



Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*: Tracing The Theme Of Environmental Oblivion

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Abstract:

The preliminary pages of Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) detail a crime-stricken, environmentally decayed future society disrupted by an economic crisis. The Positron Project in the town of Consilience appears as an alternative to the miseries caused by this economic collapse. It offers jobs and the essential comforts suspended for the people amidst the financial breakdown and chaos. This paper aims to analyse the theme of environmental oblivion to explore the ecological implications of the text. It will further explore how Mckibben's concept of 'post-natural world' applies to Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*.

Keywords: Economic crisis, Prison, Oblivion, Environmental implications, Post-natural world.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Heart Goes Last (2015) opens with the wretched state of Stan and Charmaine, the young couple who are straining to find their ways in a dystopic world where an economic crisis has severely disrupted everyday life. It is an unpredictable world characterised by rampant crime, lack of governance and hope for the future. Stan notes,

everything went to rat shit. Overnight, it felt like. Not just in his own personal life: the whole card castle, the whole system fell to pieces, trillions of dollars wiped off the balance sheet like fog off a window (Atwood 9)[1].

The economic collapse has rendered Stan and Charmaine jobless, without house and security, forced to live in a car exposed and vulnerable to the roving gangs of looters and rapers. Living down in the dumps, they want to turn their poor state around as soon as possible. The Positron Project in the town of Consilience announces new job openings and other facilities. This Project appears as a solution for Stan and Charmaine as it promises them a job and a luxurious house. Nevertheless, to become citizens of Consilience, they are made to sacrifice their freedom. They have to follow specific rules and codes of conduct set by the officials of the Project. Firstly, they were cut off from the rest of the world, and secondly, they were restricted to mingle with other employees. They will live 'two lives' in Consilience and Positron's twin city. They will work as a prisoner for a month and 'guards and functionaries' in the next. Initially, the Project was supposed to solve the 'nation's problem' of joblessness but turned out to be a scam for organ trafficking and other evils. Stan and Charmaine immediately join the Project to avoid

their miserable state promptly. They choose an individual solution for the mass crisis. Thus, their personal decisions and viewpoints regarding the environment become very enlightening. Atwood's narrative distinctly foregrounds a lack of environmental awareness and consciousness of what is happening around the world.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Ronal B. Hatch contends that Atwood attempts to "break down the too easy assumption that the individual is a being entirely separate from his or her environment. Thus the environment - whether it be the land or the urbanscape - plays a crucial role in revealing the problem associated with individualism" (181)[6]. The human treatment of nature, their interconnections and duality between nature and culture has always been central to Atwood's oeuvre. In *The Heart Goes Last*, she presents a bleak dystopic 'post-natural' world. It is a society that merely values "nature as an economic resource" (Deitering 200)[2]. Bill Mckibben used the term 'post-natural world' for a world that has been altered by human intervention and has become an overly built environment (as opposed to what it used to be naturally), where "the conscious need for nature is merely superficial" (Deitering 201)[2]. In his 1989 book, *The End of Nature*, he regarded anthropogenic environmental alteration and destruction as proportional to the very end of nature. The 'end of nature' postulation emphasises the notion of complete cultural encroachment on the natural world and its consequent death. In other words, the natural world has become significantly fabricated and synthetic to the extent that the traditional concept of abstract/physical 'nature' with all its pristine connotation becomes almost unattainable and redundant in the present context. The end of nature is a provocative notion that generates a sense of impending fear and calls us to recognise our collaboration and accountability in environmental and 'global change'. Bill Mckibben's position that "we are ending nature" very succinctly captures the sense of an impending catastrophe associated with global warming. He claims that the idea of nature as something independent from homosapiens has come to an end (48)[7]. He claims that what remains of the natural world is in no way similar to what it would have been without human alterations of the environment. Further, what remains in the form of materiality is, in a certain sense, an artefact since nature has been destroyed, and we now live in a post-natural world(60)[7].

Neil Evernden, in "Beyond Ecology : Self , Place and Pathetic Fallacy", emphasises that individual identity is directly affected by its place or environment (101)[3]. In the face of scientific and technological development and environmental degradation, many ecocritics have concluded that 'the place' or the environment never exists as some static phenomenon fixed in the same state forever. Human attitudes towards nature and environmental destruction have a reciprocal relationship. If an individual exists only in the context of its place(in Evernden's sense), the place too is reshaped, redefined and altered by the human intervention. 'The place', setting or the environment depicted in Atwood's novel, *The Heart Goes Last* is also altered to the extent of being called a 'post- natural world'. It is much needed to analyse the psychological working of the characters' minds about the environment to explore the text's environmental implications. In *the novel*, Atwood attempts to highlight the ecological oblivion of the contemporary world towards an enhanced understanding of environmental degradation and its possible causes. It emphasises the facts of environmental redundancy in a post-modern technological world (Phillips 215)[9]. In the novel's ironic depiction of environmental oblivion and fragmented individuality, Atwood most skilfully displays her ecocentric vision.

III DISCUSSION

The nature writers Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry and Barry Lopez are identified as 'appreciators of nature'. They are literary psychologists because their writings significantly contributed to 'self' and 'non- self' awareness. Their chief preoccupation' has always been the 'phenomenon of 'awareness' (Slovic 351-352)[10]. Their explicitly expressed awareness of the natural world marks the inception and beginning phase of the ecological movement. In Atwood's case, this awareness is distinctly articulated as contemporary writers tend to defy the open "espousing of one particular attitude toward nature" like early nature writers (367)[10]. Her novels are implicit expressions and psychological responses to the world in objectified mode. *The Heart Goes Last* foregrounds a dystopic 'post-natural' world set apart from such 'awareness' and characterised by a marked sense of oblivion and lack of environmental consciousness in main characters to elucidate the broken relationship with the natural

world. Nature is considered obsolete in a modernised technological setting of the Consilience Project, where the chief concerns are economic growth and prosperity. The representation of natural aspects in the novel is stamped with a superficiality that fails to produce 'self-awareness' and environmental consciousness in the life of the main characters.

Recollection in narratives mainly works for revelation and enhanced understanding or conveying the traumatic effects of any loss and craving for past life in a 'nostalgic mode'. Nevertheless, Charmaine's memories and recollections are based on a false notion and misconception that help to forget the reality and distort the truths of decay and abuse of the environment. Her childhood was disturbed, and she learned to avoid a bad situation by cheering her spirit up from her very childhood. Her resorting to memories of what her deceased grandmother Win used to say and how she used to comfort her from her desolation illustrates how this oblivion is manifested in the novel. Once she remembers her grandmother telling her to think about the flowers, the 'little patch' in the front of the house, that will soothe her to fall asleep:

Forget those sad things, honey, Grandma Win would say. Let's make popcorn. Look, I picked some flowers ... Think about those flowers instead, and you'll be asleep in no time (Atwood 36)[1].

She never remembers her grandmother Win nostalgically; instead, the recollection of her grandmother on Charmaine's part is mostly for doing away with thoughts and situations, attaining a balanced state of mind and retaining oblivion. She uses it to repress her conscience and to do away with negative actions. Her oblivion towards aspects of nature and other characters seems less to be forced one (by the totalitarian control of the Project) and more of a conscious denial and suppression. She is not like Offred, the protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale*, who, instead of being slaved for procreation in a sexually repressed theocratic regime, recollects the past time to procure insight and understanding of what has happened to her and what she has become in the new oppressive society of Gilead. Thus in Offred's case, her recollections result in awareness. Her instance implies the possibility of understanding and resistance even in the subjugated and suppressed state. However, Charmaine accepts oblivion as her way of life: *What's the use of anything?* she often thinks. But what's the use of even thinking *What's the use?* So instead she says, "Honey, let's just cheer up!" (4)[1].

Ed, one of the founders of the Positron / Consilience twin city project, while highlighting the 'epidemic of drugging and boozing' acknowledges,

Oblivion is increasingly attractive to the young and even to the middle-aged, since why retain your brain when no amount of thinking can even begin to solve the problem? (52)[1].

Enclosed in the walled city of Consilience, she becomes even more oblivious of her relation with nature (outside world) as well as Stan, her husband. At one point, Charmaine feels like killing Stan to avoid his anger on the revelation of her extra-marital affairs with Max. She assumes that after killing Stan,

She'd remember too much about how it was when they were in love, and then when they first got married and had sex in the ocean, and he had that green shirt with penguins on it... (103)[1].

'that green shirt with penguins' prints on it is symbolically referred to more than once in the novel to enforce the sense of nature merely existing as simulacra of the real natural world in a built-up world. The open oceanic natural scene falls outside their ken in the enclosed city of Consilience.

The novel foregrounds the dystopic tradition of fiction writing. The Consilience project creates an illusion of a perfect social order but turns out to be a technological cum totalitarian regime that unjustly controls people's lives. Margaret Atwood weaves a complex fictional world in this novel where the main characters live in oblivion. Frederic Jameson believed that the relationship between postmodern fragmentation and history could be defined by a lack of proper awareness and understanding of the past. According to him, having lost their sense of the past, a postmodern society can no longer have a cohesive identity. Our lives at present essentially are characterised by a lack of understanding of our natural history. Lynn White Jr. asserts,

People ... have often been a dynamic element in their own environment, but in the present state of historical scholarship we usually do not know exactly when, where, or with what effects man induced changes came (4)[11].

This ignorance is manifested in the form of oblivion in Charmaine, making her a fragmented individual. The deviation of the present from the past (in the context of natural history) makes it difficult for her to determine "the difference between nature and culture". As Dana Phillips maintained, "We may, nevertheless, still feel at home in this world because we no longer know or can tell the difference between nature and culture" (217)[9]. In an overtly artificial 'spruced up' environment of the Project, Charmaine's lack of awareness of natural aspects is reinforced as early as she enters into Consilience. Her relation to

the natural world is severed off to the extent that she fails to identify that the rose in the vase is not natural and sniffs at it. However, Stan recognises that it's not real, but he clams up not to spoil Charmaine's happiness. This episode reinforces the oblivion.

At Positron, Charmaine is entrusted with the confidential job of 'Chief Medication Officer': where her job is to kill people, thought to be a misfit for the Project through an injection in a sophisticated ceremony known as 'medical procedure'. While carrying out the procedure on the people, she has no conscience. She befools herself and the person on whom the procedure is to be carried out by saying that "[L]ook at all that sun shine who could be down on a day like today; Nothing bad is going to happen to you" (Atwood 93)[1]. She justifies her deed by thinking that the procedure is conducted on the 'the worst criminals', 'the troublemakers', 'the incorrigibles' (94)[1]. Charmaine worries what if the reporters from outside come to know about her job as the chief medication officer. Ironically she thinks that 'they' would not understand "the good reasons" (164)[1].

Towards the climax, Stan realises that he had made a big mistake by signing into the contract of the Prison. However, on the other hand, Charmaine never attains any such realisation. She accepted the same job of medication officer that Veronica refused (after knowing that the project men wanted her to 'Kill people') without worrying about its consequences. Veronica confessed it to Sandi and said, "she couldn't do it". Sandi, too, wants to get out of Consilience after knowing all this, but Charmaine reminds Sandi, "You're not allowed out!" (192)[1].

Her superficiality and suppression of conscience to retain her oblivion are displayed in many places. In a conflicting and challenging situation, she puts on a superficial smile: "That smile has seen her through many difficult places, or at least is has since she's been grown up" (198)[1]. When towards the climax, she is about to apply the medical procedure of killing through injection on Stan (not knowing at that time), she prepares herself:

To give herself confidence, she applies blush all over her pale face, then a thin coat of mascara on the eyelashes: nothing too overdone. Position allows makeup in jail; in fact it encourages makeup, because looking your best is good for moral. It her duty to look her best: She's about to become the last thing some poor young man will see on this earth. That's a big responsibility she doesn't take it lightly(199)[1].

Charmaine accepts oblivion as her mode of being to suppress her conscience. A voice in her head whispers to her: "Charmaine, Charmaine,...you are such a fraud". But she refuses to acknowledge it and suppresses it by saying, "So are you" (199)[1].

The capacity to choose one's behaviour includes the possibility of choosing erroneously. Many of the environmental problems that humankind is facing today are seen to be the products of wrong human choices (Meeker 163)[8]. When Stan realises the truth, that the Positron Prison is involved in killing 'undesirable' and 'unwanted people' and organ trafficking, he feels trapped in:

Looking back on his life, he sees himself spread out on the earth like a giant covered in tiny threads that have held him down. Tiny threads of pretty cares and small concerns, and fears he took seriously at the time... The reduction of himself to a series of numbers, stored by others, controlled by others. He should have left the disintegrating cities, fled the pinched, cramped life on offer there. Broken out of the electronic net, thrown away all the passwords, gone forth to range over the land, a gaunt wolf howling at midnight (Atwood 205)[1].

Stan wants to get out. His oblivion, up to an extent, is reconciled in self-realisation.

Deep-Ecology highlights that human beings are an integral unit of the ecology as a whole and not a separate entity, existing all by themselves. This interconnection between humans and nature and their interaction lies at the core of ecocritical vision (Glotfelty xix)[5]. However, in a typical technological context, such relations between the individual- the 'self' and its environment- the 'non- self' remain veiled. Instead of analysing the possible reasons and solutions and waiting for the crisis to get over, Stan and Charmaine attempt to find a unique solution to a common problem of national economic breakdown. Further, they attempt to find a personal solution to the common problem of joblessness, insecurity, and debt ignoring other individuals facing the same plight (Atwood 4)[1]. They are self-enclosed even when outside the Consilience. They never have a word about or acknowledge the world outside the city of Consilience that is "a festering scrap heap" (44)[1].

The inside world of Consilience is cut off from the real natural world and is an essentially built environment. Thus it is doubly aloof from interconnections on the personal and ecological level. Furthermore, the rules of the Project restrict communication among the citizens of Consilience. At 'town meetings', there is no real personal interaction as such; they meet on "closed - circuit TV, whether they are inside Positron Prison or outside of it." Ed, one of the founders, says:

You all know the rule: phones are to be used for personal intercommunication with your friends and loved ones, but no more. We take boundaries very seriously here at Positron (111)[1].

This restricted communication helps maintain social control and unawareness of what is going on. The world in the novel is ending because of an economic breakdown, not due to an epidemic breakout or natural disaster. The Positron Project promises to provide a neat and freshly painted house with a hedge and a lawn (34)[1]. The inside picture of the house shows the king-sized bed with clean sheets with a floral design of blue and pink colour. The luxurious setting is attractive for Charmaine. Instead of controlling the lives of the city's citizens in every possible manner, the Project provides them with the power to purchase commodities from the shopping mall inside the city.

Stan and Charmaine are made to face many difficulties that others have encountered amidst the economic collapse. Their life becomes unbearable not because of the environmental decay but because of the financial loss. Therefore, they decide to join the selective utopian possibility offered by the Project without considering the fate of the world decaying outside the city of Consilence. The consumer gratification possibilities make them thoughtless and doubtless about the policies and control of individual's life by technological cum totalitarian regime of the Project as long as it provides facilities which create a consumerist lifestyle possible for them. In the city, the sole focus is on production (107)[1].

In order to reach Consilence, Stan and Charmaine take on a bus trip that lasts for hours, travelling through the "open countryside, past strip malls with plywood over most of the windows, derelict burger joints" and the gas station that is still working after everything has been crushed. The countryside picture presented reveals the economic life briefly, concealing the natural aspects that are decayed and destroyed. Charmaine falls asleep during this trip, thus avoiding the natural world outside, and Stan too 'dozes off' (41)[1].

Scott Slovic has contended that "...in order to achieve heightened attentiveness to our place in the natural world- attentiveness to our very existence- we must understand something about the workings of the mind" (351)[10]. Nevertheless, Stan and Charmaine's oblivious life is epitomised by the 'suicidal disregard' of their roots in nature (Fromm 39)[4]. They are incapable of experiencing "a connection between commodity that fills their need and its natural resource" (33)[4]. Charmaine seems sceptical about the fact that the plum crumble and the cream used in it are resourced from 'Positron's very own orchard' and 'Positron's own cow' respectively (as it is supposed to be) because she has never seen either the orchard or the cows in the town. She thinks no need to "care about where the plums come from"(Atwood 89)[1]. She feels that food can come in canned containers, failing to recognise that the packaged food also, in some way is, resourced from nature.

Positron/Consilence is a technological world cut off from the rest of the decayed wasteland outside. The city's founders supposedly think it can become self-sufficient and "self-sustaining". The project men declare: "[I]n no time at all, the Project will be self-sustaining. Except for paper products, and plastics and fuel and sugar, and bananas, and..." (Atwood 89)[1]. Most of the items mentioned here are resourced from nature; ironically, the Project aims to become "self-sustaining". The twin city is, thus ironically, thought to be self-sustaining, receiving employment from keeping the prison and town running through the labour of the prisoner and the civilian's interdependent relationship.

Their oblivion is due to their reliance on technology for workable and sustainable solutions to meet their needs. Harold Fromm maintains that a modern man "is mostly unaware of connection with Nature that has been artfully concealed by modern technology" and for his psyche, "Nature is indeed a great mystery,... incomprehensible...it is virtually nonexistent" (Fromm 33)[4]. Their oblivion never allows a way for the "affirmation of the self in a transcendent moment of realisation in which the dross of culture(...) is clarified, melting away to reveal the roots of culture in nature," (Phillips 205)[9].

IV CONCLUSION

One of Atwood's great strengths as a novelist, along with the deep understanding of the psychological workings of the mind regarding the environment, lies in her ironical vision and ability to reflect the shallow human selfishness, concerns, fears, and anxieties. Her speculative novels leave one thinking over the consequences of humanity's unmindful activities that damage the environment. Most of the chapters in the novel shift between Stan and Charmaine's point of view to reveal the complexities of the concept of 'self' and the 'non- self' and highlights the need for reconciliation and understanding between the two selves, 'the individual' and 'the place'.

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