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## WOMEN'S LIBERATION NOTES: INSIGHTS FROM MARGARET ATWOOD'S "THE TESTAMENTS"

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### ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood is an undeniable profound Canadian author. Every woman character in the story of Atwood has a tale to tell, which is a rarity in the realms of fiction. "*The Testaments*"(2019) is one of the prime examples that aligns with this theme. "*The Testaments*" is a long-awaited sequel, which was published thirty five years after the novel 'The Handmaid's Tale'. This paper attempts to interpret the novel from the perspective of ecofeminism, by analyzing the lives of three distinct women from "*The Testaments*" who survive in a world full of horror, where injustices harm the women in the form of a restricted life, which are worse than death sentences. These females have the common thread of exploitation at the hands of the patriarchal society. This paper mainly analyzes how female protagonists in this novel have built up their own identity a little bit by giving their voice for environment and women liberation.

**Keywords:** *Ecofeminism, dystopian fiction, women's liberation, narrative voices, survival*

### INTRODUCTION:

Ecofeminism is a worldwide emergent movement which started as a reaction when people realized that women and nature are connected. "The first conference to address this idea was 'Women Environment', organized by Sandra Marburg and Lisa Watson at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974. In 1980, spurred by the Three Mile Island catastrophe, Ynestra King, Celeste Wesson, Grace Paley, Anna Gyorgy, Christina Rawley, NancyJack Todd, and Deborah Gaventa organized a conference in Amherst, Massachusetts, on Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 1980s." (Spretnak 1990)

Greta Gaard, an ecofeminist scholar defines Ecofeminism as: 'Ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism; peace movement, labour movements, women's health care, and the anti- nuclear, environmental and animal liberation movements. Drawing on insights from ecology, feminism and socialism, eco feminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature.' (1)

Greta Graard gives clarity that Ecofeminism revolves around women's resistance to the exploitation and oppression inflicted on nature and women, ecofeminist movements became important for exposing how developed and developing countries exploit nature and its resources in the name of globalization, and development. People who are marginalized, like women, children, elders, and the poor, are often the first ones affected by disasters or destruction. So, it's crucial to study these connections to understand the layers of oppression better.

In ecofeminist perspective, Manisha Rao says: Whenever women protested against ecological destruction, threat of atomic destruction of life on earth, new developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and, reproductive technology, they discovered the connections between patriarchal domination and violence against women, the colonized non-western, non-White peoples and, nature. It led to the realization that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from the larger struggle for preserving nature and life on earth. (Rao 2012) pg. 125

In the beginning, Ecofeminism was a framework meant for reconsideration upon movements related to particular geographical environmental health, social justice. As a result of small initiatives of many activists, ecofeminism has grown globally and taken on diverse trajectories. Today, when we talk about ecofeminism, we can get diverse perspectives. Ecofeminists help in comprehending the interconnectedness between women and the environment. Additionally, these diverse viewpoints highlight the range of obstacles that women encounter and the solutions available to them.

The present paper intends to examine one of the dystopian fictions of Margaret Atwood under the lens of liberal Ecofeminism. The novel selected for the study is "*The Testaments*"(2019). "*The Testaments*" is the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, it was published about thirty five years after "*The Handmaid's Tale*". The story continues after fifteen years from *The Handmaid's Tale* story. The story is set in the fictitious theocratic Republic of Gilead in the near future. The author immerses the readers into the lives of three distinct women, who defies the oppressions of a male-dominated society and rejects victimhood. Aunt Lydia, a powerful infamous leader in the strict government of Gilead, a fictional society, Daisy, a teenage girl living in Canada, and Agnes, a young girl growing up in Gilead. Through a combination of literary analysis and ecofeminist theory, this paper will analyze and discuss the tough situations of women characters in a dictatorship regime which replaced the United States government, a first world country. It also will discuss how women helped each other to initiate change and support liberalization despite being raised in a society that oppresses and devalues them. Women in this novel exhibit flexibility, strength, and a deep sense of care for their environment and their families of both the environment and women themselves.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW OF *THE TESTAMENTS***

Rehman and Khalid (2022), in their research article "Womanimality and Gender Polarity in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*", examines how Margaret Atwood addressed Western cultural practices objectifying both women and the environment. The objective of this study is to examine sexual differences using animals as a metaphor. Their article focuses on the fact that, since the origins of Western civilization, animals and women have held a subordinate position. Metaphors connecting with animals and gender contribute significantly to highlighting hierarchies. The relationship between handmaids and this androcentric classification of women as animals made them feel their inferiority as

women through the objectification of animals.

Oliveira (2021), in an article “Women and Nature? Nature Writing in the Dystopian World Margaret Atwood's *The Testament*”, discussed how Atwood supports feminist ideas and challenges anthropomorphism. This article highlights how literature promotes different points of view and helps to expose the struggle of marginalized communities because of inequality. It also talks about the rooted connection between women and nature throughout the world.

Keck (2022), in the article “Women’s Complicity, Resistance, and Moral Agency: Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*”, highlights both women’s participation and resistance to Gilead's patriarchal system. The study focuses through a broad theoretical lens to argue that each individual is connected with a network of social forces. Nobody can escape being part of the world political system. The article also explains that a person’s role in the existing society is fixated by the political system.

Csuros (2021), in the article “Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* as a Dystopian Fairy Tale” explains that Atwood has rewritten the gender roles in a postmodern feminist perspective. With this perspective Atwood expresses how dystopian novels disclose the patriarchal structure. In this novel, Atwood has used Fairy tale themes and characters to display how women are subjugated in Gileadean society. This paper also explains that Atwood changes her writing style from *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Testaments*, to reflect on how fairy tales change over the centuries by society. Atwood showed that authors often restructure old stories to create more optimism.

In "*The Testaments*," Margaret Atwood stated the whole story from three perspectives: One unravelling through Aunt Lydia’s Secret manuscript, detailing her plot to depose Gilead, daily activities at Ardua Hall, and her arrest during Gilead's establishing and how she came to hold the power she currently holds, the second viewpoint is provided by Agnes Jemima, who provides a witness account of her upbringing in Gilead, and the third perspective is from Daisy, who is called as Nicole or sometimes as Jade in Gilead society, who describes her existence in Canada right before realizing she was "Baby Nicole," as well as her experiences with Mayday- the underground resistance movement and Gilead.

The novel maintains the categorization of women as delineated in "*The Handmaid's Tale*" with the Gilead government sorting women into distinct groups based on their roles: Commander's Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, Aunts, Unwomen, and Jezebels.

Lydia is a respected, infamous older woman, working as an aunt under the sons of Jacob, in Gilead. Due to the change of government that resulted in the establishment of Gilead, she was arrested by the Sons of Jacob, held with other women in a stadium, confined in an isolation cell, and later rose to lead the new women's sphere. This role involved providing training to Handmaids, educating schoolgirls, and monitoring all women in the society.

Lydia is writing a secret manuscript called ‘The Ardua Hall Holograph’. It is about Gilead society which she used to hide in one of the last libraries in Ardua Hall, where all the aunts live. Lydia’s decision to write this manuscript can be seen as a significant step in her attempt to resist the totalitarian regime. By using writing as a weapon, which is forbidden in their society, she seeks to expose the injustices and horrors of the patriarchal society she is a part of. This act of defiance represents her last attempt to disrupt the oppressive system before it's too late. Through Lydia's actions, we see how

individuals within oppressive societies may strive to challenge the established order, even at great personal risk. She anticipates betrayals from those around her and fears being accused of her manuscript “What betrayals, and then what denunciations, might lie in store for me? There are several within Ardua Hall who would love to get their hands on these pages” (Atwood 2019: 5).

Lydia shares her backstory during the change of government that resulted in the establishment of Gilead: she was a judge before the Gilead society formed. She was arrested by the Sons of Jacob, held with other women in a stadium, confined in an isolation cell, and later rose to lead the new women's sphere. This role involved training Handmaids, educating schoolgirls, and monitoring bloodlines to prevent among babies born in Gilead. It's a society where both men and women are limited to fixed roles focused only on having children, the freedom to be oneself and follow one's path is seriously endangered. “Some days I see myself as a Recording Angel, collecting together all the sins of Gilead, including mine; on other days I shrug all this moral high tone” (Atwood: 278).

After Lydia, the narration shifts to Agnes, who grew up in Gilead separated from her biological mother, a Handmaid named Offred. Raised by an upper-class family since she was a young child, Agnes narrates her experiences in the form of a witness testimony transcript, offering insights into what it was like growing up in Gilead as a young individual. During their upbringing, Agnes and her peers were influenced by their teachers, particularly Aunt Vidala, who imparted to the girls the belief that they were fragile beings: “Precious flowers that had to be kept safely inside glass houses” (Atwood, 2019, p. 10). Despite contradictory messages, Agnes admits to growing up with anxiety about her future as a married woman, reflecting the predetermined roles and expectations placed upon individuals within the patriarchal structure of Gilead: “I dreaded the thought of growing older—older enough for a wedding” (Atwood, 2019, p. 11).

Daisy, a teenage girl living in Canada, becomes the third narrator after Agnes. She begins recounting her life story, also presented in the form of a witness testimony. She begins by stating “I was a fraud. Or not a fraud, like a bad magician: a fake, like a fake antique. I was a forgery, done on purpose” (x). In Gilead, an oppressive form of governance, women's bodies are under complete surveillance, with Handmaids treated as human breeders: “The handmaids can make babies” (Atwood, 2019, p. 81). This draws comparisons with the treatment of nature in patriarchal societies, where women and nature are exploited to preserve patriarchal power and dominance. On her sixteenth birthday, her parents were killed in an explosion by the Gilead government at their business, a thrift store called The Clothes Hound. After the horrifying incident Daisy is taken in by their parents' friend Ada, who is working for Mayday, the resistance movement against Gilead. Daisy learns that she is Baby Nicole from Gilead. When she was an infant, she was smuggled into Canada and that became a symbol both for Gilead and anti- Gilead groups. Further, Mayday tells her that an anonymous person in Gilead has promised them to provide information that could collapse Gilead government, and the only one that can collect the information is Baby Nicole herself. After training, Daisy is picked up by Pearl Girls, missionaries from Gilead, and goes to the country, pretending that she is a convert to Gileadean ideals named Jade.

As the story further moves on by Aunt Lydia's plot, who has orchestrated Nicole or Daisy's arrival in Gilead. Jade has a meeting with Aunt Lydia, Lydia reveals herself as a main source of information for the Maday group and asks her if she is “ready to help her friends back in Canada” (Atwood: 333). Jade



agrees, and Aunt Lydia slit into her arm under her tattoo, and puts something small in her arm. Aunt Lydia tells her she must not tell anyone, and that now she must go back to Canada like “a carrier pigeon” (Atwood: 333).

Eventually, Agnes and Becca had a meeting with Aunt Lydia. when they enter her office, they are surprised to find that Jade is there as well. Aunt Lydia tells them that Baby Nicole is in Gilead, and when Agnes asks where Nicole is, Aunt Lydia reveals the shocking truth that Jade is Baby Nicole, and thus they are half-sisters. Although Agnes is stunned, she calmly tells Jade she is happy they are sisters, and says the same thing to Becca, who clearly felt left out.

Aunt Lydia then says that there is more they need to hear: Jade, now called Nicole, must head back to Canada, and Lydia wants Agnes and Becca to help her escape. Aunt Lydia reveals that she was the one sending the secret files, and that the purpose of the mission is to expose “the deplorable degree of corruption” in Gilead (Atwood: 337). She tells them that if they do not help, then herself and Nicole will surely be executed. After deliberating, Agnes and Becca agree, but Aunt Lydia contends that Nicole must take Becca’s place on the upcoming Pearl Girl mission with Agnes. Though Aunt Lydia tells Becca she will follow them later to Canada, Agnes “suspected it was a lie” (Atwood: 339).

Agnes and Nicole begin a dangerous journey, eventually their journey ending up on a boat in the stormy ocean, paddling their way hoping to reach Canadian shores. After a lot of struggles, they reached Canada and the documents were released to the public. Those documents provoked a revolt against the Gilead government. Eventually the two sisters are reunited with Offred, their real mother.

The epilogue of the novel is a transcript of an academic conference on Gilead Studies, taking place two hundred years in the future. A scholar named Professor Pieixoto gives a lecture on the discoveries of three manuscripts: the Ardua Hall holograph written by Aunt Lydia, and two witness testimonies written by Agnes and Nicole. The professor discusses the attempts made by the scholars to verify when exactly they were written. He notes that during his research the discovery of a statue with an inscription dedicated to “Becca,” constructed by Agnes and Nicole, confirms the truth of the events described in the testimonies.

Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. Its theoretical base is a sense of self most commonly expressed by women and various other nondominant groups—a self that is interconnected with all life (Gaard, 1993).

While the primary focus of the narrative is on the oppression of women within Gilead, there are likely environmental consequences of the regime's actions that can be explored through an ecofeminist lens. The ruthless pursuit of power and control by the ruling elite in Gilead may result in environmental degradation and the exploitation of natural resources for their own gain, reflecting broader patterns of environmental destruction driven by patriarchal systems.

Ecofeminism emphasizes the importance of resistance against patriarchal oppression and the promotion of solidarity among marginalized groups, including women and nature. The characters of Agnes and Daisy, along with their mother who works for Mayday, represent this resistance as they challenge the oppressive regime of Gilead and work towards its downfall. Their solidarity and collaboration with other women, such as Aunt Lydia's eventual alliance with them, highlight the

potential for collective action in confronting patriarchal and ecological injustices.

Women in the novel exhibit flexibility, strength, and a deep sense of care for their environment and their families. Despite their upbringing in a society that suppresses them, they take action to address environmental degradation, understanding that it not only affects their immediate surroundings but also has long-term consequences for their families and communities. For example, Aunt Lydia believes that the country's decline brought on by a number of social and environmental problems may have made the creation of Gilead inevitable: "The floods, the fires, the tornadoes, the hurricanes, the droughts, the water shortages, the earthquakes. Too much of this, too little of that. The decaying infrastructure...the tanking economy, the joblessness, the falling birth rate" (Atwood, 2019, p. 66).

Reconnection with nature is another crucial aspect of ecofeminism. It advocates for reestablishing connections with nature and recognizing the inherent value of the environment beyond its instrumental use for human purposes. This can be seen in the characters' journeys towards liberation and their eventual reunion with their mother in Canada, symbolizing a return to a more harmonious relationship with the natural world away from the oppressive regime of Gilead.

Moreover, women characters in the novel actively advocate for the liberalization of both the environment and women themselves. The handmaid's bodies are approached merely as a biological tool. Agnes and Daisy recognized and addressed the realities of their surroundings and challenges towards the oppression of women is closely intertwined with the exploitation of the environment, and they strive for freedom and equality. By supporting initiatives that promote environmental conservation and women's rights, they seek to create a more just and sustainable society for all.

## CONCLUSION

"*The Testaments*" by Margaret Atwood has analyzed through an ecofeminism perspective to explore the relationship between the human and natural world. This novel provides a powerful narrative that intertwines the oppression of women with environmental degradation through vivid imagery and complex characters, reflecting the core principles of ecofeminism. The novel's portrayal of women's resistance against the patriarchal and ecologically destructive regime of Gilead highlights the importance of solidarity and collective action in the fight for liberation. Through their stories, we see the flexibility and determination of women to reclaim their independence and protect the environment, emphasizing that the liberation of women and nature are fundamentally connected.

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