polarization and seperation because they are the production of anthropocentric concerns. Atwood, as an ecofeminist author demands an absolute coherence by regarding "similarity and difference in the human-nature continuum" (Garrard, 2004, p. 25) and points to environmental justice.

In conclusion, written by one of the most impressive authors of the contemporary era, *The Year of The Flood* achieves to draw a framework including several kinds of literary feature. The Year of The Flood unifies three main different kinds of literary aspects science fiction, postmodernism and ecocriticism with their subtitles constituting a rhizomatic content. Showing science and technology used for anthropocentric aims as the cause of all catastrophes, the novel constitutes its introductory part and finds the answer of 'why' question via science fiction. Then, composed by postmodern technique, it gives a kind of development to the work and all the postmodern attempts correspond to 'how' question examining the plurality, multiplicity and the unity of differences, and it gives a kind of salvation and suggests ecocritical ways in all parts of life as a conclusion. If human does not cope up with his/her self-oriented, anthropocentric attitudes, does not change the meaning of 'we' and add all non-human lives in this concept, and try to accept nature as a social construct, its end will be nothing but a catastrophe. While crammed with such egoistic attitudes, human has no right to imagine deserving another world which will be presented to their own will and use:

"Do we deserve this Love by which God maintains our Cosmos? Do we deserve it as a species? We have taken the World given to us and carelessly destroyed its fabric and its Creatures. Other religions have thought that this World is to rolled up

like a scroll and burnt to nothingness, and that a new Heaven and a new Earth will then appear. But why would God give us another Earth when we have mistreated this one so badly?" (Atwood, 2009, p. 508).

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