






**Crises and Community Construction in the Post-Epidemic Era: Posthumanist Survival in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy***

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# Crises and Community Construction in the Post-Epidemic Era: Posthumanist Survival in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy

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## Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy centers around a global pandemic that almost wipes out all human beings. In such a post-catastrophic world, the survivors have to defeat fierce criminals who escaped from the Painball arena and construct a new community with nonhuman beings. This article puts forward a posthumanist interpretation of survival in three novels and redefines the position of humans in the world through the decline of anthropocentrism and the rise of nonhuman agents. The pandemic's danger, as well as the severity of the environment, bring about insecurity and anxiety for human beings. Therefore, to confront the severe social crises and anxiety caused by the current global pandemic, Margaret Atwood provides us with a paradigm that human beings ought to abandon the conquest of nature, insert themselves into a larger framework of cross-species identification, and construct a new community that characterizes a harmonious, tranquil and respectful coexistence of multitudinous species. Our comprehension of Atwood's opposition to anthropocentrism will be strengthened by an examination of survival from the perspective of posthumanism, which will also arouse widespread worries about ecological consciousness in this post-epidemic era.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam* Trilogy, Crisis, Community Construction

## Introduction

As the "Queen of Canadian literature," Margaret Atwood has received a worldwide reputation for her excellent literary achievements. Her works encompass a variety of themes, including climate change, ecology, gender, technology, etc. Published over the span of ten years, the dystopian speculative fiction *MaddAddam* Trilogy, comprising *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013), are the most revealing works in the oeuvre of Atwood. The trilogy's first two installments run parallel, while the last one, as a continuation, strings the whole plot together. The first novel depicts a post-catastrophic world in which the protagonist Jimmy, also known as Snowman, is assumed to be the last man alive after a large massive disaster. Then, *The Year of the Flood* reexamines the pandemic through the eyes of two female characters, Ren and Toby, who are also former members of an environmental and religious organization named God's Gardeners. When the pandemic strikes, Ren is locked inside the Scales and Tails Club, where she used to perform as an exotic dancer, while Toby is managing a Spa. The founder of the Gardeners, Adam One, anticipated this apocalypse and tried to prepare for the refuge. In *MaddAddam*, the last novel in the trilogy, Toby reunites with the survivors of God's Gardeners to

defeat fierce criminals who escaped from the Painball arena. At the end of the story, the survivors dismantle anthropocentric arrogance and construct a new community with multiple species together.

Critics have a profusion of comments from various angles, especially from the perspective of ecology. Richard Alan Northover uses "Laurence Coupe's mythic schema" to analyze "the biblical myths" in the trilogy and observes that "the idea of apocalypse event" is applied both to "the narrative of the trilogy as a whole and the storytelling that is thematized within the novels" (2016: 85). Besides, Dunja M. Mohr views the trilogy's pre-apocalyptic society as "an eco-and biotechnological dystopia" that demonstrates what "ecological crises, cultural imagination and its practice in biotechnology can bring upon the planet" (2015: 298). Hannes Bergthaller further presents the ecological crisis in the trilogy as the "rising from flaws in humanity's biological make-up" and asserts that sustainability is "a question of housebreaking the human animal" (2010: 728). In addition, J. Brooks Bouson contemplates "the philosophy of deep ecology" in the trilogy and argues that deep ecologists like the protagonist Crake "promote a shift of the whole paradigm towards the idea that nature should no longer be exploited by the human species" (2016: 342). What's more, Paul W. Harland particularly focuses on the ecological grief portrayed in the novels and denotes that "the grief induced in the readers ... is a therapeutic corrective" (2016: 2). Despite their insightful interpretations, these scholars pay little attention to Atwood's posthumanist concern for global crises. In the trilogy, insecurity originates from crises in three dimensions: the danger of plague, the severity of the environment, and the local conflicts, which are exactly the epitome of reality. So, how can we confront the rigorous social crises and anxiety under the current global pandemic? Margaret Atwood provides us with a paradigm that human beings are supposed to redefine their position in the world and construct a new community that characterizes a harmonious, tranquil, and respectful coexistence of multiple species.

### **From Anthropocene to Catastrophe: Plague Crisis**

With the galloping progress of science and technology, human beings are unprecedentedly overconfident in conquering the earth. Anthropocentrism maintains that humans are positioned at the upper species of the hierarchy and declares human centrality on the earth. Considering the "major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere," Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer propose the new term "Anthropocene" to name the current geological epoch that "emphasize[s] the central role of mankind in geology and ecology" (2000: 17). Crutzen further explains that "the Anthropocene could be said to have started in the late eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt's design of the steam engine in 1784" (2002: 23). Such great achievement lighted the Industrial Revolution, boosted trade around the world, and also spurred human arrogance to rule the whole world. However, the exponential growth in the economy and global human population has accelerated ecological degradation and massive extinctions of plants and animal species.

The transition from Anthropocene to catastrophe is due to the plague crisis; however, the outbreak of the fatal disease takes the consequence of anthropocentrism, embodying the violence and degeneration of humans. Adam One, the leading character in *The Year of the Flood*, describes the

decline of humanity that “the Fall of Man was multidimensional [...] ongoing, but its trajectory led ever downward” (Atwood 2009: 184). Although the advancement of medical science and genetic engineering has prolonged the human lifespan, capitalism and consumerism have become global problems. Genetically modified living forms are marketed for medical use and thus, due to the escalating profits, the transnational corporations ravenously hold the power. To obtain more benefits, enterprises randomly distribute the virus into vitamin pills to make diseases linger. Crake, a “brilliant genius” scientist, also Jimmy’s best friend, has predicted civilization’s depreciation and masterminded a schema to extirpate humanity (Atwood 2003: 314). A kind of bioengineered super virus is created by him and then is encysted in the BlyssPluss product, which is used to “prolong youth” (Atwood 2003: 294). The pills are disseminated across the world and thus ignite a global pandemic.

The worldwide plague decimates humans out of control and brings disastrous demise. It is a “rogue hemorrhagic,” and the symptoms are “high fever, bleeding from the eyes and skin, convulsions, then breakdown of the inner organs, followed by death” (Atwood 2003: 325). Social disruption is maximized as well: the riots broke out, “transportation broke down and supermarkets were raided” (2003: 340). Crowds then pack religious places to pray and repent, but they will pour out of there once the worshippers become aware of their greater danger of exposure. Exodus also occurs in rural areas, where locals use prohibited weapons like clubs and pitchforks to repel the evacuees for as long as they can. The fluid nature of air speeds up the pandemic transmission. The viruses “appeared to be airborne,” but there might be “a water factor as well” (2003: 325). The outset of the first novel renders a bleak and post-apocalyptic scene when Snowman wakes up among the debris littering the beach, surrounded by the “rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble” from the old world (2003: 3). At first, he thinks it is “routine, another minor epidemic or splotch” (2003: 324). Then, more and more countries have been marked as infected areas fleetly. The hastily assembled epidemic managers set up “isolation tents” for “field clinics,” and the whole cities are quarantined (2003: 342). Crake develops “a vaccine concurrently with the virus,” but destroys it “prior to his assisted suicide death” (2003: 346). Without a possible antidote, Jimmy attempts to survive this “viral version of the collapse of civilization,” living off Crake’s emergency stores (Canavan 2012: 155). He locks out all his colleagues to defend himself and gradually realizes he is the only plague survivor. And he is witnessing the extinction of a species, and humans join the polar bear, “the beluga whale, the onager, the burrowing owl, the long, long list” of extinct species (Atwood 2003: 344). The pandemic has almost extinguished the whole of humanity, just as the extinction of other species destroyed by human activities.

In the wake of COVID-19, it is worth pondering that the world is also facing the novel coronavirus disease COVID-19 pandemic. Almost every outbreak of the plague has made a profound impact on human civilization. In *Plagues and Peoples*, historian William McNeill offers a new interpretation of infectious disease on cultures and advises that we must place the transmission of the illness at the core of historical discourse. Infectious disease will “last as long as humanity itself” and be “one of the fundamental parameters and determinants of human history” (McNeill 1998: 257). The plague prevents us from communicating, and some measures like quarantine also bring about anxiety and insecurity. Therefore, in the current global pandemic, the fate of humankind is tied into one vortex, and only through unity and mutual assistance can we survive.

## Human Activities: Environmental Crisis

The global environmental crisis is one of the most pressing issues of contemporary times because climate change and pollution have produced irrevocable alterations in human society. For Atwood, ecology has also been a major concern in her works. In the trilogy, Atwood paints a picture of an environmental nightmare due to human's excessive exploitation of nature, which can be extrapolated to the near future. "For the past three centuries, the effects of humans on the global environment have escalated" (Crutzen 2002: 23). Humans are able to hold a dominant position on the planet inasmuch as technology is on the rampage. Meanwhile, the widespread use of steam engines necessitates substantial coal mining, which changes the ecology of the area. These carbon dioxide emissions from human activity have the potential to alter the global climate for many millennia to come substantially. Thus, the original equilibrium relationship between humans and nature is threatened.

Human activities have exacerbated environmental degradation, causing global warming and droughts, which pose a challenge to human survival. As an epigraph, a hymn entitled "The Garden" depicts such degeneration:

"And all the Trees that flourished  
And gave us wholesome fruit,  
And all the shining Water  
Is turned to slime and mire,  
And all the feathered Birds so bright  
Have ceased their joyful choir" (Atwood 2009: 8).

Several buildings used to be decorated with roof gardens but now are heavily overrun with bushes. With the exception of the sun's burnt-in hole, the sky is "a bleached blue," and the sea is "hot metal" (Atwood 2003: 11). At the same time, desertification occurs in continental zones. In his childhood, Jimmy witnessed that "the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted [...] and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes" (2003: 24). The melting icecaps cause rising sea levels and intrude into major coastal areas. The beach house and a large number of eastern coastal cities get washed away, and then is a "huge tidal wave, from the Canary Islands volcano" (2003: 63). When the temperature rises to an upper limit, being in the sun makes life for humans all but impossible. "Noon is the worst, with its glare and humidity" and one will "redden and blister" once the evil rays hit (2003: 37). Florida grapefruit orchards had dried up like a giant raisin when the rain stopped. The Everglades, in a row that year, burned for three weeks, and the Lake Okeechobee was reduced to a stinking mud puddle. Extreme weather phenomena increase, and the climates that Snowman experiences alternate from oppressively hot weather under a searing sun to torrential stormy showers. "The air smells faintly of burning, a smell of caramel and tar and rancid barbecues, and the ashy but greasy smell of a garbage-dump fire after it's been raining" (Atwood 2009: 10). The land or the climate are "no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being" (Atwood 2012: 28).

To escape the harsh natural conditions, the privileged people, like scientists, work and live in the

Compounds that are fraught with technological advances, while the poor can only live in dangerous urban pleeblands. Elites are no strangers to environmental degeneration but still attempt to use technology to stave off it. But in turn, environmentalism gradually becomes a tool and a trick for multinational corporations and hegemonic control, “like a giant slug eating” all the creatures and “shitting out the back-side” (Atwood 2003: 243). Bearlift center is such an organization to dispose of trash by feeding leftovers from the city to the polar bears for private businesses. However, it was actually a scam nonetheless, which “lived off the good intentions of city types with disposable emotions who liked to think they were saving something” (Atwood 2013: 59). “For the Benefit of Society [...] but not necessarily [for the benefit of] ecologies, habitats, or nonhuman creatures” (Alaimo 2016: 102). For example, humans destroy the growth of trees in rainforests just for a cup of coffee. At the same time, the process of manufacturing products destroys ecological balance and causes increasing animal extinction. “Demand for resources has exceeded supply for decades in marginal geopolitical areas, hence the famines and droughts” (Atwood 2003: 295). Consequently, the spread of the pandemic is intended to put a halt to the environmental damage brought on by rampant consumerism and widespread corporate exploitation.

Both *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam* mention an eco-religious cult, Gods’ Gardeners, who have seen the impending disaster and sought to change. The Gardeners observe that the only way to survive such a catastrophe is to respect nature and construct a harmonious community with other species. They advocate self-sufficiency and try to preserve nonaggressive agricultural traditions by preparing with guerrilla gardening, sermons, survival training, and learning handicrafts. These “ecofreak[s]” use food as a tool of resistance against ecological degeneration (Atwood 2009: 43). They are strict vegetarians who grow vegetables on the roofs of old buildings for self-sufficiency and never eat animals. And their shower water comes down a garden hose out of a rain barrel, and thus “gravity-fed, no energy was used” (2009: 66). According to the will of God, Adam One has predicted “a mass die-off of the human race” due to its “overpopulation and wickedness” (2009: 49). Therefore, Gardeners are stockpiling food in secret storage areas in order to protect themselves against the Waterless Flood.

Atwood’s “postmodern ecological jeremiads” are an allegorical call for “radically changing our social relations and anti-ecological lifestyles” (Canavan 2012: 155). Humans regard nature as “the ultimate opponent to be feared, fought and conquered” (Changizi and Ghasemi 2017: 55). However, human hubris and their activities have exerted a devastating influence on global ecology. The threats of climate change and species extinction remind us that humans are not the center of the world but are regarded as equal members of the surrounding environment. The fundamental creed of posthumanism is the decentering of humans in ecology. To understand the accurate position of human beings in nature, one should “stand ‘under,’ not above” nonhumans— “by surrendering the dream of mastery” (Wolfe 2003: 5). Therefore, this naturally leads to the next phase, which aims to protect the environment and construct a posthumanist community.

### **Posthumanist Survival: Cross-Species Identification and Community Construction**

At any time, war is a cruel act of human beings fighting for limited resources and may cause insecurity and anxiety around the world. After the pandemic, another main crisis is the *Homo*

*sapiens* conflict between survivors and Painballers. Painball, however, is a "facility for condemned criminals" where players brutally kill one another for the enjoyment of the spectators (Atwood 2009: 97). Players will get enough food for two weeks, plus a Painball gun for shooting paint and once been hit, they start to erode and "be an easy target for the throat-slitters on the other term" (2009: 97). They are unable to feel empathy for others, but abuse and eat any creature who comes into their hands. The savage players who have survived such brutal circumstances of the Painball "game" have been "reduced to the reptilian brain" (Atwood 2013: 9). They are regarded as "animalized human," which is a term put forward by Cary Wolfe and Jonathan Elmer to epitomize the people who lost empathy and love (Wolfe 2003: 101). Three guys escape from Painball, rape and kill some of their clansmen, becoming no different from "other predators in the forest" (Atwood 2013: 10). Therefore, to defend against these animalized Painballers, survivors, including Jimmy and other members of Gardeners, should go beyond anthropocentric superiority, solidify with nonhuman beings and reconstruct a coexisted community.

The descent of human agency and the ascent of nonhuman agency is the premise of reaching the realm of posthumanist symbiosis. "Atwood repeatedly makes observations about the relationship of humans to animals in her works" (Castro and Vanspankeren 1988: 164). The genetic modification and manipulations of human and animal DNA have created some new species. Pigeons, for example, are explicitly modified to serve as xenotransplantation donors for human beings through genetic splices. "Increasingly macabre genetically engineered hybrids" are created for various commercial reasons (McEuen 2013: 398). The Pigeon project, for example, is intended to "grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host" (Atwood 2003: 22). Witnessing what humans have done on earth, Crake attempts to create new genetically altered humanoids through rewriting human genetic codes to replace mankind and guide them to save the planet. "We had to alter ordinary human embryos" to perfect humanity (Atwood 2003: 303). These generic engineered figures are called Crakers, "each one perfect, each one a different skin colour – chocolate, rose, tea, butter, cream, honey – but each with green eyes" (Atwood 2003: 8). They have the scent marking ritual that they piss along the invisible line to mark their territory and prevent from other animals. This bioengineering project causes the most serious scientific challenge to the boundaries between humans and animals. Some humans perceive the Crakers "as freakish, or savage, or non-human and a threat" (Atwood 2003: 366). However, they have a kin connection with humans and are regarded as the concrete embodiment of human ideal "with pre-selected characteristics" (Atwood 2003: 304). There is a posthumanist confirmation that Crake "takes the realization that humans are a biological species like any other" (Bergthaller 2010: 731). *Homo Sapiens* is not superior to other species. And the foundation of unity between humans and nonhumans is cross-species identification, which needs "an adaptation to a cooperative interspecies approach away from anthropocentrism" (Mohr 2015: 295). The Pigeons are "children of Oryx [animals] and Children of Crake [Crakers], both" (Atwood 2013: 268). The descent of anthropocentrism disengages people from the monopoly of human hubris and opens a gate to broaden the spectrum of nonhuman agency. Therefore, a new interspecies alliance is gradually formed, composed of humans, new bioengineered species, the posthumans Crakers and human/nonhuman hybrids. Under the guidance of human beings, the Crakers begin to show signs of human civilization and become a bridge to connect Pigeons and humans in fighting with Painballers.

After the Waterless Flood, the alliance reconstructs a symbiotic and inclusive community containing an interactive network of cross-species actants. "The animals and birds— those that did not become extinct under the human domination of the planet— are thriving unchecked" (Atwood 2013: 209). Deep links are forged "between the experiences of the humans and the Crakers, as well as the Mo' Hairs, bees and even Pigoons" (McEuen 2013: 399). The community epitomizes a posthumanist relationship with nature: the removal of the centrality of human beings, the equality of multiple species, and the harmonious symbiosis of human and non-human species. Under this beneficial association, the new social group brings into existence and is also "envisaged as functioning both inwardly and outwardly as a unified living entity" (Tönnies 2001: 17). Atwood attempts to "find ways of describing agency at work through the interactions of a complex and widely-dispersed network of actants, both human and other-than-human" (Armstrong 2008: 196). Initially proposed in the latter twentieth century, posthumanism endeavors to undermine the centrality of human beings and advocates the agency of nonhuman species. Therefore, humans should discard their monopoly of anthropocentrism and realize that "material, technological, and informational networks of which [the human] is not the master, and of which it is indeed in some radical sense 'merely' the product" (Wolfe 2003: 6). Humans and nonhumans, both as independent beings, become "messmates" and "companion species" at equal footing (Haraway 2003: 17). In this community, various species depend on each other, and at the same time, they continue to have their individual characteristics. "Becoming-posthuman consequently is a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space" (Braidotti 2013: 193). At the end of the trilogy, the survivors become "noble savages that are environmentally friendly, peace-loving and socially and economically egalitarian" (Bouson 2011: 17). Human beings and the Crakers have constructed an equal and respectful community that includes cross-species like the Pigoons and the hybrids of humans and the Crakers.

## **Conclusion**

The *MaddAddam* Trilogy sheds light on Atwood's idea regarding the planet's survival and the whole human species. In the creation of a new world, Atwood proposes a posthumanist way toward "the incorporation of the other in the self (hybrid pregnancies) and of the (human) self in the other (posthuman Crakers and posthuman pigoons)" (Mohr 2015: 298). The crises revealed in the trilogy can be understood as a mirror reflection of the modern reality that humans should heed the warnings presented by the tales and see the envisioned future in the actual present, so that they might take action to prevent making similar blunders in the future. As Katherine Snyder points out, "post-apocalyptic fiction serves as a rehearsal or preview for its readers, an opportunity to witness in fantasy origins and endings that are fundamentally unwitnessable" (2011: 479). The outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic has stirred discussions about global crises, causing anxiety and insecurity among humans. Under the trend of multipolarity and globalization, we share a common destiny, and the plague is no longer a cultural memory and historical imagination but a realistic concern involving the fate of all mankind. Responding to the unprecedented public health crises while striving to promote economic development has become an urgent issue to be solved. In the post-epidemic era, humans should reconsider their positions in the world and seek possible solutions. We are "a species dependent on other species," as Dipesh Chakrabarty considers, "a part of general history of life" (2009: 219). Consequently, Atwood has explained her



vision that we should build a posthumanist community featuring a harmonious coexistence with the surroundings and nonhuman agents.

### Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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