

Ecofeminist Activism as Depicted through Margaret Atwood's the Testaments

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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism is an intellectual and political movement that connects environmentalism and feminism. This movement brings forth the interrelation between the subjection of women and the degradation of the environment as well. Ecofeminist activists believe that patriarchy and capitalism are the key factors towards women's oppression and the deterioration of natural resources.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is an internationally acclaimed Canadian writer and an environmentalist. Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* depicts power politics and gender dynamics in the fictional country of Gilead, where women are suppressed and reduced to child bearing vassals with no human rights. The novel focuses on the ecofeminist views and thereby ecofeminist activism that leads to the upheaval of women and nature at last.

The Handmaids Tale is the prequel to *The Testaments*. Atwood won the Booker Prize for *The Testaments* in 2019. The novel is a testimony of Atwood's skills as an impressive story teller and a visionary interpreter of feminist thoughts. It portrays her as an explicit craftswoman of a controversial theme: "Feminist Resistance and Resilience." *The Testaments* deals with the prominent issues that characterize its prequel, *The Handmaid's Tale* --- issues of self-expression, gender discrimination, self-discovery, political oppression, ecofeminist activism, patriarchal domination and self-construction.

The patriarchal society of *The Testaments* serves as a mirror to the terrible state of women's rights in Gilead. Atwood challenges the societal norms through this novel; calling for an inclusive feminist movement that can address the unique challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds. In Gilead, men are portrayed as natural leaders, accomplished and

intelligent, whereas women get treated as inefficient, weak and naive, only to be used for giving birth or to do domestic work. Hence, Gilead's laws emphasize strictly on gender differentiation and acting against them is a punishable offense that can even lead to execution.

This paper examines the threats imposed on women, their strategic resistance and resilience to that through ecofeminist activism. The methodology followed throughout the paper is MLA Handbook 9th edition.

Keywords: Ecofeminist, Activism, Power Politics, Gender Dynamics, Injustice

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism originated during the 1970s in North American and European academic circles. The French feminist, Françoise d'Eaubonne coined this term. Ecofeminists work on the categories of gender and societal norms that are responsible for the exploitation of women and nature. They argue that environmental protection depends on increasing women's political and socioeconomic power which is more explicit in Atwood's *The Testaments*.

Ecofeminists propagate an alternative perspective that considers the earth as sacred. They recognize humanity's reliance on the natural world and thereby embrace all life on earth as valuable. Ecofeminists also recognize and advocate Intersectionalism. They emphasize the fact that other oppressive systems like racism, homophobia, and xenophobia, are also connected to the destruction of the environment. Ecofeminist activists are focused on effective women's activism to achieve ecological sustainability and gender equality. Some of these ecofeminist activists have indulged in sorting out several issues:

- Adriana Laurent: A mixed-race immigrant from Honduras who handles issues related to climate change, race, gender, and migration.

- Shyam Sunder Paliwal: He is known as the 'Father of Eco-Feminism.' He is a recipient of the Padma Shri Award in 2021.
- Vandana Shiva is an author and ecofeminist from India, well known for her activism towards genetically modified food. She serves as a leader of the International Forum on Globalization. She is also a member of the scientific committee of Fundacion IDEAS.
- Wangari Maathai is a Kenyan activist who led the Green Belt Movement, which planted millions of trees to benefit the local ecosystems, communities, and women who planted them.
- Other ecofeminist activist-scholars include: Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Maria Mies, Mary Mellor, Ana Isla, Ariel Salleh and Lolja Nordic. They argue that environmental protection depends on increasing women's political and socioeconomic power.

Some key aspects of ecofeminist activism are evident in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*. The novel represents a dystopian society. The setting of the book is fifteen years after the events of its prequel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Three different narrators (Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima, and Nicole) are found in *The Testaments*; whereas its prequel had only one first person narrator, Offred.

Aunt Lydia plays a vital role in the novel, *The Testaments*. A peculiar character seen from the first chapter, who nevertheless reveals her backstory and the hidden administrative strategies of Gilead's oppressive regime. Raised in Gilead as a young woman, Agnes, another important character discovers her true identity and becomes embroiled in a plot to bring down the oppressive society. Meanwhile, Nicole, the third female narrator living in Canada, learns about her connection to Gilead and joins the resistance. A Canadian teenager learning about her connection to Gilead.

The novel delves into themes of oppression, resistance, and survival, raising questions about the power of women's testimonies and the importance of hope in the face of adversity. Atwood's writing is as captivating as ever, with twists and turns.

Every chapter defines the past and the present lives of Aunt Lydia and Agnes. Aunt Lydia's backstory begins, revealing her life before Gilead. Her transformation into a key figure in Gilead's oppressive regime. Aunt Lydia's narrative continues, exposing the brutal treatment of Handmaids. Aunt Lydia writes, "I write these words in my private sanctum within the library of Ardua Hall—one of the few libraries remaining after the enthusiastic book-burnings that have been going on across our land. The corrupt and blood-smeared fingerprints of the past must be wiped away to create a clean space for the morally pure generation that is surely about to arrive" (02).

Then the early years of Agnes Jemima's childhood in Gilead is showcased throwing light on her strict upbringing. Agnes gets to know the inner workings of the Gileadian elite. The readers learn about her growing awareness of the oppressive society. Agnes once participates in a "Ceremony," a pivotal event in Gileadian society. She witnesses her mother giving birth. She realises the totalitarian regime's control over women's bodies.

Most of the chapters bear testimony to the resistance and resilience of the prime female characters. Aunt Lydia's narrative jumps forward, revealing her role in

collecting the forbidden knowledge at "The Hildegard Library." Agnes, the first born of Offred, discovers hidden texts, sparking her curiosity about the world beyond Gilead.

Nicole is Offred's second daughter born to her and Nick. She is always hunted for by the Gilead authorities as she is the lost child of Gilead. Nicole's story begins in Canada, where she is recruited by a mysterious organization something that is connected to Gilead and the resistance. Nicole embarks on a perilous journey to Gilead. Meanwhile Agnes's involvement with the resistance deepens.

The readers later get to see the demonstration of the developing friendship among Aunt Lydia, Nicole and Agnes. Here the readers witness the concept of ecofeminist activism. Unlike the others, these three women strive to retaliate. They also become part of the Resistance movement of Gilead. The resistance plots to bring down Gilead's regime. Nicole finds refuge with a group of rebels.

Aunt Lydia's narrative converges with Agnes' and Nicole's storylines. The novel concludes with Aunt Lydia's reflection on the power of testimonies and the future of Gilead. Ecofeminist activism, resistance and resilience are the pivotal themes in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*.

The character of Aunt Lydia is filled with complexity. Her backstory reveals a nuanced, multidimensional personality; but her actions demonstrate a subtle resistance to the Gileadian regime.

"The Mayday movement" is the resistance movement known as Mayday in *The Handmaid's Tale* through which Nick rescues Offred. The same resistance movement plays a prominent role in *The Testaments* too. This movement involves the Handmaids and the others involved into a collective action to thwart Gilead's regime. This organization takes efforts to facilitate escape routes for Handmaids.

Agnes gets transformed under the influence of Aunt Lydia. Agnes' journey from a naive, ignorant girl to a mature young woman involved in the resistance

represents the theme of resistance and growth. Nicole's activism is showcased through her experiences in Canada and Gilead which highlights the importance of international solidarity and activism in resisting oppressive regimes.

The novel explores the various ways in which women in Gilead cope with trauma, including Aunt Lydia's strategic compliance and Agnes' quiet defiance. The survival and coping mechanisms of these women characters throw light on the concept of ecofeminist activism and sustainability. Female solidarity and womanhood is evident in the relationship of these women characters.

Aunt Lydia's character embodies both resistance and resilience, as she navigates the complexities of her role within the Gileadian regime. Aunt Lydia documents history. Her secret archives and the testimonies of Handmaids serve as a form of resistance, ensuring that the truth about Gilead's atrocities is recorded and preserved. The Hildegard Library: The secret library, containing forbidden knowledge, represents the power of information and the resilience of the human desire for knowledge. This provides hope and defiance signifying the women's defiance and individuality.

Aunt Lydia embodies the contradictions of a woman who has internalized patriarchal ideology while also subtly resisting it. Agnes' journey illustrates the impact of subjugation on young women's lives and the importance of resistance. Nicole's experiences highlight the importance of international solidarity and activism in resisting oppressive regimes. The novel emphasizes the importance of recording and sharing women's stories as a form of resistance and resilience. The power of women's testimonies is the most important thing about the novel. Atwood explores the intersectionality of oppression (sexism, homophobia, racism) highlighting the need for collective resistance and activism especially among women.

The subjugation of women is a pervasive theme in Atwood's *The Testaments*. The readers could witness

several forms of subjugation in Gilead: Forced reproductive servitude - Handmaids are coerced into bearing children for the ruling class, highlighting the control over women's bodies and reproductive rights. Patriarchal oppression - Gilead's patriarchal society reduces women to subservient roles, stripping them off agency, identity, autonomy and basic human rights. Women's economic independence is severely curtailed, making them reliant on men for survival. Limited education and knowledge - Women's access to education and information is restricted, perpetuating their subjugation through various mechanisms of control. The Ceremony is a ritualized raping of Handmaids. It is a brutal manifestation of patriarchal control. Women deemed as "Unwomen" are sent to the Colonies, where they are forced into hard labor and subjected to clean lethal ghettos.

The toxic waste and pollution in the Colonies serve as a metaphor for the consequences of patriarchal exploitation and the disregard for environmental sustainability.

Women's names, identities, and individuality are erased, replaced by patronymic designations (e.g., "Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren, Ofkyle, etc.,"). This led women to resist and fight for their survival. Women developed coping mechanisms, such as secret communication networks and subtle acts of defiance, to survive and resist their subjugation. The intersections between environmentalism and feminism is dealt with by the Ecofeminist theories emphasizing the similarities between the subordination of women and the deterioration of nature.

The *Testaments* emphasizes the importance of women's resistance, solidarity, and resilience in the face of oppression against patriarchal power structures. It also incorporates ecological themes and motifs, highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental and social justice.

Gilead's totalitarian regime is linked to environmental degradation, highlighting the consequences of unchecked capitalist exploitation especially the

"Colonies" which have dangerous high levels of lethal explosion and the exploitation of natural resources.

A varied account of environmental crisis and issues led to the totalitarian regime of Gilead: nuclear radiation, the proliferation of toxic pollution, leakages from chemical and biological warfare stock piles, a dangerously polluted natural world, chemical pollution, and toxic waste disposal sites; unlimited use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays; abortion, and other sexually transmitted diseases like Aids, Syphilis, which led to widespread sterility and concomitant population decline in Gilead and made sterility the norm. As a result, fertile women (male infertility is denied) in Gilead are greatly diminished and the ones who are fertile are forced to submit to the ruling elite. Though women are valued for their reproductive ability, they are stripped off their civil rights. Restricted to receive education, own property, talk or even walk freely or form friendships. They are literally reduced to inanimate objects. Ecological degradation and depletion of natural resources are portrayed simultaneously with the degradation of women in *The Testaments*.

The novel also mentions climate-related disasters, such as rising sea levels and intense storms, underscoring the regime's disregard for environmental sustainability. The regime's focus on monoculture farming and genetic engineering threatens biodiversity and ecosystem health. But ecofeminist activism is also witnessed through the strategic moves of Aunt Lydia's secret garden and forbidden library that serve as a symbol of resilience, hope, and the power of nature. It demonstrates her connection to the natural world and her subtle resistance to the regime. Her garden represents the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the importance of biodiversity. The forest, where Nicole and others find refuge, symbolizes the wild, untamed natural world and the potential for resistance. Agnes' observations and appreciation of the natural world and her desire to learn about ecology illustrate her

growing awareness of the interconnectedness of human and environmental well-being.

Ecofeminist activism values care, reciprocity, and mutualism in maintaining ecological balance rather than domination and exploitation. The novel highlights the importance of women's resistance, solidarity, and resilience in the face of oppression, echoing ecofeminist activism with principles of care and harmony.

The Testaments emphasizes the importance of intersectional activism, recognizing the connections between feminist, environmental, and social justice movements. The novel's environmental degradation mirrors real-world concerns about climate change, pollution, and access to healthcare.

The novel's themes and characters inspire ecofeminist activism, emphasizing the importance of collective action and solidarity in the face of oppression.

Ecofeminist theory is a universal movement that interconnects the prime factors of environmentalism and feminism. This addresses the issues that lead to oppression of women and the destruction of the environment by the patriarchal power structures. As Vandana Shiva puts it, "Women and nature are associated not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life" (*Staying Allive* 12).

Ecofeminist activists propagate an alternative viewpoint that portrays nature as serene and divine. They promote the idea of human dependency on the natural world. They embrace all life as valuable.

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