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## Margret Atwood Her Poetry and Vision - An Overview

<sup>1</sup>Shahzoor Khan, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Ravinder Kumar

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Desh Bhagat University Chandigarh

<sup>2</sup>Desh Bhagat University Chandigarh

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### ABSTRACT

Regarded as one of Canada's finest living writers, Margaret Atwood is a poet, novelist, story writer, essayist, and environmental activist. Her books have received critical acclaim in the United States, Europe, and her native Canada, and she has received numerous literary awards, including the Booker Prize, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Governor General's Award, twice. Atwood's critical popularity is matched by her popularity with readers; her books are regularly bestsellers and her novels have been adapted into popular movies and television series.

**Key Words:** - Feminism, Complex Relationships, Humanism, Behavior

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### Introduction

Margaret Atwood is an immensely influential writer in contemporary times. She is consistently active in the literary world through her writings and activism. Since 1966, from the publication of *The Circle Game*, her academic writing has never ceased. In 2019, she published *The Testaments*, a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). For this fiction, she has received the Booker Prize for 2019, jointly with Bernardine Evaristo, a British author and academician (for the novel *Girl, Woman, Other*). Her writings cover various genres from poetry to literary and cultural criticism, novels, short stories, and radio-television script. Her books have received international acclaim and popularity. Linda Hutcheon notes that Atwood has an "impact on Canadian culture," and the fact that her books are "internationally known through translations stand as testimony to Atwood's significant position" in contemporary Canadian literature (64). Atwood's writing has shown an affinity to the natural world, involving humans in a complex web of relationships. "From her earliest writing," David Staines affirms, "she was determined to be a lens focusing outwards on the world around her" (15). This study focuses on the eco critical implications in Atwood's selected novels and poems to explore the environmental concerns depicted in them. She has dealt with various dimensions of the human-nature relationship in these two genres. The study will interpret them, drawing on the insights and precision of various concepts relating to eco criticism. First, this study will discuss eco criticism as a perspective for analyzing the select works focusing on its origin, history, development, and relevance. Secondly, the study will explore and identify the eco critical concerns delineated in Margaret Atwood's selected novels and poems.

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### Margaret Atwood: Her Works and Vision

Margaret Atwood is primarily known as a Canadian nationalist, a feminist, and a gothic writer. However, due to the vast body of creative writings, enormity of themes, satirical visions, and straddling viewpoints, her works transgress this rigid categorization more often than not. Lothar Hönninghausen asserts: Atwood work has been categorized and subdivided into so many styles and phases, in which she supposedly was a Canadian nationalist, literary lobbyist, liberal parodist, Amnesty International Activist, or changed back and forth from poet to prose writer. However, Atwood appears reluctant to accept these labels and ideologies to contextualize her works. Readings of her interviews and articles display her reluctance to such categorization of writers based on any social or political motives and agenda. She distrusts such efforts on the part of interviewers, who, in her opinion, make a —great attempt to get you to say something about an issue and then make you into an exponent, spokeswoman or theorist of the same. Further, she believes that no good writer wants to be merely a transmitter of someone else's ideology, no matter how acceptable that doctrine may be. She differentiates between the aims of propaganda and creative writing. In her view, propaganda aims —to convince and spur people to action and writing purposes "to create a plausible and moving imaginative world. Additionally, Atwood does not deny the existence of these issues in her works. Writers, she maintains, are observers of society who live in a specific political, economic, and social context and translate social and political forms into literary forms Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson in *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood* notes: "Atwood maintains her stance that literature and political tracts are separate. At the same time, though, Atwood recognizes that a writer cannot help but be part of her historical time". In the period of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, she has often laid claim to her autonomy as a writer by defying the feminist label often associated with her (Atwood, —On Being). These instances reveal that Atwood is suspicious about fixed theoretical frameworks. But at the same time, a writer's work cannot be a free floating object; it is bound to have some context. In the —Introduction to the *Second Words*, Atwood addresses this conflict: When you begin to write you're in love with the language, the act of creation, with yourself partly; but as you go on, the writing—if you follow it—will take you places you never intended to go and

show you things you would never otherwise have seen. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me.

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### Rationale of Selection

Eco critical approach to literary texts has drawn the attention of a large number of scholars in recent times. It is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature and environment. Scholars/researchers have interpreted the texts that illustrate environmental concerns, and have made efforts to explore the ways literature treats nature. Some of Margaret Atwood's works have also time and again been interpreted from eco critical perspective. However, there have not been concerted efforts to study her works comprehensively from this approach. Atwood has delineated the socioeconomic-cultural and political dimensions linked to the environment that have threatened the survival of humanity. This research is therefore a meticulous study of eco centric perspective to the works of Atwood. Earlier researchers have not comprehensively applied the eco critical conceptual framework to Atwood's novels and poems. In her multiple interviews and social media accounts, Atwood has raised her voice against climate change and its effect on the earth and humanity. Through her novels and poetry, she has dealt with various aspects related to global environmental problems. The thesis therefore problematizes the environmental discourses in her novels and poetry, based on the broad discursive field of Eco criticism. Most eco critical works share a common motivation to connect to the environment. Eco critical approach looks at all direct or indirect forms of human nature relationship. Human race has reached the stage of environmental limits when the consequences of human actions damage the planet's life support systems. This awareness sparks the desire to contribute to ecological protection. Such an understanding of the crisis requires undertaking ethical stands in social and cultural contexts. The following works of Atwood have been selected for exploring her ecological concerns and vision. Novels:

MaddAddam Trilogy:

*Oryx and Crake* (2003) *The Year of the Flood* (2009)

*MaddAddam* (2013)

*Poetry Volumes: The Circle Game* (1966)

*Animals in That Country* (1968)

*The Journal of Susanna Moodie* (1970)

*The Door* (2007)

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### An Introduction to the Selected Poetry Volumes :

The Journals of Susanna Moodie is a 'fictive reconstruction(s)' (Vevaina 97) of the history, life, and experiences of Susanna Moodie (1803-1885), who was a poet, essayist, and writer of children's tales. The source material for reconstructing the historical Mrs Moodie in Atwood's book of poetry is the two autobiographical works by the real Mrs Moodie on the pioneer immigrant experience as recorded in *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* (1853) (Hatch 187). However, Atwood's work is not mere literary reproduction of Mrs Moodie's books. Coomi S. Vevaina regards Atwood as 'a visionary writer' and contends. Atwood's 1995 book of poetry, *Morning in the Burned House*, "reflects a period in Atwood's life when time seems to be running out," observed John Bemrose in *Maclean's*. Noting that many of the poems address grief and loss, particularly in relationship to her father's death and a realization of her own mortality, Bemrose added that the book "moves even more deeply into survival territory." Bemrose further suggested that in this book, Atwood allows the readers greater latitude in interpretation than in her earlier verse: "Atwood uses grief ... to break away from that airless poetry and into a new freedom." A selection of Atwood's poems was released as *Eating Fire: Selected Poems 1965-1995* in 1998. Showing the arc of Atwood's poetics, the volume was praised by *Scotland on Sunday* for its "lean, symbolic, thoroughly Atwoodesque prose honed into elegant columns." Atwood's 2007 collection, *The Door*, was her first new volume of poems in a decade. Reviewing the book for the *Guardian*, the noted literary critic Jay Parini maintained that Atwood's "northern" poetic climate is fully on view, "full of wintry scenes, harsh autumnal rain, splintered lives, and awkward relationships. Against this landscape, she draws figures of herself." Parini found Atwood using irony, the conventions of confessional verse, political attitudes and gestures, as well as moments of *ars poetica* throughout the collection. "There is a pleasing consistency in these poems," he wrote "which are always written in a fluent free verse, in robust, clear language. Atwood's wit and humour are pervasive, and few of the poems end without an ironic twang."

Atwood's interest in female experience also emerges clearly in her novels, particularly in *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Life before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Even later novels such as *The Robber Bride* (1993) and *Alias Grace* (1996) feature female characters defined by their intelligence and complexity. By far Atwood's most famous early novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* also presages her later trilogy of scientific dystopia and environmental disaster *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). Rather than "science fiction," Atwood uses the term "speculative fiction" to describe her project in these novels. *The Handmaid's Tale* is dominated by an unforgiving view of patriarchy and its legacies. As Barbara Holliday wrote in the *Detroit Free Press*, Atwood "has been concerned in her fiction with the painful psychic warfare between men and women. In *The Handmaid's Tale* ... she casts subtly aside, exposing woman's primal fear of being used and helpless." Atwood, however, believes that her vision is not far from reality. Speaking to Battiatia, Atwood noted that "*The Handmaid's Tale* does not depend upon hypothetical scenarios, omens, or straws in the wind, but upon documented occurrences and public pronouncements; all matters of record."

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## Summary of Findings

In the preceding chapters we have formulated the hypothesis, outlined the conceptual framework and then discussed select novels and poems of Margaret Atwood drawing on specific theoretical insights and precision such as environmental apocalypse, deep ecology and Anthropocene. In course of our discussion, we have been able to find certain new areas of meaning which may be useful for future reference. It is therefore necessary to write a brief summary of what we have done in the previous chapters. Ecocriticism's primary concern is studying and analysing the representation of environmental issues in various literary texts and cultural forms. Time and again, literary theorists and writers have valued literary imaginations and representations due to their relevance in real life and other cultural contexts. They have emphasised that scientific knowledge of things is insufficient; further, they optimistically regard literary representation as "capable of saving us" and as an immaculate "possible means of overcoming chaos" (Richards 82–83). Well-known ecocritic Jonathan Bate has made a contentious assertion in his book *The Song of the Earth* (2000) that "poetry is the place where we save the earth" (283). However, his belief in the capacity of literary representations and imagination tend to neglect the complexity and immensity of environmental problems. Ecocritical interpretations are intended to create ecological awareness that may lead to activism and political change for resolving ecological issues. Nonetheless, most ecocritical studies tend to overestimate the capacity of literary imagination in coping with environmental problems. They tend to ignore that "pragmatic action is seldom driven by" literary criticism and Humanities, as scholars associated with it rarely have the administrative powers to influence or "impact on climate policy" (Tomlinson 19). However, the role of literary imagination is very significant for apocalyptic environmental writings and ecocritical studies. They significantly draw on the conclusion that "the roots of the ecological crisis are to be found in a failure of the imagination" (Bergthaller 730), and literary studies and human imagination—have an important role to play in understanding and overcoming this crisis" (730). Thus, the ecocritical theory focuses on analysing selected texts' environmental representations and imaginations. Margaret Atwood's environmental implications in her *MaddAddam* Trilogy is manifested by the foregrounding of apocalyptic environmental tradition. The first two novels of the trilogy depict two dialectic environmental apocalyptic imaginations. Further, Atwood's satirical portrayal undermines the superiority and human exceptionalism inherent in these apocalyptic imaginations and environmental worldviews.

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