

Human despotism over Nature: Concern for Cruelty against Animals in the novels of Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian novelist who has written over forty books belonging to various genres – novels, poems, short stories, criticism – in her fifty years long writing career. As a novelist her thrust area has been the themes concerning women and feminism in general. But, there is also an element of the concern for our present environment and ecology, which gradually gains prominence as her novelistic career progresses. In this broad category of environmental / ecological concern she also gives expression, prominently, to the way we treat the non-human world – animals especially – cruelly.

KEYWORDS: Margaret Atwood – Canadian novelist – environmental/ ecological concern – cruelty against animals.

Margaret Atwood is a Famous Canadian poet and novelist, born on 18th November 1939. Starting her poetic and novelistic career with a thrust on the feminist themes; she gradually began to give voice to the more general themes of global importance, one of which is her voicing of our treatment of nature and the non-human world. In a thorough study of Atwood's works, 'The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood' (2006), Coral Anne Howells identifies a variety of distinct "textual spaces of Atwood's writing, from her concern with landscape and environment to her responses to Canadian social attitudes and changing ideologies of nationhood and identity..." (Howells, p. 4). Though she never takes nature and environment as her principle subject the indirect expression of her deep concern for them is easily detectable in her descriptions of the surroundings in her novels. As Ronald B. Hatch, in his essay "Margaret Atwood, the Land, and Ecology", observes not only in her writings but also in her active social life she has many times expressed her concern about the present state of our environment and ecology. He says, "Certainly, her poetry and fiction draw on the land in powerful ways ... In addition, Atwood herself has become a strong proponent of the need to safeguard the remaining wilderness, and has numerous times lent her name to environmental causes" (Nischik, p. 180). Her characters' responses to the cruel treatment of animals come as a continuation of Atwood's concern for the environment and ecology as well as her wish for a more scrupulous and humane modern living. With the modern technological weapons at our disposal, Atwood feels that our behaviour in respect of animals has been increasingly becoming despotism.

Atwood sees the indifferent attitude of humans towards nature and the inhuman treatment meted out to animals and plants, who are our co-inhabitants on this planet, as one of the major results of man's technological might, which acts to play havoc with nature, coupled with his inborn sense of superiority. This feeling of the author is not

something which is specific to certain specific individuals like her; but it can also be experienced by us if we view the non-human life as equal to us, humans.

Starting as a simple human compassion for animals, in the novel *The Edible Woman*, Atwood goes on to show us, through her later works, that the cruelty against animals has been gradually on the rise which has now been culminating in the mass killing of animals through industrial waste, war and nuclear accidents, as also for food and sport. In her first novel 'The Edible Woman' (1969), there is a scene of rabbit killing which is described by one of the characters, Peter, Marian McAlpine's friend, in a boasting tone, as an act of daring. "So I let her off and Wham. One shot right through the heart." And then, "I whipped out my knife, good knife, German steel, and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack, like a whip you see, and the next thing you know there was blood and guts all over the place" (TEW, p. 80). He thinks it funny, "He paused to laugh. Len (Marin's Friend) bared his teeth. The quality of Peter's voice had changed; it was a voice I didn't recognize. The sign saying TEMPERANCE flashed in my mind" (TEW, p. 80). Later, the anorexia that she suffers from may be caused partly by the psychological reasons, but it also certainly has a connection with the nausea of meat eating because of her realization that it comes from live animals butchered and cut mechanically without ever thinking of their life. Sitting over a steak, with Peter in a restaurant, Marian McAlpine tries many times to eat; lifting the meat piece with knife and fork and putting it down, but couldn't eat.

"She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed. Knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. Of course everyone knew that. But most of the time you never thought about it. In the supermarket they had it all pre-packaged in cellophane, with name-labels and price-labels stuck on it, and it was just like buying a jar of peanut-butter or a can of beans..." (TEW, p. 185).

Her reason behind this comes in the succeeding pages of the novel, in her thoughts, while she is reading a non-vegetarian recipe book. Her indignation at the human cruelty and inhumanness that goes on in the name of food is expressed when she reads about a turtle recipe.

"You were supposed to keep your live turtle in a card-board box or other cage for about a week, loving it and feeding it hamburger to rid it of its impurities. Then just as it was beginning to trust you and perhaps follow you around the kitchen like a sluggish but devoted hard-shelled spaniel, you put it one day into a cauldron of cold water (where no doubt it would swim and dive happily, at first) and then brought it slowly to the boil. The whole procedure was reminiscent of the deaths of early Christian martyrs. What fiendishness went on in kitchens across the country, in the name of providing food!" (TEW, p. 190).

This realization of her gradually drives her towards vegetarianism (TEW, p. 213).

A more intense picture of the human despotism over animals is drawn in her next novel 'Surfacing' (1972). Urban dweller for a long time, the unnamed narrator in the novel returns to her father's island and is shocked to see the indifferent and wasteful human attitude towards nature. In one of her trail through the island forest, her group is met by an upside-down hung heron. "It was behind me, I smelled it before I saw it; then I heard the flies... I turned around and it was hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon

rope tied round its feet and looped over a tree branch, its wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye” (S, p. 147). She wonders as to why had the killers done it. It was of no use except for the satisfaction of the human tendency to destroy,

“Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn’t they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill. Otherwise it was valueless: beautiful from a distance but it couldn’t be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it” (S, p. 149).

The whole forest seemed to be scratched and trampled with men and machines. A little later, is described the Americans treating Canada as an occupied territory, ransacking it and killing and frightening the plants and animals for no reason. The Americans’ wasteful fishing and killing just for sport is described thus:

“They had a starry flag like all of them, a miniature decal sticker on the canoe bow. To show us we were in occupied territory... Raygun fishing rods, faces impermeable as space-suit helmets, sniper eyes, they did it; guilt glittered on them like tin foil... They got drunk and chased loons in their powerboats for fun, backtracking on the loon as it dived, not giving it a chance to fly, until it drowned or got chopped up in the propeller blades. Senseless killing, it was a game...” (S, p. 155) for them.

The concern for animal killing, of the narrator, is evident even when her group fishes for their food. She provide the knife to kill a bass (a kind of fish) to her friend David when they are in a canoe and fishing for food, but at the same time she thinks, “We didn’t need it, our proper food was tin cans. We were committing this act, violation, for sport or amusement or pleasure, recreation they call it, these were no longer the right reasons... Anything we could do to the animals we could do to each other: we practiced on them first” (S, p. 153-54). Earlier in the novel, when the company of the narrator and her friends are fishing for their food they are encountered by the American fishers with their power boats who ask them whether they are getting any (fish). Upon this the narrator asks her friend to return home,

“ “Reel in”, I say to David. There is no sense in staying here now. If they catch one they’ll be here all night, if they don’t get anything in fifteen minutes they’ll blast off and scream around the lake in their souped-up boat, deafening the fish. They are the kind who catch more than they can eat and they’d do it with dynamite if they could do away with it” (S, p. 81).

This kind of behaviour is a form of holding the whole nature as hostage. Further ahead in the novel, there is a passage which shows how unscrupulous and brazen were those happy killers who were using electric current to kill fish.

“Straight power, they mainlined it; I imagined the surge of electricity, nerve juice, as they hit it, brought it down, flapping like a crippled plane. The innocents get slaughtered because they exist, I thought, there is nothing inside the happy killers to restrain them, no conscience or piety; for them the only thing worthy of life were human, their own kind of human, framed in the proper clothes and gimmicks, laminated. It would have been different in those countries where an animal is the soul of an ancestor or the child of a god, at least they would have felt guilt” (S, p. 163-64).

The narrator remembers an incident in her childhood when she had thrown her doll in water, “killing was wrong, we had been told that: only enemies and food could be killed. Of course the doll wasn’t hurt, it wasn’t alive; though children think everything is alive” (S, p. 167). Such acculturation has lost somewhere in the too daring, and false, claims of science which has been playing a major role in shaping our attitude towards nature and non-human animals. Another reason for this attitude, according to Shannon Hengen, is –

“... the lack of connection between people (which) transfers to an indifference to the natural world that has resulted in the “dying white birches”(S, p. 9) of the work’s (Srfacing) opening pages, the “fished out” lake (p. 32), and most obviously in the mutilated and hanged blue heron (pp. 137-38)”.

If the animals were to speak, as they do in stories, “... what would they really say? Accusation, lament, an outcry of rage; but they had no spokesman.” (S, p. 167). Nature has to suffer at the hands of indifferent ‘man’ just because it has no voice.

Later, when she kills an animal at the suggestion of her friend Joe, she feels very guilty, “He said it wasn’t a person, only an animal; I should have seen that was no different, it was hiding in me as if in a burrow and instead of granting it sanctuary I let them catch it. I could have said no but I didn’t; that made me one of them too, a killer” (S, p. 185). After that incident she could not make friends again with Joe. In fact, she feels that she has begun to hate him and David, another character in their group, and all men, for their falsities in love. But, finally,

“I realized it wasn’t the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both. They had their chance but they had turned against the gods, and it was time for me to choose the sides. I wanted there to be a machine that could make them vanish, a button I could press that would evaporate them without disturbing anything else, that way there would be more room for the animals, they would be rescued” (S, p. 197).

Here, she uses the word Americans as representing those people who are trying to turn against gods with their might of machines.

In the other novel ‘Cat’s Eye’ (1988), its main character Elaine could not bear with the live animal dissection that goes on in the Zoology Department where her father works as a scientist. She faints to see the cut open animals with their beating hearts approaching death –

“We come to a room where there is a cut open turtle... The turtle is alive; or it’s dead, but its heart is alive. This turtle is an experiment to show how the heart of a reptile can keep on going after the rest of it is dead... The turtle’s bottom shell has a hole sawed into it. The turtle is on its back so you can see down into it, right to the heart, which is beating away slowly...They have attached a wire to the heart, which runs to a loud-speaker, so you can hear the heart beating throughout the entire room, agonizingly slow... life is flowing out of the turtle” (CE, pp. 201-02).

The inhuman treatment of animals is also effected though the indifferent, not for experiment acts of the humans. For example, in her next novel ‘The Robber Bride’ (1993), there is a reference to “the grey fish with lumpy chemical growths on them” (RB, p. 559), which is certainly the making of the human created chemical waste that is dumped in the waters every day. Earlier in the novel, Atwood also criticizes the sanctity

of meat eating as approved in the Bible, as well as that of animal sacrifices as approved by most of the religions.

“Charis gave up Christianity a long time ago. For one thing, the bible is full of meat: animals being sacrificed, lambs, bullocks, doves. Cain was right to offer up the vegetables, God was wrong to refuse them. And there is too much blood: people in the Bible are always having their blood spilled, blood on their hands, their blood licked up by dogs. There are too many slaughters, too much suffering, too many tears.” (RB, p. 74)

She can't understand why “most of the religions are so intent on punishment” (RB, p. 74).

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