

# Ecofeminism in the Select Novels of Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison

Mrs.S.N.SINDHU  
Research Scholar  
Reg No: 8016  
Scott Christian College (Autonomous)  
Nagercoil  
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University  
Tirunelveli

## Abstract:

This paper focuses on the ecofeminism adopted by Margaret Atwood in her novel *The Hand Maid's Tale* and Toni Morrison in her novel *Tar Baby*. The novels of Atwood deal with environmental crisis as well as the oppression of women in a male dominated society. Morrison adopts ecofeminism in her novels to impart a healthy relationship between women and nature for a harmonious living on this earth. Atwood discusses the male control over female reproduction in her novel. Woman and nature are equated as both are life-giving. Atwood echoes the call for an unprejudiced society, where rights of women and the laws of nature may be well protected. The conflict between nature and civilization runs throughout Morrison's novel. Morrison wants the eco-conscious people to protect the nature and native culture.

Ecofeminism reflects an affinity between the oppression of nature and subjugation of women in history. The word 'Ecofeminism' is coined by the French feminist, Françoise D Eaubonne in 1974. Ecofeminists argue that civilized people consider nature and women as mechanical object that could be manipulated and controlled. On the other hand, for native people, both women and nature are considered to be sacred. Margaret Atwood developed an ecological consciousness and an awareness of oneness between humans and the environment. Toni Morrison adopts eco-feminism to impart a healthy relationship with women and nature for a harmonious living on this earth.

Margaret Atwood is an innovative writer, who has substantially contributed to the growth of women's writing. Most of her novels have female characters as protagonists, dealing with the problems of women. Her novels deal with environmental crisis as well as the oppression of women in a male dominated society. Margaret Atwood presents her women characters as victims of male

domination and oppression, and they try to attain freedom, equality and fulfillment by getting close to nature.

Toni Morrison is an American novelist, editor and professor. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly detailed characters. Her novel, *Tar Baby* is the story of the love affair between a beautiful black model of white culture, and a black man, who represents everything she fears and desires. The conflict between nature and civilization runs throughout *Tar Baby*. The main theme in the novel is the development of cultural inauthenticity in the lives of black people. The protagonists are all closely linked with nature and so they steer the alienated people towards eco-consciousness. The ego-conscious characters remain in the state of cultural orphans till the end and the eco-conscious characters of the novel merge in harmony with nature.

In the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood describes how the situation of environmental pollution affects women more than men. The failures to reproduce is traced to the availability of birth control of various kinds, including abortion. Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities are on the increase, and this has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents and leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal. The great decline in population in Gilead results from the use of reproduction controlling techniques, due to sexually transmitted diseases and ecological contamination.

Women are the worst victims in Gilead. They are not allowed employment and are assigned only one function, that is reproduction. Women are sent as handmaids to the childless Commanders to continue their progeny. If the hand maid is unable to produce a child within a term of six years, she is designated as 'Unwoman' and she is sent to the colonies to clean the poisonous wastes. On the other hand, if the handmaid is lucky enough to beget a child, she is then transferred to the next Commander after giving her child to the earlier Commander and her wife. Hence, woman is no less an object of public interest in Gilead.

Woman and nature are equated as both are life-giving. In patriarchal Gileadean society, woman is similar to an object and is denied of any power of feeling and individualism. The handmaids are deprived of their names and they suffer identity crisis. They are named after the Commander with whom they have to be impregnated. So Atwood opines about their helplessness in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as "Your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others" (94). Thus, they are mere existing objects to be used by men and have their identity only via men. They are also denied any link with their pasts. They are totally cut off from their roots. Offred says about his rootlessness and Atwood puts it as "I'm a refugee from the past" (239). They get no linkage with their roots, till their death.

Atwood discusses the male control over female reproduction. As technology uses the seeds by hybrid techniques and makes the plant body the centre of experiments, the Gilead patriarchy colonizes the wombs of the handmaids. Vandana Shiva states in *Ecofeminism*, "Colonisation of seed, reflects the patterns of colonization of women's bodies. Profits and power become intimately linked to invasion into all biological organisms" (29). Patriarchy enforces the women to beget children passively without giving room for any feelings. Nature has been given female dimensions as blossoming bleeding hearts in Serena Joy's garden and Atwood delineates as "female in shape" (161). Atwood uses ecofeminist images to highlight the theme of oppression of woman and nature.

The protagonist Offred remains passive, but she has a strong wish to endure and survive. She feels secure in the presence of Nick and she feels being in a cave with him. But ultimately Serena Joy comes to know about her secrets and she is implicated for violating the strict policies of the state. Nick hints at the prospect of escape by saying that it is 'Mayday' as the van comes to take Offred but she is unsure of her future and Atwood puts it as "Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing. I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped" (307). Survival is possible only in adherence with nature. Atwood clearly

describes the 'otherness' of woman and nature through an ecofeminist study. Atwood echoes the call for an unprejudiced society where rights of women and the laws of nature may be well protected.

In the novel *Tar Baby* Toni Morrison brings in the concept of eco-feminism and writes about the atrocities of men towards nature. She also stresses the need of men along with women for protecting nature. Morrison pictures the winter house L'arbe De La Croix, built by the white capitalistic man, Valerian Street in the island. In that artificially created environment, Valerian Street and his wife Margaret Street lives a dull life. Morrison pictures the destruction of nature in the novel and links it with the polluted environment due to human activities. Nature is completely affected due to the destruction of the rain forest. The seasons of rain is altered and the river is polluted due to human encroachment as Morrison opines in the novel *Tar Baby* as "The men had already folded the earth where there had been no hollow which explains what happened to the river. It crested, and then lost its course, and finally its head" (7). Morrison writes about the encroachment of civilized humans, alienated from nature, in the destruction of nature. This is similar to the situation in which, the patriarchal forces are trying to pollute the rivers and wipe off the sanctity, due to their degradable activities. Morrison wants the eco-conscious people to protect the nature and native culture.

Morrison pictures the quest of a black female hero, Jadine in the novel. She is a cultural orphan, who creates a sense of self in her by denying her own cultural heritage. Jadine, Alma and her urban friends believe in the importance of European culture and they deny their own values. The conscious of the innate self, that shredded the real and craving for materialistic possession is known as ego-consciousness. Jadine is a main ego-conscious character of the novel. Valerian Street is responsible for the cultural alienation of Jadine, the niece of his servants, Ondine and Sydney. He provides European education to Jadine and she becomes a European model. Due to the development

of a false ego, there arises a cultural clash within her. This makes her alienated from nature and native culture and she refuses to adopt the values of her heritage.

The women in *Eloe* and the women in trees represent nature and cultural heritage, which Jadine fails to adore. By denying them, she denies her mother. It is a generalized hatred towards all maternal forms, which is the outcome of her troubled consciousness. Son indirectly implies the concept of child bearing to her in order to impose the maternal concepts in her. Morrison writes in the novel that Son always wants to “breathe in to her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency” (102) and save her from alienation from nature and native culture.

Son, Therese, Gideon, the residents of *Eloe* and the wild horsemen are in close link with nature and they have concern for nature that enables them to associate with the state of eco-consciousness. Therese, the lady of nature, who laments for nature’s destruction and its exploited men, still visions a maternal world not encroached by paternal atrocities. Therese convinces Son that he should renounce the search for Jadine because she has forgotten her ancient properties and she is culturally lost. Though the novel ends in an enigma, it is sure that Son will merge in harmony with nature, since he is a character of extreme eco-consciousness and he will be steadfast to his root and culture.

Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison link women and nature in her novels. Atwood focuses mainly on environmental issues and link it with the degradation of women. Morrison focuses on nature’s destruction and makes her characters gain energy from nature and turn towards its protection by joining together.

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